Bartlett Tree Research Laboratories

PLANT HEALTH CARE REPORT

Mountain Laurel

Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) is a popular, native broadleaf evergreen shrub widely used in shrub borders and natural areas. It grows throughout the East Coast and west to Ohio and Tennessee. Mountain laurel is highly prized for its flowers in mid-spring through early summer and its attractive foliage. A slow-growing species, it may add 4 to 8 feet over a decade to only reach 7 to 15 feet in height. More than 45 varieties of mountain laurel have been selected based primarily on flowering or foliage traits.

Kalmia latifolia in full bloom

Photo courtesy of James Gaither

Flower close-up

Photo courtesy of Wikipedia

Mountain laurel shares similar cultural requirements and pest problems as its close relatives, azalea and rhododendron. It prefers acidic, well-drained soils and shade during the winter months, particularly in the Southeast and Midwest. Root disease and nutrient deficiencies can occur on poorly drained or alkaline soils. Mountain laurel is tolerant of dense shade, but flowering is most profuse where there is sun for part of the day. On exposed sites, foliage desiccation can occur, especially during winter.

Leaf spots caused by the fungus *Phyllosticta* and *Cercospora* significantly reduce the attractiveness of the foliage and may cause defoliation. Leaf spot diseases can be severe on mountain laurels grown in dense shade and with sprinkler irrigation that frequently wets the foliage. Phytophthora root disease and Armillaria root rot causes decline and death of the plant, especially on wet, poorly drained sites.

Common foliage-feeding pests include lacebugs, weevils, and caterpillars. Lacebugs feed by removing sap from cells resulting in a speckled leaf appearance. Weevils and caterpillars remove notches in the

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blade margins, which severely disfigures the leaf. Scale insects and borers occasionally infest branches and stems of mountain laurel.

Mountain laurel is seldom damaged significantly by deer. To reduce rodent-feeding on stems in winter, ensure mulch is not placed over the root collars.

Monitoring and Treatment Considerations for Mountain Laurel

Late winter

Expose and inspect root collar for problems. Add mulch as necessary. Sample soil for nutrient and pH levels, especially if deficiency symptoms are evident. If plants exhibit decline, sample roots or root collar for Phytophthora root rot.

Early spring

Apply first soil treatment in areas with Phytophthora root rot. Apply first fungicide treatment to suppress leaf spot if there is a history of this disease. Monitor for lacebugs, weevils, and caterpillars; treat as needed.

Mid-spring

Apply second fungicide treatment to suppress leaf spot if there is a history of this disease. Monitor for lacebugs, weevils, caterpillars, and signs of borer activity; treat as needed. Fertilize, adjust pH, and amend soil according to soil analysis. Install pheromone trap for borers.

Late spring

Apply third fungicide treatment to suppress leaf spot if there is a history of this disease. Monitor irrigation and soil moisture to minimize water stress and prevent root disease.

Early summer

Monitor for lacebugs and weevils; treat as needed. Monitor irrigation and soil moisture to minimize water stress and prevent root disease. Reduce or remove branches to promote appropriate structure after blooming.

Midsummer to late summer

Apply second soil treatment in areas with Phytophthora root rot. Monitor for lacebugs and weevils; treat as needed. Monitor irrigation and soil moisture to minimize water stress and prevent root disease.

Late fall

Remove mulch from stems to reduce risk of disease and rodent injury. Monitor irrigation and soil moisture to minimize winter injury. Fertilize, adjust pH, and amend soil according to soil analysis. Set up burlap screens to protect from winter injury.