

Rhododendron State Park

Rhododendron Maximum

A Botanical History

Rhododendron means “rose tree,” and what better way to describe this fragrant, conspicuous and universally popular plant group! Nicknamed “rhodies,” this family of plants is believed to have descended from magnolias. Millions of years ago they originated in Asia, where several relatively primitive forms persist. The earliest North American fossil record dates from 50 million years ago.

Rhododendron maximum is a shade-tolerant species. They prefer acid soils, and grow in association with hemlock, red maple, and here where the soil is drier, yellow birch trees. The plant’s large leaves help it absorb much light. During winter, the leaves curl and droop to conserve moisture and shed snow. The bell-shaped blossoms grow in tight light clusters and bloom in mid-July.

Rhododendrons are members of the heath family, which includes blueberries, cranberries, mountain laurel, heathers, trailing arbutus and wintergreen. You can find several of these relatives growing along the trails in the park.

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