

Horticulture Diagnostic Laboratory



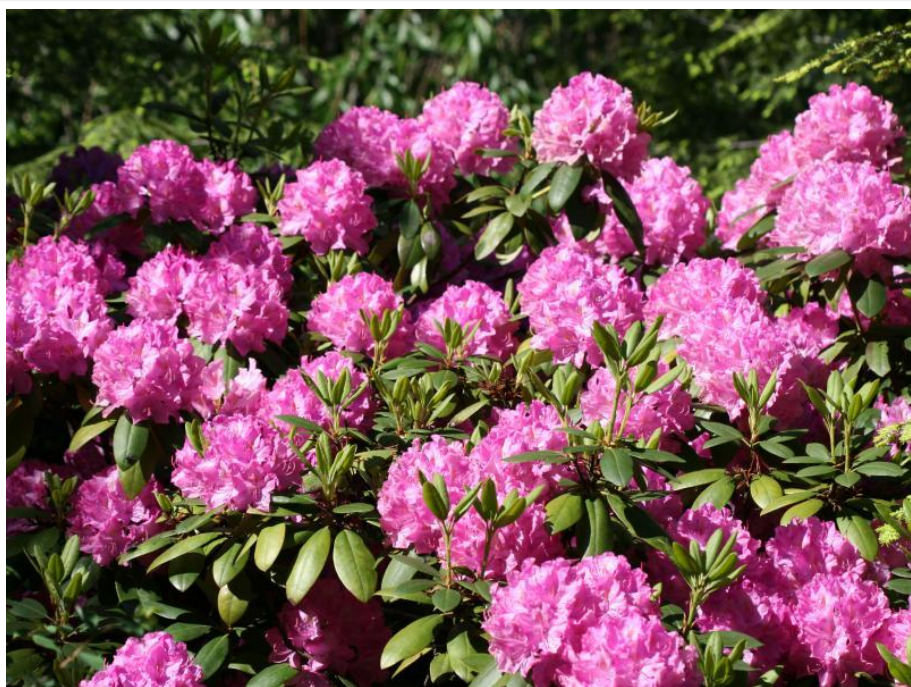
Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
of Suffolk County
www.ccesuffolk.org

Extension Education Center
423 Griffing Ave, Ste 100
Riverhead, NY 11901-3071
631-727-4126

Bayard Cutting Arboretum
Montauk Hwy
Great River, NY 11739
631-581-4223



Rhododendrons for Long Island Gardens



Rhododendrons have always had a special charisma. They developed a reputation for being the royalty of shrubs, probably because they were an expensive indulgence by the owners of the great estate gardens of Britain and early fine gardens in the United States.

William R. Coe developed his estate and gardens at Planting Fields after World War I by importing hundreds of rhododendron plants from England. Today a wide variety of rhododendrons is available in nurseries to be enjoyed by many Long Island gardeners. Visits to Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park (Oyster Bay, NY) in April until early June acquaint you with great numbers of handsome

flowering rhododendrons and azaleas, as well as many other fine flowering trees and shrubs.

The genus *Rhododendron* is extremely large, with 900 to 1,000 species found growing in many parts of the world. The largest numbers are native to Japan and in mountains and valleys from China to India. Only a handful are native to America's forests, valleys and mountains. One of these, *Rhododendron catawbiense*, a native of the Smoky Mountains, was introduced to England about 1860. This hardy species was crossed with other more tender species from China and gave rise to a host of hardy hybrid rhododendron varieties. These "ironclads" were the principal varieties imported by Coe and others for their gardens at the beginning of the century. Many of these fine old hardy varieties are readily available in nurseries today ('Roseum Elegans', 'Roseum Pink' and 'Catawbiense Album') and are still highly recommended.

Rhododendrons are popular in the Pacific Northwest, where the rainy humid environment and mild winters are ideal for their growth. Hybridists in Oregon and Washington, as well as several successful breeders in the Northeast, introduced many new varieties that rhododendron enthusiasts eagerly sought for their gardens.

