

Rhododendrons and Azaleas

Some of the best spring blooming shrubs for PNW gardens are Rhododendrons and Azaleas. They are both perfect shrub choices for our Western Washington climate since they enjoy our acidic soils and maritime climate. You, as a gardener, have a plethora of choices in colors, growth habits, and growing locations. Always make sure to pick the right variety for the right place – watch how much sun or shade you get and choose the right one.

All Rhododendrons (Rhodies) and Azaleas are old wood bloomers, with a few Azaleas as exceptions that are fall re-bloomers (which you will see below). This means flower buds are set over the summer, which then sit all fall and winter, opening into flowers the next spring. Gardeners should be pruning their specimens only after they are done blooming – this will allow for healthy summer growth and bud set for the coming spring. Rhodies can be cut back after flowering to better control their size and shape. Azaleas are the same and are easy to shear in order to keep compact, dense and blooming heavily year after year. Do you like your plant to be larger and more open? Then let them be. Want it more compact and bushy? Then prune after bloom each year. It is as simple as that!

Both these shrubs should be fed each season with an organic acidic-type fertilizer, like E.B. Stone Organics ‘Rhododendron, Azalea and Camellia’ fertilizer. Simply spread the appropriate amount under the drip line of the shrub where the feeding roots are. Try to feed once in early spring and again in May to help with new growth and flower bud set during summer. If your plants have been lacking flowers, try adding some organic ‘Ultra Bloom’ fertilizer from E.B. Stone Organics in May/June – a high Phosphorus fertilizer that will aid in bud set in summer. Watering the fertilizer in will help or, even better, add 2” of mulch or compost under the shrub to cover the food up. Rhodies and Azaleas both have shallow spreading root systems, so mulch is essential to keep them happy in the garden. They love moist, but not soggy soil. However, always be careful not to put too much mulch around the stem/trunk, so as not to bury it, or you may have issues down the road.

Since they are shallow-rooted plants and knowing that we have drier summers around here, be sure to water your specimens thoroughly in summer months. They don’t need a massive amount of water, but a good soaking once or twice a week on established plants will ensure a healthy specimen in the garden. If either of these shrubs dry out, the flower bud set will be minimized and then the foliage will burn. Newer plants will need more frequent watering, depending on your soil structure.

When adding new Rhodies and Azaleas to your garden, be sure to amend the soil. A good acidic planting mix, like E.B. Stone Organics ‘Acid Planting Mix’, makes a great

amendment - add 1/3 amendment to 2/3 native soil. Mixing that all up and adding either organic 'Sure Start' or 'Rhododendron Food' from E.B. Stone Organics will give them a fabulous start. Dig a nice wide hole and mulch with compost or bark after planting. Be sure to lightly score or loosen the root mass around the perimeter of the container to help them establish fresh roots quickly in their new home in your garden.

Now let's look specifically at three groups – Rhododendrons, Evergreen Azaleas, and Deciduous Azaleas. Discover the wonderful attributes of each and then decide which ones to add to your own garden!

Rhododendrons

The world of Rhododendrons is both varied and diverse. There are many species and literally thousands of hybrids/cultivars – certainly a choice for any spot in the garden. A big thanks to all the genius breeders, past and present, who introduce all these fabulous Rhodies for us to choose from in the PNW! These are evergreen shrubs, with the exception of a handful of deciduous ones. Even though they are “evergreen”, all Rhodies will typically shed 3 year old foliage each season as the new growth replaces it. All Rhododendrons will thrive in part sun/part shade, but be sure to choose the right ones when planting in full sun or full shade. Poor choice means either a leggy/spindly plant searching for sun or one that gets sunburned every summer. Some are small and tidy, while others may grow into small trees. Here are some general rules to consider when looking at Rhododendrons...

- Size matters! As a general rule... the larger the foliage, the more shade it prefers.
- Bloom times can be selected from early spring to early summer. Each distinct variety is classified from very early to very late, and all times in between. A few rare ones are even fragrant!
- Purples and Reds will typically take more sun, while whites/yellows/oranges typically prefer more partial shade. Pinks can be either – check your variety.
- You can always safely prune back a Rhody by 1/3, in height or spread. Often you can get away with more on these due to latent buds on old wood, but be careful!
- Don't forget about dwarf Rhododendrons. They have small foliage, take more sun/heat lots of times, and look more like Azaleas. Very easy and low/bushy.
- There are many cool flowers to choose from, but select a foliage and growth habit that are good for you and your location. Some even sport variegated foliage, which adds interest when they are not in bloom.
- Look for spotting, blotches, and edge color to add more interest when flowering.

