

Rhododendron spp.

Rhododendron, Azalea

Description: The Rhododendron Genus comprises more than 850 Species, many of which are cultivated as ornamental plants. They are native to the Iberian Peninsula but are now naturalized in all parts of the world. Most Species are small, evergreen shrubs but some may be deciduous and/or reach five feet or more in height and width. Large, showy flowers appear in the spring. Some Species will flower until the fall if deadheaded with regularity.

Cultivation: May be propagated from seed or cuttings. Most Species will thrive in almost any environment but they all like moist soil. Follow instructions for the Species you are planting for best results.

Parts Used: Leaves.

Poison: All parts of the plant. Toxicity Level I.

Side Effects: An initial burning sensation in the mouth gives way to excessive salivation, difficulty in swallowing, intoxication, irregular pulse, arrhythmia, arterial hypotension, and death from respiratory arrest. Contact dermatitis may be experienced when picking flowers.

Medicinal Uses: Extracts of *R. tomentosum* are made into “Marsh Tea”, which is then used in a syrup for treatment of pertussis (whooping cough). This tea is also used in anti-rheumatic, emetic, diuretic and diaphoretic medicines. Native Americans use the burned and powdered wood in a salve for swellings, Other Species are used by natives in northern Asia and North America for treating rheumatism and gout.

While not exactly medicinal, the leaves are traditionally used to ward off moths and bedbugs.

Magical Uses: The Karok use *R. macrophyllum* in a luck-getting ceremony of the sweat house. Asian Shamans inhaled the smoke from burning leaves as an intoxicant, allowing them to “reach the other side”.

The women of the Thompson tribe use *Rhododendron* as a scent. They also contract a lot of contact dermatitis while gathering the flowers.

Interesting Tidbits: Honey made by bees feasting on *Rhododendron* flowers is toxic. In 401 BCE, Xenophon decided that his large army needed a rest and camped in a beautiful place surrounded by *Rhododendrons* in Colchis, near the Black Sea. The only problem they encountered (they thought) was the numbers of swarming bees. The soldiers found the hives and raided them for the honey inside. Shortly after consuming the honey, the soldiers “succumbed to a strange affliction” and began to act intoxicated, staggering and collapsing by the thousands. Most were totally incapacitated; some died. Those that did recover found they couldn’t stand for three or four days.

Nearly four centuries later, Pompey camped with his army in the same area with worse consequences. Everyone died. (Pompey apparently didn’t read Xenophon’s history.) Accounts of people getting sick and/or going crazy for a bit after eating honey harvested from *Rhododendron*-covered woods persist to this day.

Today, the honey made from *Rhododendrons* is known as *deli bal* (mad honey) in Turkey and the northern Caucasus (*miel fou* in the West) – and sold commercially. Folks put a little into milk for a pick-me-up or a dollop of it in their alcoholic beverage to give it a little kick.

The Vikings (and later, Germans) used the leaves of *Rhododendron* to increase the potency of their beer; this practice was banned in 1723 by the Duke of Hanover.

Notes: