



# Trowel Talk!

October, 2016

## Finding the right spot for rhododendrons.

A few years ago, during one of my first trips to the Montreal Botanical Garden, I was advised to visit the Leslie Hancock Garden. It was mid-May. Not really knowing what to expect in that distant part of the Botanical Garden, I headed there directly, bypassing a number of other thematic gardens.



Photo: Kelly Noel

Brilliant orange-red blossoms on a mature rhododendron.

The Leslie Hancock Garden is partially shaded by tall pine trees and other conifers. Some parts do not get any direct sun. In spite of this, the area was a mass of bright colours. I was in the midst of a garden of rhododendrons and azaleas in full bloom, with flowers in various shades of pink, red, purple, yellow and orange. Azaleas are often considered separate from rhododendrons but are really part of the same family. All the plants seemed to be competing to show off their finest flowers.

Inspired by what I had seen, I thought I would try to make the same kind of garden at home. I visited a few local nurseries and

was soon the proud owner of a variety of rhododendrons: large-leaved, small-leaved, deciduous and evergreen.



Photo: Mary Ann Van Berlo

Rhododendron blooms up close.

I rushed to plant these new treasures at the foot of some large conifers in my garden. I lost two over the winter that first year, but the rest produced a rainbow of colours. I was very proud of my success and delighted to show them off to anyone who happened to visit while they were in flower.



Photo: Kelly Noel

A rainbow of rhododendrons make for a spectacular display.

Unfortunately, over time, I lost most of them. I realized I had been in too much of a hurry when I planted them – I should have done some research! Most plants have their specific requirements in term of exposure, light, water and soil, and rhododendrons are no exception. Generally speaking, in the greater Ottawa area (zone 4-5,) where the summer sun can be scorching and the temperature

drops to -30°C in winter, the planting site needs to be chosen very carefully. The plants should be sheltered from wind and excessive sun. The atmosphere should be cool and humid.

Rhododendrons have specific soil requirements too: It should be well aerated – it needs a structure loose enough that air can enter pore spaces between particles as water drains out. It should also have lots of compost mixed in to give it a high organic content. It should be cool and moist but well drained and slightly acidic.

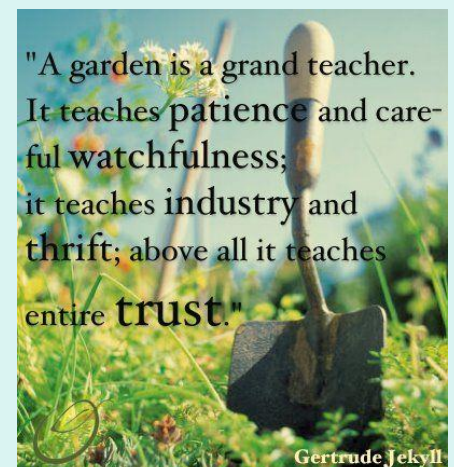
In retrospect, the site I had chosen met the air exposure criteria but failed miserably on the soil requirements and preparation. Our soil is heavy clay and the area is poorly drained.

This rather disappointing and expensive experience, both in time and effort, emphasizes the necessity to plan carefully before going out to the local nursery. Too often we are tempted by the promise of a gorgeous, colourful garden and forget to verify if our local conditions can support the plants we choose. Some plants are best admired in catalogues and pictures, or better enjoyed at the Botanical Gardens.

Robert Bourdeau  
Retired Master Gardener

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- Newsletter of the Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton
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- Editor: Mary Ann Van Berlo
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"A garden is a grand teacher. It teaches patience and careful watchfulness; it teaches industry and thrift; above all it teaches entire trust."

Gertrude Jekyll

## October TO DO List

- Bring houseplants that are still outside in. Make sure to give them a good cleaning to ensure unwanted pests don't come with them. Check under the leaves and at the base of flower buds for whiteflies and aphids. Check the leaf axils for spider mites. A regime of spraying with insecticidal soap every 5-7 days should take care of all stages of the pests' life cycle. Still, it may be good to keep the plants away from other houseplants until you are sure they are not infested. A sticky trap will also help reduce the number of insects around your houseplants.
- Water trees until the ground freezes. Conifers need water as they continue to transpire throughout the winter. This is especially important after this year's drought.
- Put stakes in the ground so that you'll be ready to wrap trees and shrubs once the ground freezes. Don't wrap them before freeze-up since you want to be sure the mice have found their winter homes and don't move in with your wrapped tree or shrub.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

## Tip of the Month

It may be too late for soft tissue herbs like basil (if they've been hit by frost) but other herbs can be harvested and dried for winter use.

Pick herbs in early morning as this is when their essential oils are more concentrated. Wash them thoroughly, then pat dry. There is no need to remove the leaves from the stem at this stage. Spread the different herbs out on

## Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton



### Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

#### ONGOING:

**Telephone Help Line:** 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1-3 pm (all year)

**E-mail Help Line:** [mgoc\\_helpline@yahoo.ca](mailto:mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca)

- monitored daily

- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

#### CLINICS:

**No clinics until next spring.**

#### SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

**Don't Stop Yet – Fall Tasks – October 17 – 7:00 pm**

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Ottawa South Community Centre – the Fire Hall, 260 Sunnyside, Ottawa

Hosted by Ottawa South Garden Club (Guest fee: \$7)

**Plant Guilds: Taking Companion Planting to the Next Level – October 18 – 6:30 pm**

Rebecca Last, Master Gardener

Rosemount Branch of the Ottawa Public Library, 18 Rosemount, Ottawa

Register [here](#). (No guest fee)

**Spring Bulbs: An Essential for Every Garden – October 20 – 7:30 pm**

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

CityView United Church, 6 Epworth Ave., Nepean

Hosted by Nepean Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$4)

**Dirty Little Underground Secrets (Soil) – October 24 – 7:00 pm**

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Brockville Wesleyan Church, 33 Central Avenue, Brockville

Hosted by Brockville & District Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$2)

**Plant Guilds: Taking Companion Planting to the Next Level – November 8 – 7:30**

Rebecca Last, Master Gardener

Carp Memorial Hall, 3739 Carp Road, Carp

Hosted by West Carleton Garden Club & Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$5)



For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.ca>



separate cookie sheets. After baking something (once the oven is off), place the herbs in the oven. Allow the residual heat to dry them. It may be necessary to turn the oven on again to get more heat – large leaf herbs will have more moisture and take longer to dry. Avoid high, direct heat. Once the herbs are dry, the leaves will easily fall off the stem as you run your fingers up the stem.

Rosemary can be dried as above, but you can also pot up the plant and bring it indoors for the winter.

While good drainage is essential, it is imperative that the soil never dries out completely. Next year you can put your rosemary back in the garden, just sink the pot in the soil so that next fall it can be lifted.

If your basil is still green, it can also be dried but a better option is to harvest it, put it in the blender with some olive oil and then put the basil slurry into an ice-cube tray. Once frozen, pop the basil cubes out and put them in a bag in the freezer.