



Millais Nurseries

Crosswater Farm, Crosswater Lane
Churt, Farnham, Surrey, GU10 2JN
Tel: 01252 792698
sales@rhododendrons.co.uk



RHODODENDRON PRUNING ADVICE LEAFLET

Our rule of thumb is that if you can cut a branch with secateurs then prune straight after flowering, but if significant pruning and a saw is required, then the best time is just before the sap rises in March.

Formative shaping



Pinch out single shoots, leave the double shoots.

On young rhododendrons, or those which are looking a bit sparse, we recommend pinching out single growth buds as they start to swell to encourage multiple branching. This will ensure that your plant retains a nice bushy shape. Simply take out the leading growth bud at each whorl as they start to expand. Instead of one lanky shoot, you should gain 3-4 bushy shoots each of which can support flowers the next season. If there are already several shoots above the whorl, then leave them all alone!

Light pruning



Prune wayward long shoots straight after flowering.

Any light pruning that you can do with a pair of secateurs is normally best done straight after flowering. You can enjoy the flowers before pruning off any lanky shoots to encourage new growth lower down. If done straight after flowering, the plant should still have time to grow new shoots and form flower buds for next season. Vigorous shoots on Azaleas may benefit from a trim. Simply snip these taller branches back to a natural plateau so that the plant grows into a nice shape, but avoid creating a 'hedge-cutter' look.

Heavy pruning and coppicing

What about large established Rhododendrons? Perhaps you have a plant that is out of control and creeping across a drive, or simply elderly and past its best. Sometimes radical coppicing is required, but this will open up a large hole in the landscape, so give it some careful thought first. We have successfully rejuvenated big old hardy hybrids at Crosswater Farm, particularly after winter snow damage.



Rhododendron Songbird. 3 months, 12 months and 24 months after pruning in March.

The best time to carry out heavy pruning is in March when the plant is full of energy after the winter, and just before the sap rises in the spring. The cut surfaces may bleed for a few days, but growth will emerge nearer the saw cut compared to pruning during winter. Be prepared to lose the flowers for a year (or two), but the re-growth will be much better, and you should gain a healthy and bushy looking plant. Unfortunately, there are no half measures, and it's best to cut hard back almost to stumps, so that growth starts low down to create a bushy plant from ground level. If possible, leave a few green shoots to help draw the sap up through the plant, and cut the stem above any rough nodules which indicate latent buds. Remember to prune out any dead, diseased, or damaged branches to leave a healthy framework.



No half measures. Prune back hard to marked positions. Remove any damaged branches.

We have successfully coppiced Rhododendrons that were well over 3m tall to stumps about 75-100cm above the ground. A good woodchipper makes light work of all the branches and leaves, and the chips can be directed back on the ground as a useful mulch. New growth starts from dormant buds below the cut, forcing their way through the old trunks in during May and early June. Check that new foliage is the correct variety on grafted plants, as coppicing can encourage *R. ponticum* rootstocks and suckers into growth. These basal shoots should be pulled off if found. This spring period is a critical time to ensure your plant is well fed, mulched, and given plenty of water. Over the next couple of years, a dense and vigorous new bush will be formed from ground level.



Rhododendron coppiced hard, leaving a few green leaves. New shoots emerging in June.



This plant had been well over 4 metres tall. Picture shows new growth with a few flower buds after one season. By the next season, all stumps were hidden.

Heavy coppicing can rejuvenate most Rhododendrons and give them a new lease of life. However, don't ignore the beauty of some old tree like rhododendrons with wonderful gnarled old trunks and a high canopy of flower.

Coppicing may fail to improve plants which are already weak or diseased. Choice woodland varieties and those more closely related to rare species with attractive smooth stems or peeling bark such as *R. thomsonii* and *R. barbatum* typically do not regenerate and may fail to re-grow properly. You have been warned!