



Garden Tips

Amending the Soil & Saving a Rhododendron



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I have been worried about my Rhododendrons since Spring 2010. I have both a large, mature stand and a cluster of newly planted rhodos. And last spring both looked terrible. After the first burst of new growth, branches began to wilt and die back. I had to keep cutting off dead material.

I thought I was doing everything right, and my arborist agreed. The shrubs were planted on a humus rich but well-drained slope in part shade. I fed them Spring and Fall with Holly Tone for acid-loving plants and mulched them to insulate the roots. The arborist and I were unable to find insect damage and we began to fear phytophthora root rot. If this were the case, all of the rhodos would be lost.

Thankfully, lab tests for phytophthora came back negative. So I finally ordered a soil test. It's a truism that we have acidic soil here in Connecticut, so I was surprised by the results. My soil measured 6.5 on the pH scale, with 7 being neutral and anything below 7 acidic. So, yes, the soil is somewhat acidic. But Rhododendrons prefer a pH of 5.5, as do Mountain Laurels (*Kalmia latifolia*) and Andromeda (*Pieris*). The acidity in the soil makes important nutrients available to the plants. Mine were suffering from their inability to take up enough nutrients.

The test also showed a deficiency in nitrogen. So I amended the soil with an acidifier—sulfur and ammonium sulfate are both good options. I also added some dried blood for nitrogen. And I made sure the rhodos were all watered when rain was scarce (which was most of last summer!).

It didn't take long for all of my Rhododendrons to perk up. The die back stopped, and this spring the shrubs put out vigorous new growth. They have remained healthy looking all summer and have now formed flower buds for next spring.

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My arborist and I have come to the conclusion that the plants were weakened by the deficiencies in the soil and unable to handle the stress of some very extreme weather the last few years. But I hope that this story illustrates the importance of testing the soil. It may seem a nuisance to collect samples, mail them away and wait for the findings. But soil is critical to plant life, and the testing process really is quick and easy.

The University of Connecticut's website provides instructions on how to take the samples. If you go to www.cag.uconn.edu/plsc/soiltest/newsite/sampling.php and click on the "PDF" link under "Home Grounds/Landscape," you'll find both instructions and a form to send in with your sample. This is a great time to make any amendments that may be needed to your soil.