



# GROWING & KNOWING **RHODODENDRONS & AZALEAS**



WRITTEN BY JOHN MASON AND STAFF OF ACS DISTANCE EDUCATION

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# CHAPTER 1 CLASSIFICATION OF RHODODENDRONS AND AZALEAS

Common terms used to describe rhododendrons and azaleas can sometimes appear contradictory. This is largely due to a number of different classification systems being proposed and then subsequently adopted, amended, or rejected. Whilst these systems have largely been based on morphology (plant form and structure), other systems have been used by gardeners and enthusiasts to make sense of this fascinating and diverse group of plants.



Ericas are in the same family as *rhododendrons*, and share many of the same cultural needs.

## THE RHODODENDRON FAMILY

By understanding related plants, we can get insights into many aspects of rhododendron culture. Plants that are closely related tend to behave similarly, require similar growing conditions and respond to similar cultural practices (ie. are likely to share relatively similar requirements for propagation, pruning, soil, water and climatic requirements).

Rhododendrons belong to the plant family known as Ericaceae, as do many other common garden plants including: Erica, Kalmia, Arbutus, Pieris, Vaccinium (eg. blueberry and cranberry) and Gaultheria.

The Ericaceae family is divided into four sub families:

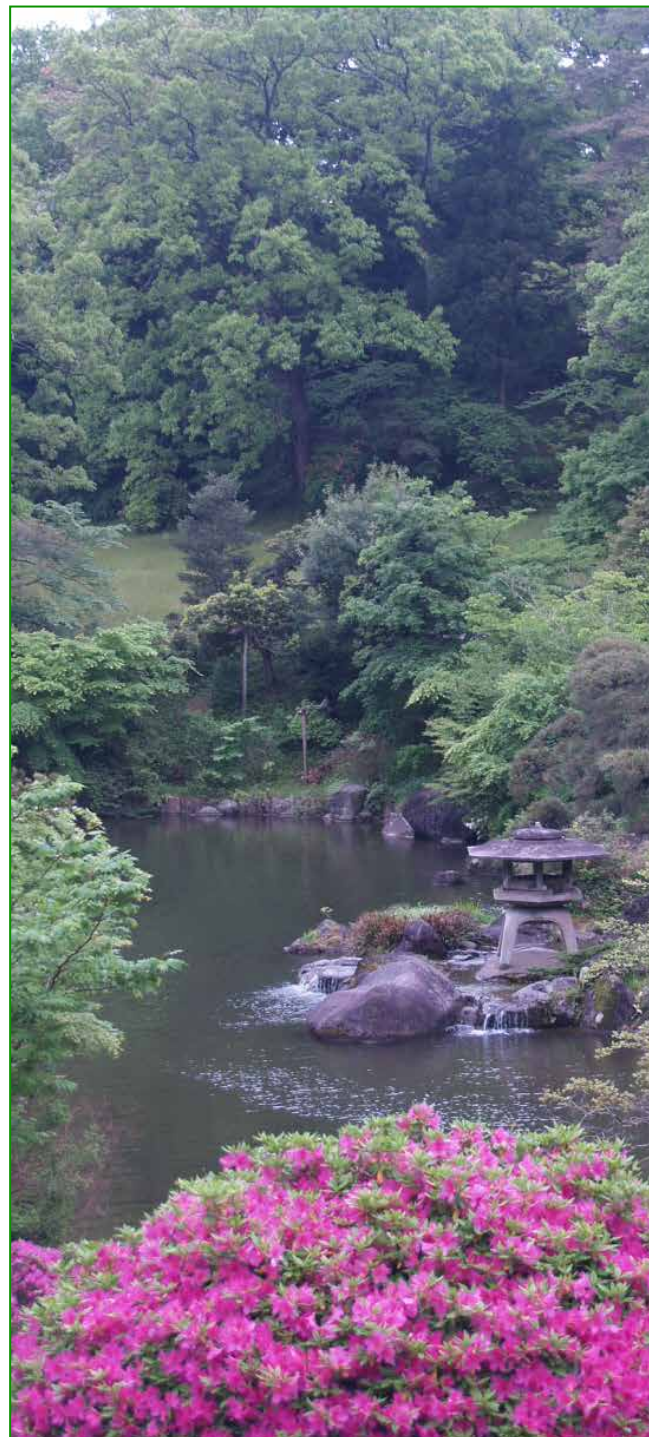
1. **Rhododendroideae** – *Rhododendron* belongs to this group. The winter buds of rhododendrons have scales, stamens usually have no appendages, the corolla detaches as the flower dies off (ie. is cauducous), fruits are a septicidal capsule and seeds are frequently but not always winged,

2. **Ericoideae** – This includes *Erica* and *Calluna*. There are no winter buds with scales, as seen on rhododendrons. The leaves are commonly small and needle like. The corolla is normally persistent (ie. petals remain attached to plant even after dying). The fruit is a loculicidal capsule or nut and the seeds are not winged.
3. **Vaccinioideae** – This includes *Arctostaphylos*, *Gaultheria* and *Vaccinium*. Fruits are a capsule, drupe or berry and seeds are not winged. Winter buds have scales, the corolla detaches as the flower dies off (ie. is cauducous), stamens commonly appendaged.
4. **Epigaeoideae** – This includes *Epigaea*. Ovary is densely pubescent, anthers contain longitudinal slits, the stigma is significantly expanded, and corolla has 5 lobes. These plants are dioecious and leaves are a cordate shape.

Most Ericaceae plants like acidic soils and high to medium levels of light (not heavy shade). Most also prefer a temperate climate, though some are indigenous to arctic climates and several others to tropical regions.

Many Ericaceae species live in close association with a group of mycorrhiza fungi in the soil. This group is known as ericoid mycorrhizas and is an unusual group. The fungi form a symbiotic relationship with the host plant Fungal hyphae (filaments) wrap around root hairs and penetrate the cell walls of cortical cells in which they form coils. They do not extend into the cell plasma

though. The mycorrhizas provide soil nutrients to the plant's roots in exchange for carbohydrates produced by the plant through photosynthesis. Some nurseries may inoculate their rhododendrons with mycorrhizal fungi to enhance nutrient uptake and growth.



Azaleas are a classic component, bringing colour and form to Japanese gardens (at Narita in Japan).



A diverse range of *Rhododendrons* growing in filtered light (at Harcourt Arboretum, Oxfordshire, England)

## UNDERSTANDING RHODODENDRONS

Azaleas and rhododendrons are both, in fact, rhododendrons, although not all rhododendrons are azaleas. This was not always the case. Azaleas were formerly considered to be a different genus throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and were only grouped into the same genus as rhododendrons in the 1930's.

The differences between azaleas and "true" rhododendrons are not clear cut. There are exceptions, but the following tendencies exist:

- True rhododendron flowers commonly have 10 or more stamens; azaleas have 5.

- Rhododendron flowers tend to be bell shaped and azalea flowers tend to be shaped like a funnel or tubular funnel.
- Azaleas tend to have hairs on the under surface of the leaves, particularly along the mid rib, while rhododendrons tend to have small dots or scaly markings underneath the leaf.
- Many azaleas are deciduous, but very few rhododendrons are deciduous.

Today, there are around 800 acknowledged species of rhododendron and many thousands of named hybrids and cultivars.