The rhododendrons and azaleas have been blooming for several weeks now, with some species earlier and some later. They make such a spectacular display that rhododendrons have become one of the most popular landscape plants in nurseries. And there are such a wide array of hybrids and species, that there is a choice in size and color for every taste.

So, what’s the difference between an azalea and a rhododendron? Actually azaleas are members of the Rhododendron genus. Most azaleas are deciduous (they lose their leaves in the autumn) while most rhododendrons are evergreen. But it isn’t a hard-and-fast rule. On a more technical level, they can be distinguished by the leaves and flower stamen. Rhododendrons have 10 or more stamen (those pollen bearing filaments that extend from the center of the bloom), while azalea flowers mostly have 5.

Healthy rhododendron growth is dependent on siting, soil preparation, and specific maintenance practices. Once planted, it is difficult to change site characteristics, so let’s begin with considering what’s optimal. On the east coast, evergreen “rhodos” grow wild along the wooded hillsides. They flourish in the acid-based soils of the Northeast. On a sunny winter day, the cycling of daytime solar heat and nighttime cold scorches and desiccates the leaves, stressing the plant. If your rhododendron can’t have a winter-shade location on the north, consider ways to create protection—perhaps surrounding it with a seasonal burlap barrier set on stakes.

For deciduous types of rhododendrons, winter shade is not an issue, but some summer shade is. If there is a canopy of filtered light, supplied by surrounding trees and shrubs, it will be happier.

Soil, soil, soil
Our Midwestern soils, which develop from limestone bedrock, are typically heavy, alkaline clay types. This makes it an ongoing challenge to keep the soil in an acidic condition. Like trying to straighten naturally curly hair—it requires continual maintenance.

Choosing a site
Begin by assessing the quality of the soil where you site the plant. In older neighborhoods (40-plus years) soils were left intact when homes were built, and topsoil is often deep. In today’s search of rhododendrons for your landscape. You need to house on the north side, sheltered from winter sun and midday sun in the summer.
tract developments, topsoil is a drainable well for watering. He reports that this has maintained the vigor of his clients’ rhododendrons for several years. In either case, soil next to the foundation is often of lesser quality, backfilled with clay or—worse yet—construction debris. It will be worth your while to amend or replace poor quality soil in these areas.

Soil for rhododendrons needs to be loamy and well-amended with moisture-holding humus—mushroom compost, peat, composted yard waste, or leaf mold. There are a couple of ways to accomplish this. One is to dig out the poor soil, and another is to create a raised bed filled with optimal soil mix.

Mulching and maintaining for success
Create a thick layer of mulch around each raised rhododendron. Follow directions on the package and don’t overdo. Instead, plant the rhododendron 2” higher than the surrounding bed. Slope the soil away, then mulch to within a couple of inches of the plant.

One professional gardener uses a heavy circlet of mushroom compost around each raised bed to create a drainable well for watering. He reports that this has maintained the vigor of his clients’ rhododendrons for several years. Annual surface addition of compost is a tried-and-true technique. It will be worth your while to amend or replace poor quality soil in these areas.

Mulch serves two essential purposes. It keeps roots cool and weeds from flourishing. When weeds pop up, pull them out by hand. Cultivating the soil around a rhododendron damages the shallow surface roots. Mulching prevents the soil from becoming too dry or too wet. Mulch also helps to conserve moisture by reducing evaporation and by slowing the rate of soil temperature change. Mulch can help prevent weeds from germinating and can also provide nutrients to the rhododendron.

When drought strikes, these past two summers have brought difficult hot, dry spells. All plants suffer, but rhododendrons can’t tolerate drought. The advantage of locating the plants near a northern foundation is that it will be one of the coolest locations even in arid conditions—and, a water spigot is usually close by.

Take the time to give your rhododendron a drink. Under average conditions, the equivalent of 1” of rain a week will do. In especially hot, dry spells, increase that—up to two times a week—as the air sucks moisture out of the ground and plants at a quickened pace. If your rhododendron bed is adequately drained with good humus-rich soil, you won’t need to be concerned about over-watering.