

Rhododendrons (published 2025-07-05)

By Nancy Weaver, Master Gardener

Rhododendrons are beloved flowering shrubs known for their spectacular clusters of blooms and glossy, dark green leaves. Available in a range of stunning colors—including pink, purple, and white—these plants are a signature feature of the Southern Appalachian landscape. They thrive naturally in the Unicoi and Unaka Mountains of East Tennessee, where their vivid blossoms attract visitors from near and far.

While most rhododendrons have finished their bloom cycle in the Tri-Cities area by mid-June, they are just reaching their peak atop Roan Mountain, where the annual Rhododendron Festival is celebrated on June 21 and 22. Just over the border, Bakersville, North Carolina, hosts its own North Carolina Rhododendron Festival from June 20–22.

Nestled between these two areas is Carvers Gap, home to the famed Rhododendron Gardens. The gardens have been renovated and reopened in June. In addition Roan Mountain State Park offers an impressive natural display of rhododendrons, which continue to bloom into July.

If you're inspired to add these magnificent plants to your home landscape, be aware that rhododendrons can be a bit particular, but they're not impossible to grow with the right preparation.

Choose the Right Variety

Not all rhododendrons are well-suited to our region. Local experts and Tennessee Smart Yards recommend *Rhododendron catawbiense* (Catawba Rhododendron), a native species known for its hardiness and regional adaptability. Another excellent choice is the 'PJM' group of hybrids, which are compact, reliable bloomers that tolerate both sun and shade.

Ideal Growing Conditions

Rhododendrons prefer:

Acidic soil with a pH around 5.5: soil amendments may be necessary based on results of a soil test. See “Lawn and Garden Soil Samples” at <https://soillab.tennessee.edu/soil-testing/lawn-and-garden-soil-samples/> and Getting the Most out of Your Home Vegetable Garden Soil Test Report at <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/W804-A.pdf>.

Moist, well-drained soil: they do not like “wet feet.” See “Testing and Improving Soil Drainage” at <https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu/how-to/testing-and-improving-soil-drainage>.

Partial shade meaning 2 to 4 hours of direct sunlight to protect from intense midday sun.

Spring to early summer planting in East Tennessee.

Fertilizing & Pruning Tip

Go easy on the fertilizer. Rhododendrons are sensitive to excess fertilizer salts. Apply a gentle fertilizer formulated for acid-loving plants in early spring.

Pruning should be done from early spring to mid-summer, shortly after the bloom period. Avoid shearing. Instead, use the “reach and cut” method to preserve the plant’s natural shape and encourage healthy growth. There is a YouTube video from the University of Illinois demonstrating pruning at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v7A_yWZcrw.

A Word of Caution

All parts of the rhododendron plant are toxic to both humans and animals if ingested. Even honey made from rhododendron nectar can be dangerous, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as "mad honey."

A Symbol of Appalachian Beauty

Whether you're admiring them along a misty mountain trail or nurturing them in your own backyard, rhododendrons are emblematic of East Tennessee’s rich natural heritage. With proper care, they can add a timeless touch of Appalachian elegance to any landscape.

Resources

Tennessee Smart Yards:

https://tnyards.utk.edu/?searchSiteLevel=Current&swp_form%5Bform_id%5D=1&s=rhododendrons&formSearchSiteLevel=Select

American Rhododendron Society: www.rhododendron.org

The Southeastern Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society (SE-ARS):

<https://www.se-ars.org/>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site:

<https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

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