Rhododendrons and azaleas are among the most popular flowering shrubs in Kentucky. A healthy stand of these shrubs will enhance almost any landscape. Rhododendrons and azaleas invariably suffer disease problems associated with poor growing conditions. They can survive and grow in Kentucky once they are established; however, they have a few special requirements. The “special requirements” are conditions that match those in areas where rhododendrons and azaleas are native.

Rhododendrons and azaleas are closely related to each other and can be found growing on the forest floor in many parts of the world. In their partially shaded habitat they enjoy a slightly acidic, rich, organic soil often with a surface layer of decaying leaf litter.

The following items should be considered in order to provide some of the “forest” conditions when attempting to establish rhododendrons and azaleas in the home landscape.

**Site Selection**
Rhododendrons and azaleas do best in a location that receives partial shade. Rhododendrons and evergreen azaleas also benefit from a sheltered location that provides protection from the direct afternoon sun and the winter winds.

**Soil conditions**
Rhododendrons and azaleas have fine silk-like roots that are important in absorption. These roots do not tolerate water-saturated soil conditions. Poor drainage and wet soil are problems often associated with heavy clay and compacted soil. (This is a common problem here, as these soils are prevalent in Kentucky.) Planting in raised beds or mounding up native soil, to which organic...
soil amendments have been added, will help attain good soil drainage.

Although too much water can injure the roots it is important that they receive adequate moisture, especially during the first year after transplanting. A two to three inch layer of organic mulch surrounding the base of the plants helps retain moisture and helps control weeds.

Rhododendrons and azaleas do best in a slightly acidic soil (pH 4.5 to 6.0). Organic soil amendments, such as peat moss, can help lower a high pH. Yellowing between the leaf veins is most often due to a pH problem. If this occurs, a soil test is suggested for exact recommendations on adding a soil amendment, such as sulfur, to the soil in order to lower the pH.

Diseases
When rhododendrons and azaleas are grown under favorable conditions diseases are less of a problem. When they do occur they can often be traced back to their environment. Listed below are the two most common diseases of rhododendrons and azaleas.

**Botryosphaeria Dieback**
This fungal disease is found on plants under stress. Not surprisingly then, this is one of the most common diseases to find in the first couple years after transplanting. There are several species of Botryosphaeria that attack Rhododendron and azalea

**Symptoms**
This disease starts with the appearance of scattered dead branches among healthy branches. Infection often begins at leaf scars, pruning wounds or dead flower clusters. These infection sites are often at the tips of the branches; from here the disease can work its way down the stem. Leaves on affected branches will roll lengthwise or curl downward, turn brown and remain attached to the branches.

**Disease Management**
Reducing plant stress, such as transplant shock or drought, is the most important control measure. Making sure that plants are shaded from the hot afternoon sun is also important. Heat and drought stress in particular have been shown to favor this disease. Promptly pruning out all of the dead and dying branches to below the discolored wood will help prevent the spread of the disease; as will avoiding all unnecessary wounds.

**Phytophthora Root Rot**
Also known as Rhododendron Wilt, this disease develops where wet soil conditions occur.

**Symptoms**
The leaves of infected plants look off-colored and eventually wilt. In the advanced stages the leaves are rolled lengthwise and the leaves and stems appear brown in color. The root systems of infected plants are greatly reduced. The remaining roots often appear water-soaked and brown.

**Disease Management**
Buy only healthy plants from a reputable
nursery. Avoid plants that lack normal green color or appear wilted. Plant in an area with good soil drainage and use raised beds if necessary. As a last resort, fungicide treatments can be used to prevent the spread of *Phytophthora* into and among plants. A fungicide containing metalaxyl or fosetyl-Al used as a soil drench can be an effective treatment when used as recommended on the label. (Pesticide certification may be required to purchase and apply these fungicides.)

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