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How to Grow Rhododendrons and Azaleas



Rhododendrons are popular among gardeners with their evergreen shrubbery and early blooms.

Photo Credit: Pixabay

Botanical Name:	<i>Rhododendron</i> spp.
Plant Type:	Shrubs and Bushes
Season:	Part Sun , Full Sun

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Planting, Growing, and Pruning Rhododendrons and Azaleas

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)

Last Updated: February 24, 2025



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Flowering rhododendron and azalea shrubs, both from the genus *Rhododendron*, have long been mainstays of the garden; many have leaves that stay green all year. Caring for these beauties isn't difficult either—as long as you meet their needs. Learn more in our complete guide to growing.

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& Azaleas

Azaleas are actually part of the rhododendron genus. This means all azaleas are technically rhododendrons, but not all rhododendrons are azaleas.

How to tell the difference?

Rhododendrons are generally larger flowering bushes, with some growing 20 feet wide. Azaleas are usually smaller, with some ground cover varieties only growing 1 to 2 feet tall.

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bell-shaped and grouped at the end of the stems with 10 stamens (the long structures that stick out of the center of the flower). Azalea leaves are usually pointed and narrow. The flowers tend to be more spread out on stems and more funnel-shaped. They also have less than five stamens.

Rhodys are fussier, preferring environments that are neither hot nor cold (Zones 5 to 8). They need a certain amount of chilling to develop strong flower buds. In the winter, protect rhododendrons from cold damage. (See more below.) Azaleas come in two groups: evergreen and deciduous (varieties that drop their leaves in the fall). Both can be found in nearly every part of North America, from the frosty Canadian plains to tropical Florida.

With thousands of varieties, there are rhododendrons and azaleas for just about every landscape situation. They come in many flower colors, including pink, red, white, yellow, and purple. Though most

summer-blooming varieties that add color to the garden.

Explore [tips for growing the best varieties of rhododendrons and azaleas](#).

Tips for Buying Plants

- When shopping for rhododendrons or azaleas, pay attention to when they flower. Early varieties can blossom in March; late ones into July or even the fall.
- Buy plants that are deep green (not yellowed), aren't wilted, and have been well watered. Check the soil in the container with your finger and avoid plants that are bone dry.
- If your weather heats up to above 90°F in spring, avoid white-flowered azaleas. Their thin petals drop off in the heat.
- In hot climates, buy plants in 3-gallon pots rather than 1-gallon pots. Small plants, with their smaller root balls, struggle in the hot late spring and summer.

- [How to Grow Azaleas](#)
- [Rhododendron Care and Growing Tips](#)
- [Best Flowering Trees and Shrubs for Your Garden](#)

PLANTING

Most large-leafed varieties require **dappled shade**; avoid deep shade or full sun. A sunny spot that receives a few hours of shade is perfect. See regional guidelines below.

Soil should be well-drained, humus-rich, moist, and acidic (pH 4.5–6).

Azaleas and rhododendrons have shallow root systems and need moist soil and mulch to keep them from drying out. Amend planting areas with compost, peat moss, or a substitute, only if your soil is poor. Learn more about [soil amendments](#) and [preparing soil for planting](#).

→ Not sure which hardiness zone you're in? [See the USDA map](#).

- Plant in full sun to increase flowers and avoid mildew problems. Shrubs need a minimum of 6 hours of full sun daily.
- Plant on the sheltered side of a wind-break. If subjected to cold, dry winds, their leaves and buds dry out and die, especially during winter winds.

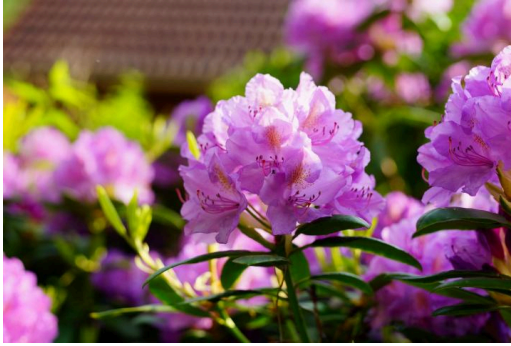
Planting in Warm or Hot Regions (Zones 7 to 11)

- Plant in a site that receives afternoon shade, especially in hot areas. In tropical zones, azaleas will bloom in full shade.

How to Plant Rhododendron & Azaleas

- Plant in spring or early fall.
- Space plants 2 to 6 feet apart, depending on their estimated mature size. Dig a hole as deep as the root ball and about twice as wide.
- Set new plants so that their top roots are at soil level or slightly below. If you plant them any deeper, the roots and trunks may rot

ing it with the remainder of the soil.



Rhododendrons are a welcome sight each spring!

