

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

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### Reviving Rhododendrons

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Tell Tom York that a tropical rhododendron won't grow in Maine, and he'll prepare the soil and put the plant in the ground to accept the challenge.

Once he retired from shipbuilding in 1994, Tom's life-long hobby of growing rhododendrons became a full-time job. Since he was accustomed to finding ways to improve ship production, the challenge to grow rhododendrons that aren't suitable for Maine's climate was just another test

of his problem-solving skills.

Tom researched rhododendrons and learned about the varieties that weren't adaptable to that area of the country. "Historically, they are rare in Maine," Tom says, "There are two or three common varieties, the lavender and the pink."

Tom started with the variety that he knew would grow, English Roseum. Next were the Catawba Album and Boule de Neige (one of his favorites), common to the Boston area. Then it was the West Coast's turn when Tom tried the yellow-flowered Goldkrone. "It wasn't hardy, but I bought three and tried them. I covered them in the fall for years, then stopped covering them and one has lasted 15 to 20 years," he says.

While Tom is finding success with rhododendrons that are considered not hardy enough for Maine, he doesn't want to infer that it's like growing them in North Carolina. In the time that it takes to grow a rhododendron—10 ft. in North Carolina—the same plant in Maine will be only 5 ft., but that hasn't stopped him from growing 150 varieties, plus 12 to 15 varieties of magnolias and 20 varieties of azaleas.

The Maine coast with its phalanges-like coves, inlets and peninsulas has a "rocky, boney soil," says Tom. The soil in Bath where York's Hardy Rhododendrons is located is heavy clay, which is not favorable for growing rhododendrons. "We raise the plants and amend with gravel and sand," he says.

The summers are cool with foggy days and nights. During the winter, the coastal temperature stays a bit warmer than inland. "The influence of the ocean keeps it mild," says Tom. Snow cover is beneficial for the plants. "When it is -25 degrees, two inches of snow can protect the plants, although every five to 10 years a tough winter damages them, but doesn't kill them," he adds.

Tom and his wife, Beth, have 10 acres of flat land where they have their home. Three acres are used for the business and growing areas. Tom propagates by seeds and cuttings, and buys rooted cuttings. “We do grow in the ground, but more than half are grown in containers,” says Tom. The plants are stored under plastic in 10,000 sq. ft. of greenhouse space from mid-November to May 1. Tom says, “There is no heat in the greenhouses. We use plastic to protect the plants from wind and sun damage.” He adds, “The winter sun is too harsh, with the plant dormant and the ground frozen; once the winter sun beats on it there is no way for it to pick up moisture.”

The retail business is open from April to November 1, although Tom and Beth work year-round. They are there for people who want to talk about their garden plans, check out the inventory, look at pictures, and commiserate about the long winter. What were once hobby and personal gardens are used now for trials and displays for the customers who come not only from Maine, but Connecticut, New Jersey, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Tom says 65% of their customers are females, 50+. Retail sales make up 80% of the business; garden centers and landscapers are wholesale customers. Retail prices range from \$15 to \$100 with sizes from 6-8 in. to 5 ft. Tom says, “The price is not based on size; some varieties don’t grow big. One plant can be 12 in. at five years and another can be 3 ft.”

In 1994 when he started out, Tom says, “We advertised and got our customers through word of mouth. People thought it was unique to be growing and selling rhododendrons in Maine and not importing them from Connecticut or the West Coast.” The business was small in the beginning; there was not enough inventory. But after a few years, Tom knew how much to plant and grow. “It’s a long cycle to grow a rhododendron. It takes three years to be large enough to sell,” he says.

“Our business is unique,” Tom says. “We try to grow something that isn’t available in box stores. There are plants that they don’t carry—it’s too difficult or expensive for them to grow. Big boxes have pretty standard variety,” he adds.

There are times when Tom’s customers ask for varieties he doesn’t grow. “That particular variety wouldn’t do well if they’re putting it somewhere that’s not suitable. If a rhododendron dies, most people say it’s due to cold weather, but nine times out of 10, it’s something else,” he says.

A few nurseries in the area have tried to grow what Tom grows. “I have low overhead and for others, there is too much time involved,” he says.

Plus, you have to love what you’re doing. Tom’s fondness for the rhododendron is evident. “It’s the overall appearance of the flowers and foliage. There’s nothing like it. It attracts wildlife, birds and rabbits. The plant itself is a great plant, but there is a history, too,” says Tom. “In the past, there were a few wild rhododendrons in Maine; others came from China and the Himalayas. Plant explorers would be gone two to three years in the Far East. The communication between hybridizers in the mid-Atlantic area is quite interesting; they would correspond and cross-pollinate and share their plants,” he adds.

“About eight years ago,” Tom says, “a couple in their late 80s came to Maine on vacation. They saw many plants from their younger days, including Molly Fordham that one of their friends had developed. They had

never seen it flower.”

Tom's tips for other growers:

- “By far, the most important thing is to bend over backward to satisfy customers. When people want garden designs, they come and look at our gardens at no cost. It's no money out of our pockets in the winter, and in the summer if they have a garden, we might lay out plants on the lawn as they would be at their house or deliver at night for them at no or minimal cost.”
- “If someone has a plant that has died there could be all kinds of reasons. Find out why—don't just sell them a new one—her kid may have stepped on the plant. Replace it automatically with a smile.”
- “Jump through any hoop to satisfy the customer. You have to make certain they come back again.” **GT**

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