



Growing Rhododendrons and Azaleas in Iowa

Rhododendrons and azaleas are spectacular flowering shrubs. Although there are more than 900 species and innumerable cultivars, only a small number perform well in Iowa. To be successful, the Iowa gardener must select cold hardy cultivars, choose suitable planting sites, and follow recommended planting procedures.

Azaleas and rhododendrons are members of the genus *Rhododendron*. Deciduous members of the genus are commonly called “azaleas” while the evergreen species are referred to as “rhododendrons.”

Site selection

When planting rhododendrons and azaleas, proper site selection is extremely important. Azaleas prefer partial to full sun. Rhododendrons perform best in protected sites in partial shade. Areas that receive morning sun and afternoon shade are usually good sites for rhododendrons. Avoid windy, exposed sites. During the winter months, strong winds and bright sunlight can dry out rhododendron foliage and cause extensive leaf burn.

Both rhododendrons and azaleas require well-drained soils with a pH of 4.0 to 5.5. The pH of most garden soils in Iowa ranges from 6.5 to 7.5. An excellent way for home gardeners to lower their soil pH is to incorporate sphagnum peat moss into the soil. (The pH of sphagnum peat moss generally ranges from 3.0 to 4.5.)

Planting rhododendrons and azaleas in a wet, poorly drained soil usually results in their death. Gardeners with poorly drained sites should build berms or raised beds to ensure good drainage.

Planting

Rhododendrons and azaleas have shallow, fibrous root systems. When planting, dig a wide, shallow hole. The hole should be 3 to 4 times wider than the rootball. The depth of the hole should be 1 to 2 inches less than the height of

the rootball. Backfill with a mixture that is half soil and half moistened peat. When planted, the top of the rootball should be 1 to 2 inches above the surrounding soil.

Maintenance

Rhododendrons and azaleas like a consistent supply of moisture through the growing season. To help conserve moisture, apply 2 to 3 inches of mulch around plants. Shredded bark, pine needles, and shredded oak leaves are excellent mulching materials as they are mildly acidic and help maintain the desired soil pH.

Despite the presence of mulch, it may be necessary to water rhododendrons and azaleas every 7 to 10 days during prolonged periods of hot, dry weather.

Recommended choices for Iowa

The following rhododendrons and azaleas possess excellent cold hardiness and are the best choices for Iowa landscapes.

Northern Lights Series of Azaleas—Developed and released by the University of Minnesota, these varieties have flower bud hardiness of -30 to -40° F.

- **Candy Lights™**—light pink flowers with pale yellow streaks
- **‘Golden Lights’**—gold flowers
- **‘Lemon Lights’**—light yellow flowers
- **Lilac Lights™**—pinkish purple flowers with darker speckles on upper lobes
- **‘Mandarin Lights’**—mandarin orange flowers
- **‘Northern Hi-Lights’**—creamy white flowers have bright yellow upper petal
- **‘Orchid Lights’**—orchid flowers
- **‘Rosy Lights’**—flowers are deep rose pink
- **‘Spicy Lights’**—soft orange flowers
- **Tri Lights™**—soft pink with white overtones and yellow blotch
- **‘White Lights’**—white flowers



‘PJM’ Rhododendrons—The ‘PJM’ rhododendron grows well over much of the upper Midwest. The evergreen foliage is dark green in summer, turning to a maroon-purple in fall. The flower buds are hardy to -30° F and produce bright lavender-pink blossoms in mid to late April. Mature plants are approximately 4 to 6 feet in height and width. ‘PJM’ was introduced by the Weston Nursery in Hopkinton, Massachusetts and was named after its owner, Peter J. Mezitt. Several selections of ‘PJM’ are available.

- **‘PJM Compact’**—compact, lavender-pink flowers
- **‘PJM Elite’**—blossoms are slightly more pink
- **‘PJM Regal’**—medium pink flowers

Three other Weston Nursery hybrids also do well in Iowa.

- **‘Aglo’**—light pink flowers with dark pink throats appear about 7 to 10 days after ‘PJM’; small green leaves turn to bronze in fall
- **‘Black Satin’**—winter foliage is dark mahogany (almost black), deep magenta flowers
- **‘Olga Mezitt’**—bright pink flowers on shrubs that are 4 to 5 feet in height

Marjatta Hybrid Rhododendrons—Developed at the University of Helsinki in Finland, these hybrids have large showy flowers and broad evergreen leaves. Flower buds are hardy to -25 to -30° F. All perform best in sites protected from winter sun and wind.

- **‘Elviira’**—low growing, spreading plant with a mature height of 2 feet; flowers are bright red
- **‘Haaga’**—plants have an upright growth habit and may grow 6 feet in height; dark green foliage and rosy pink flowers
- **‘Hellikki’**—dense spreading habit, reaching 5 to 6 feet in height; flowers are dark violet-red
- **‘Mikkeli’**—5 to 6 feet in height; white flowers have green flecks in the upper portion of the corolla
- **‘Peter Tigerstedt’**—upright plants may grow to a height of 6 feet; white flowers have violet flecks in the upper part of the corolla

Catawba Rhododendrons—These cultivars have large, dark green leaves and 5- to 6-inch-diameter flower clusters. They are hardy to -20° F, require a protected site, and perform best in southeast Iowa.

- **‘Album’**—white flowers
- **‘English Roseum’**—light rose flowers
- **‘Nova Zembla’**—red flowers
- **‘Roseum Elegans’**—lavender-pink flowers

Exbury and Knap Hill Hybrid Azaleas—These two groups contain a large number of cultivars. The following are hardy to -20° F.

- **‘Gibraltar’**—orange flowers
- **‘King Red’**—red flowers
- **‘Klondyke’**—golden orange flowers
- **‘Oxydol’**—white flowers with yellow blotch

For more information

Call ISU’s Hortline at (515) 294-3108 (Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-noon and 1-4:30 p.m.) or email hortline@iastate.edu.

<http://store.extension.iastate.edu/>
www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu
www.reimangardens.iastate.edu

To learn more about horticulture through training and volunteer work, contact your county office of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach for information about the Iowa Master Gardener program.

Prepared by Richard Jauron, extension horticulturist.

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