GROWING

How to Care for Rhododendron & Azaleas

- Mulch plants every spring with 2 to 5 inches of pine bark chips or pine needles to protect shallow roots and retain soil moisture. A lack of water reduces flower bud formation. Read more about using mulch.
- **Tip:** A common mistake is to create a so-called “mulch volcano,” where mulch is piled heavily around the trunk of the shrub. In fact, this can keep the trunk too wet and encourage rot. Always leave a few inches

- Fertilize azaleas and rhododendrons sparingly and only when flower buds swell in the early spring, even if they are fall bloomers. Heavy applications of fertilizer will burn the plants' roots.
- Water plants during the summer if rainfall is less than 1 inch per week.
- After flowering, deadhead where practical, to promote vegetative growth rather than seed production. Remove dead flowers from rhododendrons carefully; next year's buds are just under the old heads and will start to develop shortly after flowering.
- Azaleas and rhododendrons may be transplanted at any time during the growing season, but they transplant most successfully during fall or early spring when they are dormant and temperatures are cool.

Winter Care for Rhododendrons

Rhododendrons are shallow-rooted plants; in cold regions, apply several inches of organic mulch around the

with burlap in the fall. Cold, dry winds will cause too much moisture evaporation from the leaves, which will wither and die. To help them recover from cold snaps, deeply water rhododendrons if there are warmer days. In the spring, prune out any dead or damaged branches and leaves.

Pruning Rhododendron & Azaleas

- In general, do not prune spring-flow-
ering shrubs such as azaleas and
rhododendrons. If you need to reduce
height, prune after flowering in
the spring.
- Otherwise, just remove dead, dam-
aged, or diseased branches at any time
of year.
- On young and old plants, simply snap
off spent flower stalks by bending
them over until they break away from
their stems. Be careful not to damage
growth buds at the base of each
flower stalk.



This bud is a sure-fire sign that beautiful flowers are almost here!

Types

There are more than 900 species in the *Rhododendron* genus, which vary greatly. It would take a whole book to understand this wide world!

You may be interested in joining the [American Rhododendron Society](#), which runs a database with information on more than 2,000 rhododendrons and azaleas. On an annual basis, the society selects a number of rhododendrons to be awarded the [Rhododendron of the Year](#) designation, highlighting the best-performing plants for different regions.

Here is a handful of varieties that we think you'll enjoy:

blooms mid-season with violet-blue flowers. Zones 7 to 9.

- **‘Cecile’** is a vigorous azalea that grows to 7 feet and produces dark salmon-pink buds in mid-season. Zones 5 to 8.
- **‘Hydon Dawn’** is a low-growing rhododendron that actually tolerates full sun. Pale pink flowers bloom in mid-season. Zones 7 to 9.
- **‘Nova Zembla’** is an evergreen rhododendron that grows 5 to 10 feet tall and bears bright red flowers in late midseason. Zones 5 to 8.
- **‘Rosy Lights’** is an azalea that offers extra cold hardiness. It grows to 6 feet and bears deep purple-pink flowers. Zones 3 to 8.
- **‘Purple Gem’** is a dwarf rhododendron that grows to 2 feet and is an early-season bloomer. It bears small, light purple flowers. Excellent in front of a border or in a rock garden. Zones 5 to 8.

HARVESTING

Cut branches once the buds have just

and give the stems a fresh cut at the same time. Vase life is about 7 days.

GARDENING PRODUCTS



PESTS/DISEASES

- Vine weevil
- Whiteflies
- Leafhoppers
- Lacebugs
- Scale insects
- Caterpillars
- Aphids
- Powdery mildew
- Bud blast

- **Petal blight**
- If soil is not sufficiently acidic, **root rot** and **lime-induced chlorosis** could occur.

WIT AND WISDOM

The name “*rhododendron*” comes from the Greek *rhodo*, for “rose,” and *dendron*, meaning “tree.”

Rhododendrons are the state flower of Washington and West Virginia.

*The glittering leaves of the rhododendrons
Balance and vibrate in the cool air;
While in the sky above them
White clouds chase each other.*
–John Gould Fletcher

SHRUBS AND TREES

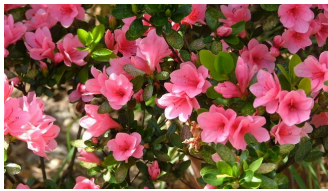
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Boeckmann



Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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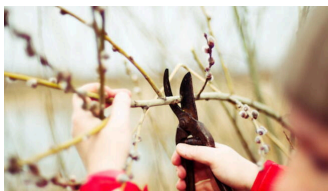
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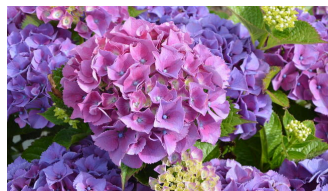
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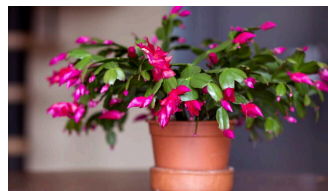
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COMMENTS

ADD A COMMENT

PJ (not verified) 1 year 10 months ago

I have a rhododendron that flowered beautifully last year. It gets sun from roughly 9am to 1pm then shade. There are many new leaves the plant seems to be growing well. However, no

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weeks. I water regularly if it doesn't rain. I've tried to acidify the soil with Aluminum Sulphate (current pH 6.5).....it's now June 6, in zone 6b (Hamilton, Ontario, Canada)it looks like no buds or flowers this year. Any advice ?

REPLY

Mary Colwell (not verified) 11

months 3 weeks ago

I noticed the article says to fertilize sparingly. Maybe you should back off on fertilizing every 2 - 3 weeks and see what happens.

REPLY

Deb Marquez (not verified) 1 year 11 months

ago

My rhodies are not happy. The leaves are shriveled and brown every spring. They still produce flowers and a few leaves, but I would love to know what I'm doing wrong/what I could be doing differently to help them out.

REPLY

The Editors 1 year 11 months ago

Hi Deb,

Since the issue with your rhododendron leaves seem to happen every spring, it sounds like you are dealing with winter injury. Rhododendrons lose water through their leaves in winter during times when it is warm and sunny. Since the ground is frozen, the roots are not able to take up enough water in the soil to make-up for what is lost through the leaves. There are a few ways to prevent winter injury, including adequate watering during the growing season.—about an inch a week—and especially in the fall to give your rhododendrons what they need for the winter. You also want to avoid fertilizing after mid-September because it may delay dormancy.

winds can help prevent damage.

REPLY

Penelope (not verified) 2 years 9 months ago

Can my fairly shaded rhododendrons survive in the whole month of September in Michigan without watering?

REPLY

The Editors 2 years 9 months ago

It really depends on how dry or wet your part of the state has been and is expected to be. If you get plenty of rain in August and September, and temperatures cool off, then the plants should be fine, assuming they are planted in the ground. If they're in containers, they will likely need some extra watering if conditions are dry.

REPLY

deirdre bannon (not verified) 3 years 1

month ago

I'm new to Rhododendrons, ibought 2 beautiful 'Polarnacht' yesterday but how do I find out what zone I'm in to give my plants a chance to survive. Thank you

REPLY

Nancy (not verified) 2 years 11

months ago

Almanac has this available on their site, then all you need to do is input your zipcode. I also like to look up plantmaps.com . If your city has more than one plant hardiness zone, this site shows a map and you'll be able to easily locate exactly which zone you're in. We live alongside a mountain range and have three different plant hardiness zones in our city, so this helps a lot as to which one pertains to us.

REPLY

bernard webb (not verified) 3 years 6 months ago

a series of sucker-like, tall sprouts have developed. Could I have pruned them incorrectly? Should I snip them off sometime?

REPLY

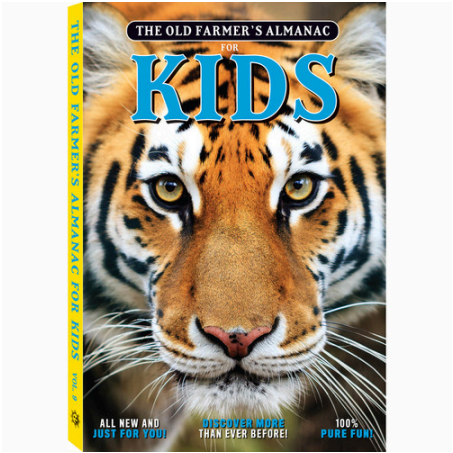
Anne (not verified) 3 years 4 months ago

Azaleas are best pruned early spring; the green shoots might be part of the plant's normal growth during winter;

REPLY

MORE COMMENTS

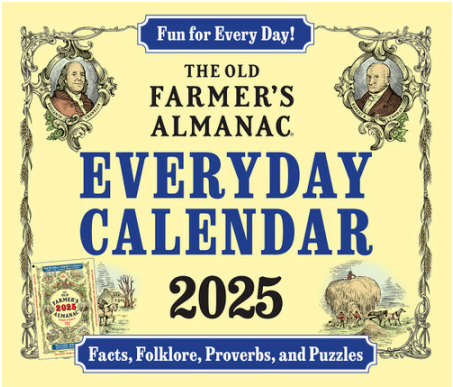
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