

## Evergreen Rhododendron, Spring-Blooming Beauty

By Susan Camp

One of my favorite shrubs is a 10 to 12-foot-tall evergreen rhododendron. When we moved here, it was a straggly waif with a few dry branches and leaves. I was sure it wouldn't survive, but Jim persisted, and the shrub steadily grew to become a thriving beauty. Every spring and early summer, we are thrilled by its massive lavender blooms.

During the very cold snap of the past few weeks, the normally glossy, dark-green leaves turned a dull gray-green, drooped, and curled up. As soon as the daytime temperature rose last week, the leaves uncurled. Today it is 25° F again, and the leaves have resumed the curled shape. In fact, rhododendrons exhibit this curious behavior every time the temperature drops to 32° F.

Both rhododendrons and azaleas are classified botanically in the genus *Rhododendron*, but the shrub we call rhododendron (*Rhododendron* species) usually refers to specimens with large, glossy, leathery leaves and rounded clusters of showy flowers called "trusses" in shades of white, pink, rose, lilac, purple, and red. Evergreen rhododendrons range in height from compact 4-foot shrubs to small trees up to 15 feet tall with a similar spread. Unlike azaleas, rhododendrons branch from a central trunk.

Rhododendrons grow in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 through 9, depending on species or cultivar. They require acidic soil with a pH range from 3.7 to 6.5. Iron chlorosis, or yellowing of the leaves while the veins remain green, can occur if the soil is too alkaline. A soil test by VA Tech will tell you if a high pH is the problem. You can lower the pH by applying ferrous sulfate. Aluminum sulfate is toxic to rhododendrons.

Plant rhododendrons on the east or north side of the house in a location that offers protection from south and west winds. A site with dappled sunlight is best, but rhododendrons will grow in a spot with morning sun and afternoon shade. Select species or cultivars that perform well in our region. See Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-602 "Growing Azaleas and Rhododendrons" and 2901-1065 "Evergreen Rhododendron (*Rhododendron* species)" for lists of recommended varieties.

Rhododendrons need moist, organically rich, sandy or loamy soil with good drainage. The shallow, fibrous roots are delicate and tolerate neither dry soil nor heavy clay with poor drainage. The shrubs require weekly watering in summer. Application of an organic mulch around the base of the shrub will protect the roots during periods of drought and in the winter. Avoid mulch made from black walnut, pecan, or hickory trees; the chemical juglone in these trees is toxic to rhododendron.

Fertilizer should be applied lightly to avoid burning the roots. In fact, the best way to feed rhododendrons is with compost. If you choose to apply a chemical fertilizer, use one formulated specifically for rhododendrons, azaleas, and other acid-loving plants.

Remove faded flowers to reduce the chance of fungal infection and improve the looks of the shrub. Leaving the spent blooms won't hurt the rhododendron, but may cause decreased flowering the next year. Be careful not to remove new buds with the withered flower.

Prune rhododendrons after they bloom. By mid to late summer, the new buds will have set, and late pruning will remove the buds for the next spring. Diseased, dead, or damaged branches can be pruned at any time. Branches that are crossed should be removed, as they can rub against each other and create an entry point for insects or disease. Old, leggy shrubs can be pruned to a more pleasing shape, or even rejuvenated by removing no more than one-third of the old branches over a three-year period.

Several hundred species and cultivars of evergreen rhododendron exist, so it isn't difficult to find one that you like and will meet your climate and aesthetic needs. The Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder and The American Rhododendron Society are excellent resources for rhododendron varieties and care.

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