

Azaleas, Rhododendrons & Blueberries

Azaleas, rhododendrons and blueberries are acid-loving plants that will do well in Minnesota if they are provided with the right conditions in which to grow. Azaleas and rhododendrons are highly desired for their showy, colorful blossoms while blueberries are grown for their flavorful fruit. Care should be taken to ensure that you select cultivars that are adapted to your area.

Site Selection and Planting

The ability to grow any acid-loving plant depends greatly on site selection and preparation.

Because of their shallow, fibrous root systems, azaleas, rhododendrons and blueberries require a soil that is uniformly moist, but not saturated. Organic soils and light, well-drained soils are preferred while heavy, poorly drained soils should be avoided. Maintaining a uniform moisture supply can be accomplished with irriga-

tion and/or mulching. Heavy, poorly drained soils will result in loss of plants to root rot.

In addition to the physical soil requirement azaleas, rhododendrons and blueberries require an acid soil with the pH in the range of 4.5 to 5.5 for best results. Soils that are more alkaline than the 5.5 will result in the plants not growing as well and becoming yellowish and more subject to winter injury. If your soil is too alkaline the addition of acid peat, sulfur or iron sulfate can lower the pH.

When planting it is important not to plant too deep. Roots of these acid-loving plants tend to be in the upper 4 to 6 inches of soil and need to be near the surface for aeration. To plant, dig a shallow hole, deep enough to plant the top of the root ball at or slightly above the existing soil. Backfill around the plant with a mixture of acid peat and the existing soil.

Mulching with acid peat, wood chips, sawdust, pine needles or similar materials to a depth of 3 to 5 inches is beneficial for controlling weeds, retaining moisture and adding organic matter. In addition, mulching will eliminate the need for cultivation which can cause injury to the shallow root systems. When using a sawdust mulch it is necessary to replace the nitrogen lost in the decomposition process by fertilizing with a high nitrogen fertilizer.

Once planted, azaleas, rhododendrons and blueberries benefit from the application of acid-forming fertilizers to maintain soil acidity and supply nutrients. Specially formulated fertilizers for acid-loving plants are available and will be of great benefit. Fertilizers are best applied in the spring or early summer.

CARING FOR YOUR ENVIRONMENT

- ✓ When designing and installing an environmentally-friendly and sustainable landscape, it's important to remember to choose the right plant for the right place. With Minnesota's severe winters, it's especially important to choose plants that are hardy. The "Lights" Series of azaleas was developed by the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum especially for northern climates. Lights Azaleas come in a wide variety of colors. Purchase Lights azaleas at an MNLA member nursery or garden center.



In Minnesota there are no serious or common diseases or insect pests. Powdery mildew can sometimes cause azaleas to be unsightly in fall but it is seldom worth controlling with sprays. A bigger problem can be the damage caused by rabbits, field mice and other rodents during winter. A cylinder of hardware cloth (wire mesh with holes 1/4-inch square) around the trunk will help to prevent any damage.

Recommended Species & Cultivars

— AZALEAS —

Mollis: (*Rhododendron x kosteranum*) A hybrid species of azalea with particularly showy blooms of shades ranging from deep orange to yellow. A select strain introduced by the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum has proven to be flower bud hardy to -20 to -25 degrees Fahrenheit. It will bloom well most years in the Twin City area and southern Minnesota. It is a slow grower that will reach 6 to 8 feet at maturity.

Light Series: A series of hybrid azaleas developed by the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum with flower bud hardiness of -30 to -45 degrees Fahrenheit. Each cultivar name includes 'Lights'.

Golden Lights: Golden yellow flowers are produced in late May and early June. Somewhat upright in habit.

Orchid Lights: Dwarf compact form with soft lilac flowers appearing about a

week prior to other azaleas. Flower buds hardy to -45° F.

Northern Lights: A hybrid seedling strain resulting from the cross of two hardy azaleas that is extremely floriferous with flowers in shades of pink. Flower bud hardy to -40 degree F. Mature height 6 to 8 feet.

Rosy Lights: A Northern Lights seedling selection with deep Rosy pink flowers. 6-8' in height and spreads.

Spicy Lights: Colorful blooms of coral pink cover the plant in late May.

White Lights: Extremely floriferous with many trusses of white flowers with a tinge of pink appearing in late May. Flower bud hardy to -35 degrees F. Matures to 5 feet in height and spread.

Lemon Lights: A new cultivar with flowers of dark and light yellow.

Northern Hi-Lights: A newer cultivar with bi-colored flowers of yellow and white and excellent fall color.

— RHODODENDRONS —

PJM: A small-leaved evergreen hybrid rhododendron with deep lavender pink flowers in early spring. Small dark green leaves turn a deep mahogany color in winter. Plant is hardy to -35° F. but flower buds above snowline can be damaged in less severe winters. Can reach up to 5 to 6 feet with a 4 to 5 foot spread.

— BLUEBERRIES —

The cultivars listed below were all

developed and introduced through the University of Minnesota fruit breeding program. These low statured or half-high plants were developed by crossing the more tender high-bush blueberry with the low spreading, hardy blueberry that is found in northern Minnesota to give us the first reliably productive blueberry cultivars for Minnesota. These cultivars are normally hardy to -25° to -30° F. before suffering any injury to the overwintering flowerbuds. It is best to plant two different cultivars to ensure good pollination and fruit set.

Northblue: A very productive plant producing from 3 to 7 pounds of fruit on established plants with medium to large size berries. Excellent flavor. Plant will reach about 20 to 25 inches at maturity.

Northcountry: Medium sized fruit with exceptionally good flavor and good productiveness. Cross pollinates well with Northblue.

Northsky: Low statured plant with small berries. Good for use in northern Minnesota where snow cover will normally protect this low growing cultivar. Moderately productive. Can be used as a cross pollinator for other cultivars.

Polaris: A 1996 intro with very aromatic, firm berries with excellent flavor.

Chippewa: A 1996 intro with sweet fruit and high yields.

St. Cloud: Introduced in 1990, with a more upright habit.



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