

## Planting and Care of Broad-leaved Evergreen Shrubs

Broad-leaved evergreen shrubs are often the main component of residential and commercial landscapes. Typically used as foundation plantings, in landscape or woodland settings or as groundcovers, these 'old reliables' need proper planting and care to ensure their longevity in the landscape. This illustrated pocket Garden Guide will focus on the planting and care of broad-leaved evergreen shrubs.



### Site and Selection

Shrubs in this category primarily consist of acid-loving (ericaceous) plants such as *Rhododendron* (including azaleas), mountain laurel, *Pieris*, *Leucothoe*, *Ilex*, *Osmanthus*, *Skimmia*, as well as *Pyracantha* and boxwood.

When considering placement for this type of shrub, one should first be aware that due to their year-round evergreen foliage (much of which has a large leaf surface area), they prefer a non-exposed location. Many are naturally found growing as under story plants and thus receive protection from the tree



Wrong plant/wrong place...note scorch on Rhododendrons from exposed planting in a southern location.

canopy. Furthermore, the decomposing leaf litter in such habitats would indicate these shrubs prefer a soil high in organic matter.

Before going to the nursery or garden center, do some homework. Revisit the above paragraph and **ALWAYS** select "the right plant for the right place"! Know what you're looking for in a plant--aesthetically and/or functionally, and know where you want to plant it. Plant needs and your needs must be in agreement before you can proceed! Lastly, bear in mind the USDA hardiness zone in which you live. Often microclimates exist within a zone or even on an individual property, but better always to select the plant recommended for your zone or the next colder one.

Now you are ready to go to the garden center with your list of plant choices. What do you look for other than good vigor and plant structure? Consider the following:

- ❖ Is the foliage uniform in size and is the color appropriate for the species?
- ❖ Is the foliage free of any mechanical or pest injury? There should also be no broken or dead branches.
- ❖ Is the branching habit uniform throughout the plant?
- ❖ The root ball or container should be the proper size for the plant.
- ❖ In some instances, plants grown in other regions that contrast climatically (not grown locally) may not adapt or be as hardy in their new, local planting site.
- ❖ The soil ball or the media in the container should not be dry.

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### Season to Plant

Broad-leaved evergreen shrubs, being clothed all winter and thus more vulnerable to winter cold and exposure, require good root establishment and above-ground hardening-off prior to the arrival of winter. Any fall planting, which is fine for hardiness zone areas of 5 and 6 or greater, must be done early. This means as early as mid to late August and no later than



Planting too late in the season can result in damage and/or death of the plants.

the end of September. Again, this can vary slightly depending upon the region of the country. Spring planting is also fine for evergreens, but better to do it while they're still somewhat dormant in early to mid spring.

### Digging the Hole and Installing the Plant

#### Balled & Burlaped (B&B) vs. Container

B & B are grown in the nursery field, dug with a soil ball surrounding the roots, and wrapped in burlap for delivery and sale. They are generally dug when dormant and are best planted in spring and fall. With

containerized plants, they are grown much of their life in the pot, although generally stepped-up into a next size larger pot as they grow to a more saleable size. This system affords the greatest efficiency and flexibility. Since little root disturbance occurs, plants are available and can be planted much of the year.

### “Prepping” the Hole

Ideally, have the hole(s) dug, or at least partially excavated, before going to the nursery to purchase. It's also important to be aware of potential soil drainage or compaction problems in the intended planting area. The site may be low and can't drain or the soil may have a high percentage of clay. If this exists, special consideration needs to be given in modifying the planting area and/or selecting shrubs that have a greater tolerance to such conditions. All too frequently, plants are installed and only after-the-fact does one realize there is a constant wet area or a root suffocation problem, etc.

A simple test for drainage involves digging several post holes to a 2 to 3 foot depth. The rate at which the water disappears is your indicator. Fill to the top with water and record how long it takes to disappear. Then refill. If the water level drops more than 1 inch per hour, the drainage is fine. However, if it takes longer to drop 1 inch, drainage will need improvement. Then, if it remains in the hole overnight, drainage tiles or raised beds will have to be installed. Remember, even if there is only the remote possibility of a drainage problem, do the test and do it before any planting!

