



Port Kells Nurseries

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Three ways to Prune Rhododendrons

There are three common reasons for pruning rhododendrons—maintenance, shaping, and rejuvenation—and the pruning method for each is easy to learn. The result is a shrub with dense branching, plentiful foliage, and abundant flowers.

Maintenance pruning removes old flowers and dead wood

Maintenance pruning consists of the removal of spent flower clusters, called trusses, and also of any dead or diseased wood. The trusses are not only unsightly but will eventually form seed, which uses precious energy that would otherwise be available to the plant for vegetative growth. Maintenance pruning is the easiest type of pruning and is the only one that needs to be done every year.



To remove old flower trusses on rhododendrons, use a pruning shear to snip the truss at its base, about 1/2 inch above the emerging flush of new growth. Some people just grasp the stem with their thumb and forefinger and snap the truss from the plant. This works well most of the time, but occasionally the truss breaks off, taking some of the new growth with it. By using a pruning shear, such accidents are avoided.



Wood damaged by storms or a harsh winter should be clipped from the plant. Diseased stems, often identified by their wilted, curled yellow-green leaves, should also be removed. Make the cut below the damaged portion of the plant, taking care to cut into healthy wood right above a dormant bud. Be sure to disinfect the shears with rubbing alcohol between cuts.

Maintenance pruning is best done when the flowers have faded and before the flush of new growth rising beneath each truss is more than an inch or so tall. Many types of rhododendrons can benefit from maintenance pruning, including some deciduous azaleas, like the Knap Hill-Exbury hybrids, and most broad-leaved. Some varieties of rhododendron, most notably small-leaved cultivars rarely set seed and do not require maintenance pruning. If your flowers and flower stalks simply shrivel up and essentially disappear in the weeks after flowering, then your variety doesn't set seed and doesn't need to be deadheaded.

Pruning for shape enhances the plant's natural habit and form

As the name implies, shaping involves altering the shape of the plant, and it can be done for many reasons, from encouraging denser branching to controlling plant width or height.



Shaping improves the appearance of a plant by encouraging increased branching at its growing points. Since many evergreen rhododendrons hold their leaves for about three years, a branch will have a series of leaf whorls, each representing a year's growth. The whorls of foliage are separated by sections of leafless stem, called internodes. In general, broad-leaved rhododendrons have much longer internodes than small-leaved and deciduous types and benefit most from shaping. To shape a rhododendron, follow the branch from the end down to the last whorl of leaves you want to keep. Make the cut about 1/4 inch above the topmost leaf in this cluster. Repeat as needed.



Shaping is most easily done in late winter, while the plant is dormant. Although this sacrifices some of the flower buds, it ensures a complete growing season for the new stems that emerge.

Rejuvenation pruning calls for drastic cuts on old wood

Rejuvenation pruning is best used to restore shrubs that have become leggy, overgrown, or otherwise unattractive. Many rhododendron species and hybrids can be severely pruned and come back as good as new. Rejuvenation pruning removes most of the branches of the plant, initiating the rise of vigorous flushes of new growth from previously leafless old stems. The new growth matures into a new framework of branches that can then be shaped over the years to produce a stunning shrub. It's best to perform this type of pruning in winter, while the plant is dormant.



Rejuvenation pruning involves the careful cutting back of each primary branch of the plant's framework. Rhododendrons often have three or more main branches rising from the crown of the plant. These branches, called primary branches, form the basic scaffold of each shrub. Each branch is cut at a different height to produce a staggered arrangement that will make the shrub look natural when the new shoots mature.

Another type of rejuvenation pruning consists of cutting the entire plant to within 6 inches of the ground. It is a quick method, but not all rhododendrons survive the treatment. In some instances, an apparently healthy plant may be weakened by disease or poor nutrition and cannot recover from the stresses of hard pruning. To see if your shrub can handle such a hard pruning, cut only one of the main branches back to 6 inches. Cut the others back to a height you are sure is healthy, say 2 feet. If new growth emerges from the 6-inch cut, you can cut back the rest of the shrub following year and be confident in its return.

Regardless of the method, rejuvenation pruning works because of a special trait of rhododendrons. Look at the bark on a stem or main branch of many rhododendrons and you will see tiny buds, little pink dots about the size of a pinhead that pepper the surface of older branches. These little pink buds, called latent buds, are the key to successful rejuvenation pruning, as they will give rise to the new framework of branches. Once you've determined how far back the plant needs to be pruned, take a moment and examine the area for a nice healthy bud (one that is firm and appears filled out) and cut 1/2 to 3/4 of an inch above that bud. Pruning above a cluster of two or three buds is better than pruning above just one bud, as this often produces multiple branches.

