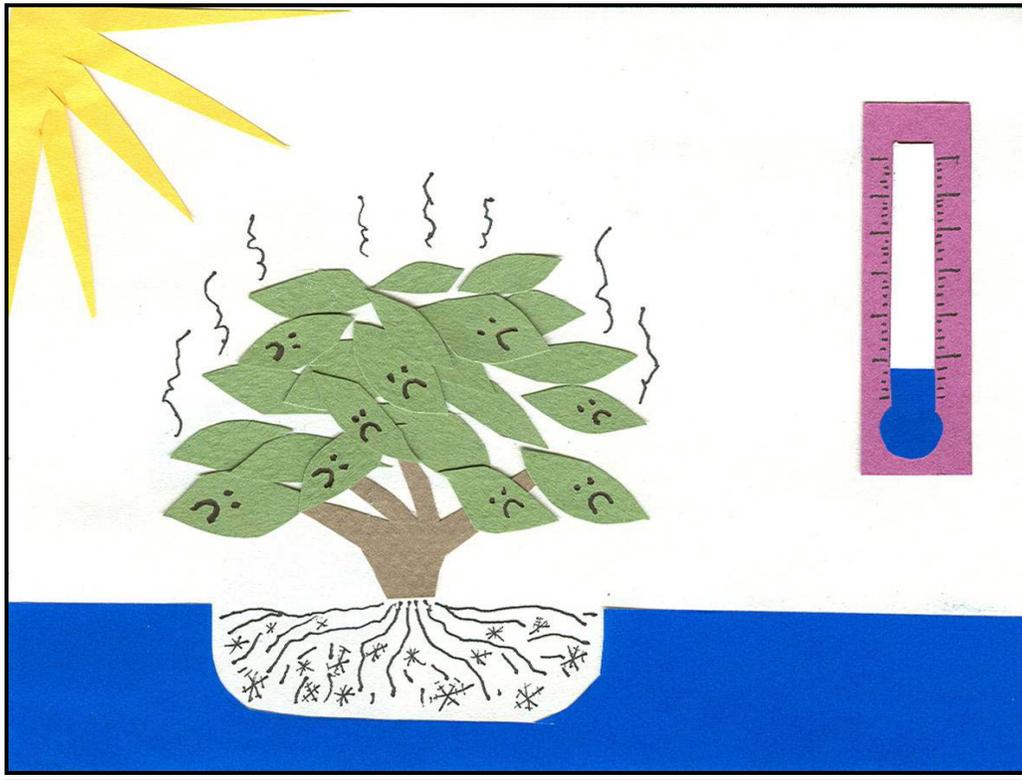


Planting Strategies for the Midwest (or Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Winter Sun Blockers but Were Afraid to Ask)



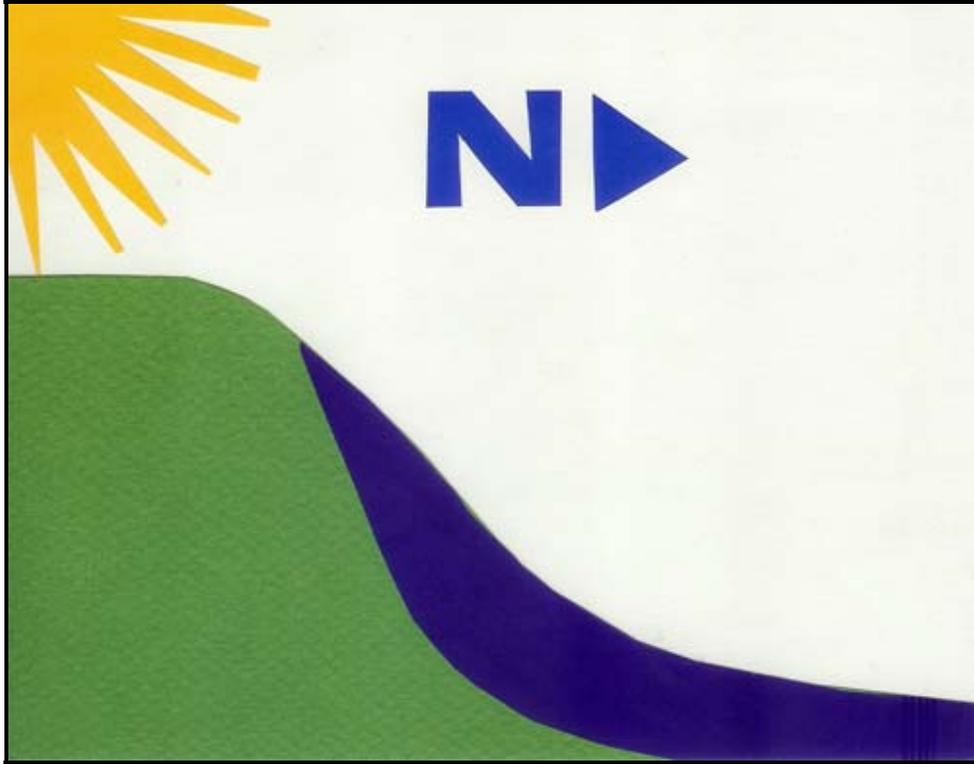
Rhododendrons retain their leaves all year long, even in the coldest days of winter. It is desirable to have green foliage during sub-freezing temperatures when all of our gardens are dormant, but it can be stressful on the plant. In order to survive the cold, rhododendron leaves curl downward (starting around 28° F) and the colder it gets the tighter they become. Sometimes they look more like conifer needles than broad leaf evergreens. This reduces the leaf surface and protects the leaves from losing water.



The worst place a rhododendron can be planted in the Midwest is in direct winter sun. When the ground is frozen and the sun is out, the leaves are tricked into opening up instead of staying curled. It feels more like late April than mid-winter on the leaf surface. Water is then lost through the leaves, but cannot be drawn up from the frozen ground. When water is lost from the leaves faster than the roots can replenish it, the leaf tissue dries out and dies, turning brown.



To prevent leaves from drying out, we recommend planting on the north side of winter sun blockers. In this diagram, the purple shadows indicate safe planting sites. Plant on the north side of solid walls, buildings, evergreen shrubs & trees and dense deciduous forest. All places where the sun does not reach.



Another excellent winter sun blocker is the north side of a hill. You can also construct your own protective blocker using burlap and snow-fence, although we prefer a more natural look.

By using winter sun blockers you enable your rhododendron to use its survival mechanisms to withstand the cold and keep its leaf curl. This also prevents water loss due to wind. Even though your plant may be in cold winds on the north side of blockers, by retaining the curl it will prevent water loss from wind too. In general, the larger the leaf the more protection from the winter sun is needed.

Look at our plant list and find our recommendations for specific variety placement under the location column. But when you are not sure where to plant use the north side of a blocker.