

Yard and Garden – 04-25-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

This past Monday morning, while sipping my first cup of coffee for the day, I stood by the patio doors gazing into our backyard. As the sun's rays began to pierce the treetops, streaming beams of soft amber light touched the dew-covered grass creating a myriad of tiny sparkling jewels.

When I stepped onto the deck, the brisk morning air immediately raised goose bumps on my skin. High above, I heard a cardinal calling out. Inhaling deeply, I savored the fresh sweet scent of that early spring day, and then quickly, I visually scanned our yard. Scattered throughout the landscape were hundreds of yellow daffodils dancing in the morning breeze.

Weeks earlier, I noticed that frost had destroyed many of the flower buds on our magnolia trees; however, that morning I was pleased to see both the saucer magnolia and the star magnolia in bloom. Although not completely covered with blossoms, it was still great to see them in flower. I also noticed tulips of assorted colors dotting the landscape. For that brief moment, there I stood, staring, sipping and shivering, yet reveling in the joy that the beauty of spring had returned once again.

Spring is and has always been my favorite season. Although the weather can be somewhat temperamental, for me, witnessing the rebirth of a spring landscape is always exciting. I'm thrilled to see the stark, dreary shades of winter vanish into a flush of emerald green, brightly adorned with brilliant colors of spring flowers.

Every spring I eagerly await one particular flower in our yard. It is our PJM rhododendron. On the west side of our home, beneath the window of our living room, nestled between two yew shrubs, is the rhododendron. This little beauty actually belongs to Rita. Nearly fifteen years ago, my mother gave this plant to Rita for her birthday.



Each spring, at this time, this obscure little shrub becomes a show stopper. For two to three weeks it graces the landscape with brilliant, lavender-pink flowers. Once it's finished blooming, the shrub simply blends with the rest of the vegetation. Often passers-by will ask, "What is that flowering shrub?" Generally I respond, "Rhododendron," but occasionally I answer, "Azalea."

Although all azaleas and rhododendrons are classed as *Rhododendron* by plant taxonomists, the name azalea is commonly used for native deciduous species and some oriental evergreen types. In general, rhododendron is used for those species that have large, evergreen, leathery leaves. No sharp division can be made between the two; thus, it is always correct to call any of them rhododendrons.



Azaleas and rhododendrons perform best in mild, humid climates. Most regions of central and western Nebraska do not provide ideal growing conditions for rhododendrons to thrive. Azaleas and rhododendrons must have an acidic soil. They grow best at a soil pH between 5.0 and 5.5. The soil in Kearney and the surrounding area is mostly alkaline, often testing with

pH levels in the high 7's to 8's. Soils can be made more acidic by applying agricultural sulfur or iron sulfate. The amount of pH change varies with different soil types.

Site selection is also important. One should plant rhododendrons where they receive wind protection. Buildings provide good shelter. Evergreen shrubs or trees planted to the south or west of rhododendrons also protect them; they also make a great background for showing off the flowers.

The PJM rhododendrons are smaller, growing to heights of 3 to 5 feet. Their form is rounded, and the foliage is leathery and dark green until fall when it turns purplish. PJM's are heavy bloomers and considered the hardiest among rhododendrons. They include the following:

*Black Satin - Counterpoint - Desmit –
Elite - Henry's Red – Laurie - Low Red –
Frilled -Marathon - Molly Fordham -
Northern Rose - Olga Mezzitt - Regal -
Victor - Waltham - Weston's Pink
Diamond – and White Angel.*



Although I'm not absolutely sure, I think ours is *Regal*, for it certainly appears that. The *Regal* rhododendron is a vigorous grower with a broad, spreading habit bearing an abundance of showy, vivid, purplish-pink flowers beginning in mid-April.

For the next two weeks, I will enjoy our PJM rhododendron; I will also relish the beauty of spring once again returning to Nebraska.