

## Rhododendron and Cherry Laurel



*Rhododendron* is a large evergreen shrub (growing up to 8m tall) that was introduced to Ireland as an ornamental plant in the 18th Century from Asia and north-west China.

Cherry laurel is a dense thicket forming invasive ever-green shrub of gardens, parks and woodlands from South West Asia. The leaves are thick and laurel-like and are poisonous with cyanide. The white flowers are produced on upright spikes and are succeeded in autumn by blackish cherry-like fruits that should not be eaten.

*Rhododendron* thrives on peaty, sandy and acidic soils and is extremely hardy. It is a very popular garden ornamental plant and has been extensively planted as game cover along the edges of fields and within woodlands. Its popularity, adaptability to Irish climate and soils, along with its highly successful and multiple methods of reproduction and dispersal, means that it has become naturalised and widespread. As *Rhododendron* is very shade tolerant, it has become widely established in several habitats, notably heathlands and woodlands from adjacent gardens.

### Impacts and key issues

You can download an identification sheet from the following link: [Rhododendron \(\*Rhododendron ponticum\*\)](#)

*Rhododendron* and cherry laurel are extremely invasive plant species, particularly in the more humid western parts of Ireland, forming dense impenetrable thickets. Both species are unpalatable and likely toxic to mammals and probably invertebrates due to the presence of 'free' phenols and diterpenes in *Rhododendron* and cyanide in cherry laurel. They are both avoided by grazing animals, thus giving them significant advantages over native species. The deep shadow cast by the plants and toxic leaf litter accumulating underneath

*Rhododendron* produces a dark sterile environment, which suppresses regeneration of native species and supports little wildlife. Changes in soil chemistry induced by *Rhododendron* have

also been reported. Animal populations can also be negatively influenced by *Rhododendron* e.g. bird numbers are lower in mature oak woodlands dominated by *Rhododendron*.

In Ireland, *Rhododendron* has invaded three habitats of international importance under the EC Habitats Directive: upland oak woods, bogs and heath. For example, it is now a widespread invasive species in Killarney, where >650 acres of the Killarney National Park are completely infested.

*Rhododendron* in Ireland hosts a serious plant health pathogen *Phytophthora ramorum*. This is a fungus that has the potential to attack a wide variety of native woody plants and is the causative agent of 'Sudden Oak Death'. On *Rhododendron*, the first indication of the disease is the wilting of shoots. These develop a brown/black colour that spreads along the twig and can move onto the leaves, where the leaf bases and tips blacken. The fungus has been recorded in Northern Ireland and DARD has identified this species as likely to cause significant damage to trees and landscapes if it establishes widely. Consequently, *Rhododendron* is one of the biggest conservation issues facing Irish woodlands today.

There are reported cases of human poisoning by 'toxic' honey from *Rhododendron*. The severity of the reaction probably relates to the amount of affected honey digested and the health and susceptibility of the individual concerned.

### **Status and specific legislation**

There are no specific legal provisions associated with growing of *Rhododendron* or cherry laurel on the island of Ireland. However, all management methods described here should be carried out with due care and attention, with particular consideration to Health and Safety requirements and, where necessary, by trained and competent personnel. All waste not dealt with on site should be taken to a licensed landfill site.

Under the EU Plant Health Directive, emergency legislation was introduced in 2002 to prevent the introduction and spread of *Phytophthora ramorum* within the EU. If suspicious symptoms are observed on *Rhododendron* or any other tree species, the Forest Service (ROI) / DARD (NI) should be informed.

### **Sources of Further Information:**

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/PDF/fcpg017.pdf/\\$FILE/fcpg017.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/PDF/fcpg017.pdf/$FILE/fcpg017.pdf)

[Forestry Commission – Managing and controlling invasive Rhododendron, a practice guide \(2006\).](#)

[Forestry Commission – Rhododendron: control best practice \(2008\).](#)

[Lever and Mulch method leaflet](#)

[Organic methods of Rhododendron control, Kehoe Countryside Ltd](#)