

## Watering and Mulching

Mulching is an essential part of proper care for Azaleas and Rhododendrons. The roots of these shallow-rooted plants need the protection that mulch affords against extremes of heat and cold and against drying out. Remember, just because these plants like well-drained soil doesn't mean they like to be dry. They just don't like to be sitting in soggy, wet soil for long periods of time, which would cause their roots to rot.

The best mulches for azaleas and rhododendrons are organic mulches, such as pine or cedar bark or pine needles. Apply a 2-3 inch layer. Since mulch eventually breaks down and becomes a component of the underlying soil, add new mulch every few years as needed.

Avoid excessive irrigation. During summer heat and drought, deep watering (1-2 inches applied once or twice a week when natural rainfall is lacking) is better than daily or every-other-day sprinkling, which can lead to root rot and other disease problems.

## Pruning

Azaleas and Rhododendrons require little, if any, pruning for maintaining their natural beauty and growth habit. Maintenance pruning can be done anytime. The best time for more severe pruning, rejuvenation pruning or removing large branches (2" diameter or more) is late winter through early spring.

If, however, preserving the maximum amount of flowers for the following spring season is the goal or if you are "shearing" azaleas to create an un-natural shape or topiary look, then pruning should be

undertaken immediately after they finish blooming (usually June or July). Pruning later than that risks interfering with the development of next year's flower buds.

Begin by pruning off dead or injured branches, which could cause disease and insect problems in the future. Then prune back tall, gangly limbs shooting out of the top of the shrub. This will promote a more attractive, compact shape.

**Proper planting and pruning, in conjunction with the other tips offered above, will help these flowering shrubs provide your landscape with eye-popping flower color and dependable shrubs for years to come.**

### You'll need these:

- Compost, peat moss or coir
- Espoma Plant-tone
- Mulch
- Garden hose
- PlantSure plus Mycorrhiza



# Azaleas & Rhododendrons

...the mainstay of our landscapes



Azaleas and Rhododendrons are the mainstay of many of our landscapes, especially in shady locations. They provide lots of dependable spring color and are long-lived shrubs.



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**A**zaleas and Rhododendrons are closely related: All Azaleas are Rhododendrons, but not all Rhododendrons are Azaleas. Azaleas are a subset of Rhododendrons. The genus Rhododendron is in the Ericaceae, or heath, family, which includes its namesakes, the heathers and heaths, blueberries and cranberries and mountain laurels.

So how would you be able to distinguish an azalea from a rhododendron? There are no clear-cut lines for distinguishing all azaleas from all rhododendrons. Here are a few general characteristics to consider:

- Rhododendrons are usually larger shrubs than are azalea plants, and they have larger leaves.
- Azalea flowers are more funnel-shaped and have five stamens, while the rhododendron flowers are bell-shaped and have ten stamens; however, new hybrids (crosses between true rhododendrons and true azaleas) have intermediate stamen numbers.
- Rhododendrons are evergreen; the exceptions are *R. mucronulatum* – Korean Rhododendron, a.k.a. Korean Azalea) and *R. dauricum* (Dahurian Rhododendron).
- Azaleas are mostly deciduous (losing their leaves in winter) with a few exceptions being evergreen.
- Rhododendron leaves are often scaly or have small dots on their undersurface while azalea leaves are never dotted with scales but are frequently pubescent (covered with fine hairs).

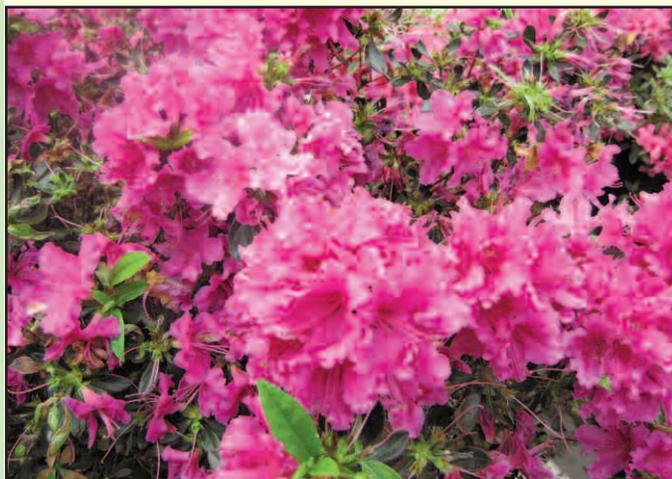
# Planting and Pruning Azaleas and Rhododendrons

## Rule #1: Location, Location, Location

Azaleas and Rhododendrons are (by-and-large) shade lovers, so just any old spot won't always work. Selecting a spot cooled by partial shade, where the soil is acidic and well-drained, is a step in the right direction in proper care. Soils rich in organic matter – but well-drained – work, too. Since good drainage is crucial, a raised garden bed might be the solution for planting in poorly drained locations.

Keep these points in mind:

- If needed, amend your soil with organic matter such as coconut coir, peat moss or compost.
- Some varieties will tolerate full sun if the soil moisture is consistently sufficient.
- Soil pH should be about 5.5; have your garden soil tested before planting (we can test your soil for free).
- Correct the pH as required (we can advise you). Soil on Long Island and in much of the metro area is acidic, requiring little or no action regarding the pH.



## When and How to Plant

The recommended planting time for balled-and-burlapped plants is late fall or early spring. Plants grown in containers can be successfully planted almost anytime unless the ground is frozen or the weather is too hot and dry.

1. Dig the planting hole as deep as the root ball or container and 2-3 times as wide, creating a shallow bowl-shaped hole.
2. Set your plant in the hole; make sure the top of the root ball is level with the surrounding soil and no deeper. Add soil beneath the root ball if needed.
3. Backfill the rest of the hole with prepared soil.
4. Water your plant in well immediately.
5. During the first few months, while plants are becoming established, watch watering.
6. Fertilize the following spring and once a year with a well-balanced organic fertilizer like Espoma's Holly-tone.
7. Don't apply fertilizer at the time of planting; new foliage and roots aren't yet ready to handle the high salt content of fertilizer, and they can easily be burned.