

Rhododendron Care

Lisa Taylor, Garden Educator / Author / Consultant / Organic Gardener
Author of *Your Farm in the City, Maritime Northwest Garden Guide*
www.gardenwithlisa.com/learnwithlisa.html

Basic needs

Sun Part shade to full shade for most rhodies, think woodland habitat. Small leafed varieties can tolerate full sun.

Soil Well-drained soil with moderate organic matter. Acidic soil is required. If plant is healthy, no need to fertilize. If plants show signs of nutrient deficiency, use Rhododendron and Azalea Food a month or two before blooming or just after blooming ends. Don't fertilize in summer.

Water Rhodies have shallow root systems so they need consistent watering during the dry season until established. Mulch with wood chips for water conservation and soil building. Water established plants a couple times a month during summer.

Air Avoid extreme exposure, strong direct wind will dry out plants. Urban wind tunnels are wicked. Think dappled shade and gentle breeze.

Selecting Varieties

There are so many different rhododendrons for sale, it is overwhelming. First identify where you'll plant and how tall and wide an area you are working with, then see what is available that fits your space.

- Height – rhodies come in all sizes and growth habit. Read the tag to determine how big the plant will grow.
The height listed on the tag is the height after 10 years. Add 25% - 30% more for the ultimate height (20+ years).
- Color – so many colors available. Paint with the rainbow palate for a spectacular spring show.
- Bloom time – plant varieties so that you extend the blossom season

Planting

Prepare the soil as you would any other tree or shrub. Amend with 2 inches of compost a hole that is 3 times as wide and twice as deep as your root ball.

Plant in early spring and fall.

Plant in the cool of the day – evening is ideal.

Water well. Use soaker hose or drip irrigation to water deeply. Water each week throughout the dry season for 2-3 years, then water a couple times a month after the plant is established.

Moving

Rhodies that have grown too large can be moved successfully. Roots are shallow and saucer shaped so they are easy to dig up.

Even a relatively small rhody is heavy. Plan your move, rent a plant dolly and have help.

Have new site prepped and ready to go when you lift the plant out of the ground.

Plant right away!

Water well. Use soaker hose or drip irrigation to water deeply. Water each week throughout the dry season for 1-2 years, then water a couple times a month after the plant is established.

Pruning

Use good pruning practices – by pass pruners, pruning budget (1/5 per yr), thinning cuts only

Prune Rhodies for size at any time of the year.

Prune just after blooming ends to keep more flowers for next year

Deadhead spent blossoms to encourage health of plant

Pests

It's good to be aware of the common pests of the rhododendron; with good cultural practices, most rhodies will grow with any problems. Use the Organic Check List to grow a healthy, pesticide free garden.

Organic Check List

Build healthy soil

Work with nature

Right plant, right place, right time

Encourage biodiversity

Use the least toxic approach

Water wisely

Conserve resources

Learn as you grow

Resources

Garden Hotline (206) 633-0224, gardenhotline.org

Rhododendron Species Garden, Federal Way, WA <https://rhodygarden.org/>

Rhododendron Care <https://rhodygarden.org/rhododendron-care-sheet/>

Great Plant Picks Rhododendrons <https://www.pacifichorticulture.org/articles/great-plant-picks-3005-rhododendrons/>

Anne Lovejoy's tips for selecting the best rhododendron for your yard

<https://amp.kitsapsun.com/amp/100612654>

Sky Nursery's 2022 Rhododendron list – massive selection with great information about each variety <https://skynursery.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/rhododendron-list.pdf>

Swanson's Nursery's Rhododendron growing tips

<https://www.swansonnursery.com/blog/azalea-rhododendron-care>

Books

Maritime Northwest Garden Guide, 2nd ed., Lisa Taylor, 2014

Your Farm in the City, Lisa Taylor, 2011

Living With Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest, Russell Link, 2004