Perhaps the most striking development of beautiful hybrids hardy for the Northeast was made by Charles O. Dexter, who carried on a massive breeding program at his estate in Sandwich, Massachusetts. Making extensive use of the Chinese species *Rhododendron fortunei*, Dexter produced a remarkable number of hybrids characterized by dense foliage, large stature and flowers of superior size and color, many of which are fragrant. Notable among the Dexter hybrids are 'Scintillation,' 'Betty Hume,' 'Parker's Pink,' 'GiGi,' 'Mrs. W.R. Coe,' 'Wheatley' and 'Westbury.'

Many of the more tender varieties, grown reliably in England and the Northwest, find the winters on Long Island more severe than they can stand without injury or winter kill. Unfortunately, some varieties available in garden centers on Long Island, shipped here from West Coast growers, are not always reliably hardy. They should be tried only in the most protected locations.

An excellent way to become acquainted with rhododendrons best suited for Long Island gardens and to learn how to grow them is to attend the meetings of the New York Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. They are held at Planting Fields Arboretum. More information on the Society can be obtained from their web site <http://www.nyrhododendron.org/index.htm>. Visitors are cordially welcomed. If you talk with Rhododendron Society members, you will soon learn the varieties they consider the "good doers," or most reliable, in their gardens. Some of those considered best for dependable hardiness and performance are listed in table below. New York Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society web site is another good place to get information on dependable rhododendrons for our area.

Ensure success with newly-purchased rhododendrons, or any other shrub or tree, by proper planting and after care. The old adage of preparing a five dollar hole for a 50-cent plant is still good advice. It is imperative to dig a hole *at least* three times the diameter of the root ball. It is good practice to prepare an entire bed area at the same time by incorporating organic matter (composted materials or peat moss) and rototilling the area to obtain a uniform soil consistency.

A plant should be placed with the root flare or root collar set at or slightly above the natural grade. The hole should be only as deep as the depth of the root ball. This insures that the root ball rests on firm soil to prevent settling after planting. Rhododendrons are surface rooting plants whose roots occupy the upper 3 - 5 inches of soil and need a loose, porous soil to permit adequate oxygen and moisture penetration for the roots. After backfilling the hole you can build a 3 or 4 inch high soil berm around the plant just beyond the root ball to help facilitate watering the first month or so. This should be removed after a few months. The rule of thumb is not to fertilize newly planted shrubs until one year after planting.

If you purchase container-grown plants, you often find them pot-bound or approaching that condition. Cut or loosen some of the roots to disrupt the circular growth and force the plant to extend its roots into the surrounding mineral soil. You can obtain more detailed information on planting trees and shrubs from the Cornell Cooperative Extension – Suffolk County web site in the leaflets titled [*How To Plant Trees and Shrubs*](#) and [*Planting and After-Care of Container Grown Plants*](#). Printed copies of these leaflets are available from the Insect and Plant Disease Diagnostic Labs for a charge.

The use of coarse mulch materials (wood chips, oak leaves or pine needles -- do not use peat moss as mulch) for newly-planted rhododendrons helps ensure success in growth by retaining moisture and preventing deep freezing in winter. Keep the mulch several inches away from the stem of the plant. Rhododendrons require adequate moisture throughout the year to ensure good growth, flower bud initiation and prevention of desiccation and burning of foliage from deep freezing of roots and drying winter winds. Provide adequate water and you will enjoy beautiful rhododendrons year-round.

A List of Rhododendrons Suggested for Landscapes on Long Island

LOW: (up to 3' in height)

'**Dora Amateis**' - A compact, slow-growing hybrid with white flowers; blooms early.

'**Ginny Gee**' - A dwarf small-leaved plant with two-toned pink flowers that cover the plant.

'**Ramapo**' - A hardy dwarf early bloomer. The small violet-blue flowers are enhanced by small blue-green leaves.

'**Purple Gem**' - Similar in plant form to 'Ramapo' but with bright purple flowers in profusion.

'**Veesprite**' - Tiny clusters of Persian rose flowers and small leaves on a delightful dwarf.

