



CARE SHEET FOR RHODODENDRON

Rhodies had their heyday a few decades back, and are not as popular as they once were. With increasing population density, new diseases, changing climate and water restrictions, quite a few of the older cultivars don't work as well.

Diseases/pests: there are myriad problems. Vine or root weevils notch the foliage, and can eat roots and bark, if their population is sufficient. Lace bugs are making inroads, into the Puget Sound Basin, creating nasty stippled looking foliage, ultimately killing plants. Two forms of powdery mildew will affect plants. Plants under stress (lack of water, light and air circulation) are more prone to the telltale whitish coating, while certain color groups (orange/apricot/salmon/yellow) are also quite susceptible to the "newer" mildew (which causes brown/red/purplish spotting on the foliage, and can lead to complete leaf drop and death).

Our advice is, if a plant is ugly, remove it. There is no sense in trying to spray, as the chemicals are toxic and once spraying begins, one has to continue as the spraying regime only keeps disease/bugs at bay, and won't eradicate the problems.

That said, well grown plants are unequalled in their floral display and there are newer selections of rhodies that perform well in our changing environment.

We particularly like plants with indumentum and tomentum. This refers to the felty/fuzzy covering that new foliage has. Indumentum is the fuzz on the underside, tomentum on the top. The plants with this characteristic are mostly smaller sized, growing three or four inches a year, and staying compact for many years. Most importantly, the fuzz seems to ward off the newer mildew, which has been a real problem in Dunn gardens. This disease has probably wiped out one third to one half of the plants that were here fifteen years ago.

The sometimes brilliant expanding foliar buds and silver to fawn colored tomentum add months of interest. Eventually the tomentum wears off, revealing a green leaf, usually of a nice dark green, frequently glossy. This often takes most of the summer (unless people deliberately rub it off), the tomentum lasting until autumn/winter rains wash it away.

Let's face it; most old hybrid rhodies are boring to look at. The flowers last two to four weeks (weather dependent), and after that what is there? Sticky brown blobs to deadhead. A green mass, of a hue you hope is soothing, not sickly. Ho-hum.

Make certain to keep rhodies hydrated during periods of dry weather, and they do best placed out of strong wind and where they aren't exposed to all-day or afternoon, broiling sun. If planted in decent soil, there is no need to fertilize, though a light mulching will help (not too thick, and nothing too rich!).