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Why Do Your PJM Rhodos Suffer?

This is a topic is of great interest to me. One reason is that I can use the term ericaceous, describing acidic soil loving plants!

The three cultural culprits usually to blame for PJM and large leafed Rhodo problems are as follows:

Poor drainage, high pH, and too much late winter/early spring sun. Let's discuss them one at a time.



These plants love excellent drainage, and heavy clay soils are the kiss of poor health. I don't care if you replace all the top layer of soil in the planting bed, you're still going to get a soaking bathtub effect when it rains hard. Try "planting" on top of the grade, and feather out from the top of the root mass with a mixture of peat, sand, and compost. I've heard tales of just putting them in deep mulch, and having them thrive.



A pH of around 5.5 is ideal for these plants. High pH is often related to clay soils, but my massive Rhodo beds at home have a natural pH of around 7.6 in almost pure sand. This is the easiest of our problems to solve, with the use of garden sulfur. I like to sulfur in the fall, so the sulfur breaks down into the soil by May, but sulfuring and then mulching can cover the somewhat unsightly yellow microdots. I actually sulfured all my ornamental and edible gardens last fall. We happen to sell 6 lb. and 50 lb. bags of sulfur, as well as a combo pH, moisture and light meter. As MSU Extension likes to say, "Don't guess, soil test!"

Lots of sun and wind in February and March, when the root system is still frozen, is the real kiss of death! The plants are robbed of moisture, just when the roots can't replace it. That's why you often hear the advice to plant on the east side of homes. This gives the plants a mild morning sun, while protecting them from harsh afternoon sun and drying southwest and northwest winds. If you have a south exposure deciduous tree line, planting to the north of the trees also gives winter protection, while letting the plants get plenty of sun in the summer when the sun is higher in the sky.

There you have it! Trying to ameliorate these three cardinal sins will make your ericaceous plantings look much healthier, and save you warranty replacements.



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