

HOME & GARDEN

Impressed by rhododendrons

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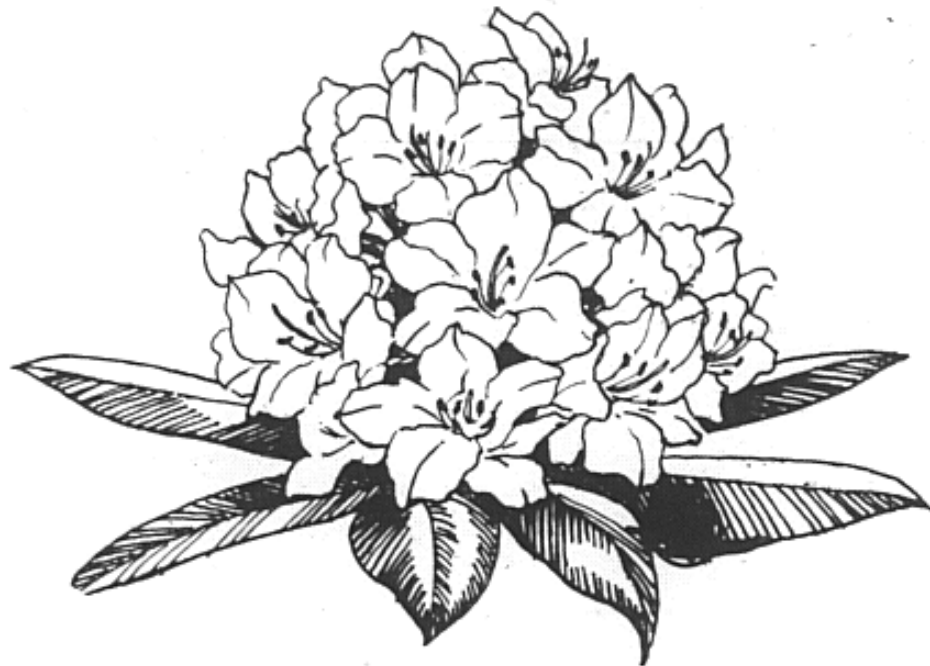
This week I traveled to Cape Cod for the first time. Because the weather was cold and windy I couldn't lie in the sun, baking and working on a tan, but we did walk on the dunes and beaches, admiring a landscape that is very different from the richness of our hill. The vegetation is austere, but it is amazing to see the variety of grasses and plants that can live in the seemingly lifeless sand. There are even small trees and, of course, the fragrant beach roses.

We drove through several small towns, and I was particularly impressed by the number of rhododendron bushes energetically blooming with great health and vigor. They were everywhere: in front of houses, municipal buildings and in parks.

BETWEEN THE ROWS

At one point we drove into Centerville and passed a beautiful old cemetery; the weathered stones looked peaceful and only slightly melancholy in the shade of giant and ancient pines. The solemnity, however, was interrupted by the luxuriant bloom of rhododendrons that reached a height of 20 feet.

By the time we arrived at my brother's house on Saturday night we had seen hundreds of beautiful rhododendrons, and after we had admired his new rhododendrons and azaleas I went into the house to check the garden books to see what there was about the Cape that caused these bushes to grow so successfully. I've now checked the "Time Life Garden Encyclopedia," written by James Crockett of Crockett's Victory Garden fame, "America's Garden Book," by James and Louise Bush-Brown and the "Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening," published by Rodale Press. They all agree that rhododendrons require a moist but well-



drained soil that is fairly acid and rich in humus. They all stress that proper soil preparation is vital to success in growing these beautiful flowering shrubs.

They will do well in full sun, but most of them prefer at least some shade, and a heavy, acidifying mulch is also beneficial, which would explain why those bushes growing in the Centerville cemetery did so well. They were shaded by pines and mulched with their needles. But still I don't completely understand their vigor because the soil is generally so sandy on the Cape. It seems another instance of the tenacity of life or at least of the liberties you can take with any set of directions and still come up a winner. Maybe three out of four requirements is sufficient. If anyone out there wants to grow rhododendrons

do so magnificently on the Cape, I wish they would let me know.

It is too late to plant rhododendrons this spring, but if you have some landscaping to do, think about the benefits of these plants. Their broad leaves are evergreen, they bloom profusely in the spring only two years after planting, they come in a variety of colors and some of the new hybrids are very hardy.

New England's acid soil suits them perfectly. If by chance your soil has a PH of more than 5.5, do not try to acidify it with aluminum sulfate as you might for blueberries. This chemical will turn into a nitrate in the soil, and it will cause the leaves to yellow, damage the roots and

You can condition the soil with leaf mold, acid peat or hardwood sawdust. This will lighten a clay soil and help it to retain moisture.

Dig a generous hole early in the spring and plant your rhododendron no deeper than it was in the nursery. Use the rich humusy soil you have created to fill the hole and water it well. The soil does not have to be heavily fertilized. You will find that 5 pounds of cottonseed meal, fish meal or blood meal for each 100 square feet will be plenty and only has to be applied every other year or so. (You can also use 5-10-5 fertilizer.)

Rhododendron roots are very shallow and the bushes should always be mulched for protection. As this mulch decomposes it will provide the plants with most of the nutrition that they need. Use oak leaves or pine needles because these are acid, and be generous in the winter. It is even a good idea to cover the mulch with pine branches to hold it in place if the winds are severe.

After blooming, the spent flower heads should be removed, and this will encourage even more profuse blooming the following year. (Otherwise the strength of the plant will go into the formation of seed heads.) Just snap off the bloom cluster, don't cut back the branch.

Actually, rhododendrons require very little pruning. Just remove any dead or weak branches and trim back healthy branches just enough to maintain a pleasing shape.

Rhododendron come in many colors. There is the ubiquitous lavender, but *R. Chionoides* is a very hardy white that has a yellow splotch in the center. *R. English Roseum* is a clear deep pink and it also is very hardy. A variety that I have especially admired in the catalogs is the dwarf Yakushima rhododendron which comes from Northern Japan and is very hardy. It has exquisite flowers, just the shape of apple blossoms.