- Pay attention to hardiness. All will be rated – some will go down to 20 to 30 degrees below zero and others may have some damage in winter at 20 degrees above zero.
- For shade/part shade, look at ‘Yak’ hybrids. These Rhodies have wonderful, soft indumentum on their foliage for added interest.

With both Rhododendrons and Azaleas there some pests and diseases to watch for. Always get a proper diagnosis to find the best treatment. Here are a few of the common issues that may arise on your Rhododendron specimens...

- **Root Weevils:** These evil creatures live in the soil and crawl up at night to grab a snack. You will see notches bit out of the edge of the foliage on Rhodies, and many other plants for that matter. Treat the ground with granular ‘Eight’ from Bonide to eliminate larvae or wrap trunks with tree wrap and apply ‘Tanglefoot’ to catch the adults. Systemic insecticide is other option, but be very careful when spraying and try to avoid harming our native bees.
- **Lacebugs:** These do some serious damage to foliage and will leave the plant looking anemic and sickly. The key with any spray for these is to thoroughly cover the foliage, especially the undersides. Best options are ‘Neem Oil’, ‘Insecticidal Soap’, and anything containing Spinosad - all of these options are natural. Systemics are also an option – but again consider harm to our native bees. Keep in mind a happy Rhody that is grown properly in the right location and feed organically will always resist lacebugs!
- **Rhododendron Powdery Mildew:** A fungal issue that can infect foliage, especially showing up on the undersides. It will cause some defoliation in summer and create a leggy/sparse plant. Treat with most any fungicide, or use natural biofungicide like ‘Revitalize’ from Bonide (contains Bacillus). Air circulation and proper sun will always help as well. Spray new growth after flowering/pruning and break the cycle!
- **Rhododendron Fungal Leaf Spot:** Shows up on leaf surface as irregular brownish areas on foliage. This will add to leaf drop in summer, and if left unchecked may infect the entire plant. Some hybrids are more susceptible, but air circulation and the right amount of sun will always help. Spray with same fungicides listed for mildew and again, spray the new growth to break the cycle!

Evergreen Azaleas

Evergreen Azaleas offer bright spring blooms, evergreen foliage and a smaller stature than many Rhododendrons. They can be found in a number of flower colors – pretty much any color but yellow and true orange. Many will take full sun, if irrigated in summer – lots of reds, light purples, and hot pinks.

Many others will take more shade – whites and light pinks. Azaleas make wonderful border shrubs and can even be clipped into a low hedge. Most evergreen Azaleas grow to 2 to 4 feet tall and wide, some even smaller, but always check your specific variety for its growth habit. Always consider mass planting Azaleas or adding groups of them – for example 3 planted in a cluster will make a more impressive statement in the landscape than just one here and there. You can even mix two or more colors together for a sweet spring flower display. Here are points to consider when choosing the right Azaleas for your garden...

- Utilize foliage color in winter. Many hybrids will hold their leaves but turn red/burgundy over the cold months, adding additional interest to the garden.
- There are white/green variegated foliage options, like ‘Silver Sword’ and ‘Girard’s Variegated Gem’, for year ‘round foliage interest.
- You can select bloom times from March into early June.
- There are varying heights available, including dwarf ones like ‘Cherry Drops’ and ‘Gumpo White/Pink/Fancy’.
- You can select Satsuki Azalea varieties, like ‘Getsutoku’, ‘Eikan’, and ‘Higasa’ – these tend to bloom later into May and early June. These sport very large flowers and sometimes have multiple colored flowers on one plant!
- Some newer ones like ‘Chanzonetta’, ‘May Snow’ and ‘Maraschino’ – part of the Kimono Series – are all excellent shrubs with great flower power and lower growth habits.
- There are some re-blooming Azaleas available that bloom in spring and again in fall. Be careful with hardiness on most of these. The ‘Double Shot’ series is the hardiest we have seen and comes in a few color options. The newest and most hardy repeat bloomers are from Proven Winners Color Choice Shrubs – the Perfecto Mundo Azaleas – available in white, pink, purple and red. These are double flowers as well.
- Consider mixing varieties to stagger bloom times and utilize complimentary colors.
- Lots of options for each color in single, and even some double, flowers!

