



## ORGANICALLY GREEN

HORTICULTURAL SERVICES

Spring Newsletter, 2019

Every May and June our landscapes are brightened by the beautiful flowers of rhododendrons but many of us know little about this large genus of shrubs.



Rhododendron is derived from the Greek words *rodon*, meaning rose and *dendron* meaning tree. They were discovered by the 16<sup>th</sup> century botanist Charles l'Ecluse, later known by the Latinized name, Clusius. Today, there are over 1,000 species of rhododendrons that can be found in North America, Europe, northern Australia, and some temperate and tropical regions of Asia.

However, rhododendrons have been around far longer than the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the earliest mention

dating back to 401 BC. Xenophon's army, in retreat and starving near the Black Sea coast of Turkey fed upon honey made from the nectar of *Rhododendron luteum* and suffered nausea and vomiting. This is not surprising, given that all parts of rhodos are toxic and eating the leaves can cause abdominal pain, convulsions and even death. The toxic honey that is produced from the pollen or nectar is referred to as "mad honey" as it is known to produce hallucinations, vertigo and/or loss of coordination.

The culture of rhododendrons is relatively easy if you avoid poor draining, saturated or heavy soils. Rhodos belong to the acidic soil-loving *Ericaceae* family which includes cranberries, blueberries, mountain laurels, and andromedas. They have a fine fibrous root system that requires a moist soil with a pH ranging from 4.5 o 6.0.

Under the right conditions these plants can be extremely long lived, as in the case of the 'Old Cornish Red' rhododendron located in Horsham, UK which is currently 120 years old. Currently, this



'Old Cornish Red' Rhododendron



single stemmed rhododendron is 40 feet wide and 30 feet tall and attracts visitors from around the world!

The main ornamental trait of rhodos is their flower which can be funnel-, bell-, trumpet-shaped or tubular. Flowers can sometimes be fragrant and come in a multitude of colors such as white, pastel, orange, golden, red, pink or purple. The biggest misconception of these plants is that they prefer to be planted in full or deep shade. When in actuality, some light is needed to stimulate flower production and plants in deep shade may have very few flowers.

Also, regarding the flowers, there is always some debate about whether they require deadheading in order to adequately flower. If you remove the spent flowers before seed set- which may be a large undertaking depending on the amount and size of your rhodos- it will help them to set the same or more flowers for the following year. If you choose not to, they will still produce buds, but overall flowering may be reduced.

Rhododendrons can also tolerate a range of temperatures with a few species able to tolerate a low temperature of -35°F. Despite their innate cold hardiness in some areas, when temps are at or below 32°F, the leaves will typically droop and curl inwards in an attempt to retain water by reducing their surface area. (They also exhibit this trait when dehydrated.)

Leaves of rhodos range in size but the larger leafed varieties maybe more susceptible to wind and sun damage in the winter. This is typically referred to as winter desiccation, the plant continues to release water vapor to cool itself but is unable to replace it as the soil water is frozen. This results in a “burn” or browning of the leaf tissue. Another lesser known fact is that rhododendrons -as well as other

evergreens- is that they shed leaves on an annual basis. Usually, the leaves that are retained are anywhere from one to three years old.

Conversely, there are also rhododendrons that are found in tropical climates. *Vireya* rhododendrons grow in cool mountainous regions of Southeast Asia, either as epiphytes high in the tall trees of the cloud forest or on open ground in shrubberies. There are over 300 *Vireya* species, comprising approximately one-third of all rhododendrons.

No matter where they live, rhododendrons make a great addition to any garden!



*Vireya Rhododendron*

*For more information:*

<https://www.rhododendron.org/>

<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderListResults.aspx?letter=R>





*We offer the following services:*

Landscape Services:

- ⊗ Landscape Design & Installation
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- ⊗ Seasonal Displays
- ⊗ Spring Bulb Planting
- ⊗ Tree and Shrub Maintenance & Removal
- ⊗ Sod Installation
- ⊗ Tree/Shrub Transplanting
- ⊗ Air Spading
- ⊗ Radial Trenching
- ⊗ Vertical Mulching
- ⊗ Holiday Lighting

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- ⊗ Anti-Desiccant Spraying
- ⊗ Flying Insect
- ⊗ Deer Repellent
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