'**Mary Fleming**' - Creamy yellow flowers streaked with salmon-pink, dark foliage in winter.

A List of Rhododendrons Suggested for Landscapes on Long Island

LOW: (*up to 3' in height*) (continued from page 2)

'**Wyankie**' - A fine, small-flowered white with exceptionally good winter foliage, early flowering.

R. keiskei - Pale yellow flowers cover this early blooming compact plant.

R. yakusimanum - Highly prized rhododendron with slow growth and compact habit, pink buds open to white flowers.

MEDIUM: (*3' to 6' in height*)

'**Pioneer**' - Early flowering with rose-pink flowers in profusion. Small leaves, partly deciduous.

R. mucronulatum - The earliest of all, blooming with Forsythia. '**Cornell Pink**' and '**Mucronulatum-Pink**' seed-grown are both good color forms - deciduous.

R. carolinianum - Bell-shaped pink, lavender pink or rose flowers and small, glossy green leaves on a broad but upright plant.

'**P.J.M.**' - An early flowering intense pinkish lavender that resembles *R. carolinianum*. The small leaves turn a mahogany-copper in late fall.

'**Windbeam**' - A popular small-leaved variety that blooms with apricot-pink flowers changing to pure white flushed with light salmon. This is a reliable, hardy plant.

'**Boule de Neige**' - A compact hybrid with pure white flowers in large clusters that appear early. Grows best with some shade.

'**Vulcan**' - Heavy trusses of fiery red on a well-shaped mound of dark green pointed leaves.

R. vaseyi - One of the loveliest deciduous native azaleas with flowers ranging from white to pink.

TALL: (*over 6' in height*)

'**Betty Hume**' - Large pink frilled and ruffled flowers; plant habit is one of the very best.

'**Blue Peter**' - Frilled trusses of light lavender with a showy dark flare.

'**Cadis**' - Fragrant light pink flowers on an attractive plant.

'**Catawbiense Album**' - This has been a standard white for over a hundred years and is still a winner.

'**Everestianum**' - Ruffled, lavender-rose flowers on an exceptionally hardy plant.

'**GiGi**' - Trusses of up to 18 rosy-red flowers covered with deep red spotting. One of the best Dexters.

'**Great Eastern**' - An attractive ruffled deep purplish-pink, paler in the center. Free flowering with large trusses.

'**Janet Blair**' - Pink-white flowers with a light yellow blotch complement this very vigorous, well-rounded and branched plant.

'**Mars**' - Deep tone hardy red and white stamens and open flowers of good substance. Needs some protection from afternoon sun.

'**Mrs. W.R. Coe**' - Large flowers form a dome-shaped truss of brilliant pink flowers with a crimson throat. A fine Dexter with glossy dark green leaves.

'**Parker's Pink**' - Lightly scented 3-1/2" flowers are brilliant pink with heavy red spotting and white center - highly popular.

'**Roseum Pink**' - Similar to 'Roseum Elegans' in hardiness and habit, but with a lovely pink flower.

'**Scintillation**' - Fine pink flowers of heavy substance in mid-May. Has handsome foliage and good compact habit of growth.

A List of Rhododendrons Suggested for Landscapes on Long Island

TALL: (*over 6' in height*) (continued from page 3)

'Westbury' - Fairly late blooming large pink; open funnel-shaped flowers with nearly white edges. Very floriferous, well-branched plant.

'Wheatley' - Frilled, lightly fragrant flowers are a delicate silvery pink shaded deeper on the edge and touched with yellow-green in the throat. Plants often grow more broad than high.

R. fortunei - An outstanding plant covered with large, often fragrant pastel pink flowers in generous trusses.

R. maximum - A native species of the Northeast, white to pink flowers, the last to bloom of the season; requires some shade.

R. schlippenbachii - Called the Royal Azalea, a dense deciduous bush with pastel to rose pink, star-shaped flowers. Excellent.

Resource: "Rhododendrons for Long Island Gardens", by Gordon E. Jones, *Long Island Gardening*, May/June, 1992, p. 3-5.

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