When growing Azaleas in the garden, a healthy, watered and well-fed plant will grow successfully. Keep this in mind when fighting any insects or diseases to minimize potential damage. Always get a proper diagnosis to correct any issues. **Here are a few of the more common Azalea pests and diseases...**

- **Leaf Gall:** An interesting fungal growth that is whitish/greyish on tip of foliage. It is very noticeable if you have it. Prune out bad foliage and apply a fungicide containing Copper to treat. A fall spray will help prevent leaf gall.

- **Azalea Lacebug:** Same information and treatments as listed above in Rhododendron Lacebug section.
- **Whiteflies:** Pesky little leaf suckers that sometimes get on new growth or overwinter on older foliage. Easy to treat with a number of natural insecticides listed for whitefly.
- **Root rot (Phytophthora):** Also on Deciduous Azaleas and Rhododendrons, if plants are in shallow soil with poor drainage, especially over winter months. There is no spray or cure, just make sure you have the soil amended and adequate drainage!

Deciduous Azaleas

Azaleas that drop their foliage in fall also have places in our landscapes. There are a bunch of named varieties and lots of colors to choose from. These are the spring bloomers where you can have true orange and yellow flowers, as well as pinks, reds, and whites. Many are fragrant and they turn nice colors in the fall as well. Most will grow with some reasonable height as they age – in the 4 to 6 feet tall range, some to even 8 feet, depending on the variety. Site them in at least half-day sun to full sun and follow all the same rules for the other Azaleas and Rhodies listed above. One difference is that deciduous Azaleas don't like a really deep mulch cover - keep the compost/bark a little less deep around them. They make nice specimen shrubs and can be sited in the background of a sunny garden so that you can enjoy bright spring flowers and allow them to mature. These are not plants to hack back annually in order to keep small – allow them to branch and grow. Focus on removing dead wood and shaping them into a nice specimen for years to come. Some refer to these as “Exbury” azaleas, but in truth this is one classification, there are many others as well. Here are some tips of deciduous azaleas in the garden...

- Everyone wants orange ones, look for ‘Gibraltar’, ‘Arneson’s Gem’, ‘Mandarin Lights’ and ‘Tangerine Lights’, among others.
- Like golden yellow? Look for ‘Klondyke’, ‘Golden Lights’ and others.
- Like red ones? ‘Mary Poppins’, ‘Arneson’s Ruby’, ‘Red Sunset’ and others.
- Looking for fragrance? ‘Irene Koster’ (pink/white), ‘Fragrant Star’ (white), ‘Mt. St. Helens’ (salmon), to name a few. Most all have at least a light fragrance on a warm spring day.
- If you want smaller, more mildew resistant choices, look at any of the ‘Arneson’ azaleas – there are a few color choices bred by Mr. Arneson.
- Some great later blooming fragrant ones can be found, many are Weston Nursery varieties (‘Popsicle’, ‘Innocence’, ‘Lemon Drop’ and others).

- Ultra hardy ‘Northern Lights Series’ come in a variety of colors and are all easy to grow.

When growing deciduous Azaleas, keep these pests and diseases in mind...

- **Powdery Mildew:** Deciduous varieties of Azaleas are known for mildew, but most of it comes from growing in too much shade with poor air circulation/pruning. Grow them in sun, keep overhead watering to minimum and if needed, treat with any fungicide to control mildew.
- **Azalea Sawfly:** The larvae of these flies will overwinter in the soil, hatch out in spring and attack the foliage leaving nothing but the midrib of the leaf, usually. Healthy plants can withstand infestations and will be fine. If damage persists, treat with most any insecticide, making sure to cover foliage entirely. Natural options include ‘Spinosad’, ‘Insecticidal Soap’ and others. The larvae are green just like the leaves, so look carefully!

With all of these to choose from who could resist another Azalea or Rhododendron? Look at all the choices and rediscover these plants for your own landscape. Utilize them to add color to the spring garden. Rhododendron is our state flower after all!