

Growing Rhododendrons and Azaleas in the Midwestern Garden

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Rhododendrons and azaleas have fascinated me since my boyhood days in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Nelson County, Virginia. There it was ever a delight to visit my great grandmother in the spring to pick the “wild honeysuckle,” as *Azalea nudiflorum* [actually *Rhododendron periclymenoides*, Ed.] was commonly called there, and on the day of the school play, at the close of the school year, we would pick great bouquets of *R. maximum* to decorate the stage of the country school. And so, some years later, when I began designing and constructing gardens in southwestern Michigan, I decided to grow rhododendrons as a source of plant materials.

There are four important factors to consider in growing and using rhododendrons; namely, climate, soil, varieties, and use in the landscape.

Climate

Climate involves temperature, with its extremes of 97° F in the shade in summer to -40° F (wind-chill index), with strong northwest winds in winter. The hot sun may fade or even burn the leaves on a sultry day in August. It may prove to be devastating in early July when the growth is young and tender and the humidity is high.

Where there is little snowfall to prevent freezing of the soil, mulching heavily is essential in winter. Frozen soil, low humidity, and a strong wind may mean complete desiccation, causing death to the plant. One must be cautious using mulch, however, as the trunk just under heavy mulch may not harden off before the first big freeze, and winter damage leading to death will occur. Insects that

eat the roots and girdle the main stem at the soil level may be prevalent under heavy mulch. White grubs are particularly fond of this sort of habitat.

Rainfall is usually plentiful enough for rhododendrons, as they are able to survive a considerable drought. Azaleas are much more exacting in their requirements, and may suffer in prolonged droughts to a degree that death may result. Ample mulch again may prove invaluable in months of low rainfall. Most home gardeners know the importance of irrigation in dry periods, and drought is usually no great problem unless watering restrictions are enforced because of heavy demands on the city water supply.

While snow is normally more beneficial than harmful, in some winters the snowfall may be so heavy that breakage may occur in rhododendron plantings. The greatest damage may be experienced when the temperature rises and then there is rainfall followed by falling temperatures and freezing. The increased weight may cause damage. Rhododendrons, however, have an amazing recovery ability, and by the end of the growing season any previous damage may no longer be noticeable.

Soil

Soil and soil management are most important in growing rhododendrons and azaleas successfully. Good drainage is essential, be it sand, loam, or clay soil, because roots suffocate from lack of oxygen if air cannot circulate freely in the soil. An excess of water prevents circulation of air, and the roots gradually die from oxygen starvation. The leaves

turn yellow from lack of nutrition, resulting in death to the entire plant.

Acidity (pH) is of next importance. Usually the use of 50% acid peat (pH 3.5-5.0) and 50% soil will adequately solve the acidity problem should there be one. Organic matter is essential and rhododendrons and azaleas should be mulched annually if possible. Peat mulch above all is especially beneficial to rhododendrons and azaleas because they will develop a thick root system stimulated by the mulch.

The culture of rhododendrons and azaleas is rather specific because the shallow feeder roots should not be disturbed with cultivation that would damage the root system. Ground cover such as creeping myrtle (*Vinca minor*), *Pachysandra*, and *Ajuga* are very compatible and should be used to reduce or eliminate weed growth, thereby reducing maintenance to a minimum.

Varieties

There are many rhododendron and azalea species and hybrids entirely hardy for growing in the midwestern garden. *R. maximum* does especially well in the shade, blooming in early July. While the bloom is interesting, the plant is used more for texture than bloom. *R. mucronatum*, *R. vaseyi*, *R. periclymenoides*, *R. calendulaceum*, and *R. viscosum* are among these hardy species.

There are literally hundreds of rhododendron hybrids in production in the United States. Unless the home gardener falls into the category of the small group of rhododendron fanciers that is able to spend a great deal of time in the garden working

with the “border line” in hardiness group of rhododendrons, it is advisable to stick to those of proven hardiness. Here there are reds, such as ‘America’, ‘Caractacus’; whites such as *R. catawbiense album*, ‘Boule de Neige’, ‘Cunningham’s White’; purples such as ‘Lee’s Dark Purple’; pinks such as ‘Scintillation’, ‘Mrs. C. S. Sargent’; rose-pinks such as ‘Roseum Superbum’, ‘Roseum Elegans’; and, of course, many others. These are suggested for the beginner. There are also hundreds of azalea hybrids, both deciduous and evergreen. The Exbury, Knap Hill, and Ghent hybrids, all deciduous, come in a wide array of flower colors and have proven hardy in the Midwest.

The evergreen types, unless ideally located in the garden, may need some protection over winter. Since protection is not needed until after Christmas, discarded Christmas trees will serve admirably for this purpose. Simply remove the boughs and place them tips upwards around the plants with stem end pushed slightly into the soil for support. The boughs will protect the plants from wind, snow, and ice breakage, and especially winter sun. Protection is usually most needed during March, when the days may be very cold, windy, and sunny, a combination that may cause havoc to foliage, blossom buds, and even the entire plant.

Uses in the Landscape

Rhododendrons and azaleas have an outstanding capability for use in the home landscape. They may be used in foundation plantings, shrub borders, and they are also ideally suited for naturalizing. They come in a wide range of sizes, forms, textures of leaf and stem, and leaf and flower colors. When creating a landscape with rhododendrons and azaleas, always consider the use of companion plants to enhance the beauty of the landscape composition. Hemlock, Douglas fir, and white pine are among the finest tall-growing evergreens for the background planting. White and gray birch clumps will add charm throughout the year. Juneberry (*Amelanchier* sp.) clumps will provide early flowers and fruits that the

catbirds, brown thrashers, robins, and other fruit-eating birds will delight in. Flowering crabapples and Japanese flowering dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) make perfect companions, not only because of flowers and fruit, but also for the soft shade they may afford.

Of the many shrubs that may be used, four of my favorites are the tree peonies, red-veined *Enkianthus*, Burkwood viburnum (*Viburnum x burkwoodii*), and the blueberries. The flowers of the tree peony will add a boldness to the azalea planting, blooming with ‘Fedora’ and the other Kaempferi azalea hybrids, after mid-May. I like the Burkwood viburnum because the flowers fill the air with a delightfully spicy fragrance, enticing one to pass its way while walking through the garden. The leaf and form of this viburnum add interest throughout the year.

Enkianthus provides interesting form and flower with striking yellow, apricot, and orange fall foliage color. Blueberries are delicious; however, the birds will very likely harvest them before the gardener gets a chance. Their fall leaf and stem colors during the winter complement the garden scene. The judicious use of yews and Japanese holly will complete the picture, bringing beauty throughout the year.



On a recent Lake Michigan Chapter tour of the Mann garden, members are shown in front of the garden room Mann built to better enjoy one of the grassy walks in his garden. Shown right is Gable hybrid ‘Rose Greeley’, which is white with a pale green throat. (Photo by Tony Greco)

Charles Mann (1912-2001) was a native of Virginia who first became interested in gardening while he was a boy living in the Southern estate of Thomas Fortune Ryan, a New York financier, where Mann’s father was manager of the greenhouses and gardens. He was a graduate of Ohio State University, where he specialized in ornamental horticulture and landscape design.

In 1946 Mann established The Flower Basket, a nursery and landscape service in Saugatuck, Michigan. He specialized in growing “the better type of ornamentals,” and was one of the first to grow rhododendrons, azaleas, and hollies successfully in the state. He designed and constructed a series of gardens on his home grounds adjacent to the nursery. Here he developed garden rooms and outdoor living areas, creating vistas through the use of different elevations and by the incorporation of terraces, sunken gardens, and stone walls.