Aside from proper plant selection and site analysis, preparing the planting hole correctly will provide for the quickest root development of a newly-installed plant. All current research recommends digging the hole only as deep and 2 to 3+ times as wide as the original soil ball or container diameter. This allows the plant to send out new roots, in all directions, without being impeded by the more compacted soil

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beyond.

Unless the soil is especially sandy or clayey (to which 1/3 the amount removed is amended/ thoroughly mixed with compost or sphagnum peat), that soil or backfill that comes out of the hole is what “goes back in”. Because the majority of a plant’s roots are near the surface, the sides of the upper portion of the hole are sloped. And to further loosen the soil once the plant is installed, break down the sides even more with a fork or spade. This additionally benefits root development and helps to eliminate air pockets. If, upon digging the hole, the sides look smooth and glazed (primarily with “heavier”, clayey-type soils), scarify with a garden fork or hand cultivator.

Within the planting hole there should be no need to add any fertilizer. A pH test, however, may determine a need for acidity/alkalinity adjustment. This is dependent on the requirements of the plant being installed.

### How to plant broadleaved evergreen B & B shrubs:

1) Lift balled plant only by the ball.



2) Make sure depth of hole is appropriate for top of ball to be level with existing ground surface. If soil is clayey or drainage not ideal, dig depth of hole so the top of the ball is about 1 inch higher than the surrounding soil.

3) Untie burlap. Cut off and remove top half of burlap (or tuck down into the hole), and remove all twine. If it is synthetic burlap, remove it completely.

4) Fill hole about halfway with backfill and water to settle in. Then add rest of backfill.

5) Build a 3 to 4 inch tall saucer or berm of backfill at the outside edge of the original soil ball to hold water.

6) Add water in the berm very slowly so that it will permeate the original soil ball.

7) Apply a 2 to 3 inch layer of mulch in the saucer and, if possible, radiating out further.

### How to plant broad-leaved evergreen containerized shrubs:

1) Only handle shrub by the container.



2) Dig the hole as deep, and 2 to 3 times as wide, as the diameter of the container.

3) Carefully remove plant from the container.

4) If there is any indication of massed roots that are adjacent to the wall of the container, tease them out. Use your fingers, a knife (to make vertical cuts in the root ball), or better



Use a hand-held cultivator to 'tease out' the roots of containerized plants.

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yet--a hand cultivator. This allows the newly-developing roots to grow outward, rather than in a circular girdling fashion.

5) The surface of the container media is level with the surrounding soil.

6) Fill the hole halfway with backfill and thoroughly water to settle soil.

7) Add remainder of backfill.

Build a 3 to 4 inch tall saucer at the outside edge of the original container ball to hold water. Do not make saucer larger in diameter as the water added must penetrate the original ball where all the roots currently exist.

9) Slowly add water to the saucer, filling it to the brim.

10) Apply a 2 to 3 inch layer of mulch.

### Immediate Care Following Planting

#### Watering

Proper and frequent watering of any broad-leaved evergreen shrub is essential for speedy establishment and long-term prosperity. This means the original root ball, as well as the surrounding backfill. Too much supplemental water, however, can also be detrimental.

The amount of water needed depends upon many conditions, but a general rule is 1-inch every 5 to 7 days for at least the first year. If there is insufficient rainfall, this amount may need to be doubled for sandier-type soils. Always apply slowly for maximum penetration, and if rainfall is deficient later in the fall, do not hesitate to continue supplemental watering.

For a group of several shrubs, soaker hoses or “leaky pipe” can be very effective in conserving water and

getting it where it needs to be--at the root zone area. Whereas, an even larger planting is best dealt with by installing a drip irrigation system.

#### Mulching

Reasons for mulch application are numerous and the results are all beneficial. Preferred materials are all organic types (they decompose) and include bark chips and nuggets, shredded bark, hulls, shredded oak leaves, licorice root, chopped (seed-free) bedding, and wood chips. Apply evenly and within the planting area and beyond, if possible. Always keep material away from the stems of the plant. Depth of most finely-textured materials should be no greater than 3 inches. When deeper, there is a real potential for reduced air exchange in and out of the soil beneath. The coarse, nugget-type materials can go on at the 4-inch range.

Avoid, where possible, the use of black plastic and fiber-type geotextile mulches in shrubbery beds. Their appearance can be unappealing and, if camouflaged on



Apply a uniform layer of mulch, 2-3 inches deep to newly-planted shrubs.

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