

Pruning Rhododendrons

Gray Barn Green Thumb Guide



Rhododendrons are perfect plants for the Northwest with their bright, beautiful spring blossoms and vibrant evergreen foliage. Most rhodies prefer partial shade, although some varieties can take full sun. They perform best in well-drained soil and mulched with some type of organic matter to conserve moisture and prevent weeds. Fertilize in late winter or early spring with a fertilizer for acid-loving plants.

Early spring is the best time to prune rhododendrons. Prune them just before or just after blooming. Although it's not necessary, plants will look better if the dead flowers are removed after blooming. Be careful not to damage the new buds below and just snap or snip off the faded flowers.

Always prune dead wood, crossing branches and interfering or crowding branches. First and always take out all the dead wood. The removal of the dead and brown twigs will instantly transform any plant for the better. Second, when two branches are crossing or rubbing, or if they are growing too close together, remove one. Make a thinning cut, which is removing a branch to the point where it began as a bud, or remove the entire branch by cutting it off at the ground. Third, take out branches that hang over a walkway, touch the house or droop and scrape the ground. These provide a route for weevils to climb into the plant and feed on the leaves. Remove spindly shoots that sometimes develop along the main stem. After performing these three simple steps your rhody will look like a brand new plant!

Rhododendrons can be cut back severely. If you really need to rejuvenate a plant, do it over a period of 2-3 years, leaving some foliage each year to help the plant survive. Letting sunlight in will encourage new shoots to form. Each year cut back some of the heavy branches 1-2 feet off the ground. Prune plants so they don't touch the house or a fence. Don't worry about cutting rhododendrons back this much; they usually recover within a few years.

Consider moving your rhododendron. Some varieties can and will rapidly outgrow their space. An old gardener's saying is "Inside every rhody is a 15 foot tree trying to get out!" Before hacking away at your rhody every year, consider moving it. Rhododendrons are easily moved because of their shallow root system. After transplanting heavily soak the plant and continue to give it plenty of water throughout the first year. Often in a new landscape rhodies are planted too close together or next to a walkway. These are good candidates to move instead of pruning every year.



Remove limbs touching the ground and deadwood



After



If desired, prune a small amount to even out the crown.



After

Resources:

Guide to Pruning by Cass Turnbull, 2004

The Pacific Northwest Gardener's Book of Lists by Ray and Jan McNeilan, 1997