

# A big, old rhododendron

By Linda Roe

There's nothing that says Pacific Northwest like a big, old rhododendron, its leaves shiny and dripping with raindrops. However, I often hear people say they don't like rhodies because they need too much care or they get too big. I think they may not actually dislike rhodies, but where they are placed.

So many times, rhodies are "crew cut" under the eaves of the house with nothing but spindly trunk, sad leaves and nary a flower to be seen. Others block the entire living room window and half the house. Some poor things bake in the sun on the south side of the driveway, their small, withered flowers gasping for water.

In order to enjoy a rhododendron in your yard, consider where it would thrive. Size, foliage and flower color all work together to make a rhodie a welcome addition to the landscape. First let's take the rhodies under the front window. There are compact and dwarf cultivars that will be shorter than the window sills for a long time. Try the classic Ramapo, which grow wider than it is tall and will be covered with little purple flowers in early spring. This one will also tol-

erate sun and heat well. Need something smaller? Little pink flowering Ginny Gees, yellow Peter Bees or lavender Ernie Dees are shaped like tidy little mounds, never outgrowing their allotted space.

Rhodies have beautiful leaves, none better than the "Yak" hybrids (*R. yakushimanum*). Their new growth is covered with soft, white, felt-like hairs called indumentum. The mature leaves are dark green and glossy with felty brown undersides. Find a spot for a compact apricot-flowering Cupcake or a pink Ken Janeck.

The newer rhodies are just as beautiful as the old classic ones. Would you like a big, red rhodie? Consider a Taurus, which has huge, dark red trusses and reddish new growth that suggest the horns of a bull. Pink lovers should take a look at a Fantastica, which is dark pink on the outside and lighter in the center. Ellie Greens are bright magenta pink with reddish new growth. Fans of old purple rhodies might like the newer one called Lees Dark, which has flowers that are dark purple with a darker eye.

Yellow rhodies have become more popular in the last few years and more new varieties are becoming available. Seaview Sunset is one of the most popular, with orange buds opening to bright yellow flowers. Hotei is



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an old favorite with buttery yellow flowers. My favorite is Starbright Champagne, a beige yellow with a magenta center. Plant your new rhodie in a place where it will be able to assume its natural, beautiful shape.

Rhodies thrive in acidic, humus-rich soil with a regular source of water and cool sun or part shade. They dislike being buried with too much mulch around the trunk. Although rhodies prefer regular watering, they do not like sitting in wet, boggy soil. When the water pools around the roots, a rhodie is prone to water-borne fungal dis-

eases. Drooping curled leaves are a classic symptom. Berming your rhodie up when planting in wet clay can go a long way to prevent this. Fertilize your rhodies with a special fertilizer formulated for acid loving plants. It is important to prune your plants right after they bloom, as they form the buds for next spring in the summer. Treat your rhodies with the respect these grand evergreens deserve and they will be beautiful even in the rain. ■

*Information courtesy of Wight's Home & Garden.*