Bartlett Tree Research Laboratories

PLANT HEALTH CARE REPORT

Azalea and Rhododendron

Azalea and rhododendron, combined in a single genus, *Rhododendron*, are the most popular plants used in the landscape. The genus represents 800 to 900 species of evergreen, semievergreen, and deciduous plants and many thousands of cultivated varieties. These shrubs display a wide diversity of flower color, foliage traits, growth habits, and flowering dates. Depending on your site and selections, azaleas and rhododendrons may bloom from winter through summer. They are used in both foundation and specimen plantings. Common companion plants include dogwood, redbud, silverbell, Stewartia, holly, mountain laurel, Japanese andromeda, and fringe tree.

Evergreen azalea
Rhododendron 'Firestar' (Kurume)

Rhododendron 'Dexter's Honeydew'

According to the American Rhododendron Society, "all azaleas are rhododendrons, but not all rhododendrons are azaleas." Some general characteristics can aid in their differentiation:
1) Azaleas typically produce more flowers and have smaller leaves than other rhododendrons.
2) Azaleas usually have five stamens while rhododendrons have ten or more.

Continued on page 2

Azalea and rhododendron thrive in partial shade, but some varieties will tolerate full sun or dense shade. Flowering is most prolific if plants receive at least partial sun. Protection from strong wind is critical to prevent desiccation and winter injury, especially on evergreen varieties.

Azalea and rhododendron require acidic, well-drained soils. Nutrient deficiencies and root disease commonly occur when soils are alkaline and poorly drained. Iron is essential for healthy azaleas and rhododendrons, but is often unavailable when soil pH is too high.

Phytophthora root rot is the most destructive disease affecting this plant group. Root disease commonly occurs in plants subjected to soil moisture extremes. In wet areas, drainage systems should be installed and neither soil nor mulch should contact the stem. Some azaleas are susceptible to a fungus which transforms leaf tissue into large pink galls. Warm, moist weather conditions during bloom can predispose plants to a flower blight disease. Canker disease fungi can cause dieback of stems and branches especially following periods of low temperatures or drought.

Monitoring and Treatment Considerations for Azalea and Rhododendron

Winter

Apply dormant treatment to suppress overwintering insects. Inspect plants for deer and rodent damage; apply repellent treatment as needed. Expose and inspect root collar for problems. Add mulch as necessary. Remove dead, dying, diseased, and broken branches. 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 fungicide treatment to prevent leaf gall on susceptible varieties. Monitor for lacebugs, whiteflies, mites, scales, and foliage-feeding caterpillars; treat as needed. Install pheromone trap for borers.

Mid-spring

Monitor for lacebugs, whiteflies, mites, scales, borers, and foliage-feeding caterpillars; treat as needed. Apply fungicide treatment to prevent leaf gall and flower blight as needed. Fertilize, adjust pH, and amend soil according to soil analysis. Reduce or remove branches to promote appropriate structure in early-blooming varieties.

Late spring

Monitor for lacebugs, whiteflies, mites, scale crawlers, weevils, and foliage-feeding caterpillars; treat as needed. Monitor irrigation and soil moisture to minimize water stress and prevent root disease. Inspect mulch levels and adjust as needed. Hand-pick leaf galls and remove from property. Remove dead flower heads from rhododendron.

Azalea and rhododendron are susceptible to a large number of pests. Leaf-feeding pests, including lacebugs (damage pictured at right), whiteflies, mites, and weevils, weaken the plant and reduce the attractiveness of the foliage. Scales and borers can infest branches and stems. Weevil larvae can girdle the stem by feeding on the roots unnoticed.

Azalea and rhododendron are favorite food sources for deer. Rodents may feed on bark tissues below the soil or mulch line resulting in girdling and death.

Reduce or remove branches to promote appropriate structure in late-blooming varieties.

Early summer

Monitor for lacebugs, whiteflies, mites, scale crawlers, and weevils; treat as needed. Inspect irrigation and soil moisture levels to reduce moisture stress and prevent root disease. Remove dead flower heads and reduce or remove branches to promote appropriate structure in late-blooming varieties.

Midsummer

Apply second soil treatment in areas with *Phytophthora* root rot. Monitor for lacebugs, whiteflies, mites, and weevils; treat as needed. Inspect irrigation and soil moisture levels to minimize moisture stress and prevent root disease.

Late summer

Monitor for lacebugs, whiteflies, mites, and weevils; treat as needed. Inspect irrigation and soil moisture levels to minimize moisture stress and prevent root disease.

Early fall

Inspect plants for evidence of deer browse. Begin applying repellents before deer injury becomes severe. Inspect irrigation and soil moisture levels to reduce water stress and prevent root disease.

Late fall

If sucking insects were problematic this past growing season, consider treating with an appropriately timed systemic product. Inspect plants for deer and rodent damage; apply repellent treatment as needed. Remove mulch from stem 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.