

# Pruning Tips: Rhodies

## MY RHODY'S TOO BIG (or too leggy, or too ugly)

By Cass Turnbull

The problem with rhododendrons is, well, they're touchy. Sometimes you head back a branch to a node, and when you return next month you find that, instead of sending out new shoots, the branch simply gave up and died. On other occasions people reduce their rhodies to the height or width they want, only to discover that by the time the plants have developed decent, full leafy crowns, they're back up to about the size they were before. That's the other problem with rhodies. All the leaves are at the outside edges of the plant. There's nothing green to cut back to.

The hardest plants to prune are old, previously chain-sawed rhododendrons. The new growth looks like spaghetti. Although many can be brought back to a semblance of beauty with years of rehabilitative pruning, these casualties are often so indisputably ugly that removal is a more realistic solution. Just to confuse matters, radical reduction sometimes results in growth which is bushy, compact, healthy AND shorter. Much depends on whether the species in question is healthy, and of a compact habit to begin with, and whether it receives sufficient sunlight to re-establish. Another commonly seen situation is that of a large-growing, open habit rhododendron (like the 'Loderi' types) which someone is trying to keep shorter and more compact. George Pinyuh says, "Inside every rhody is a fifteen foot tree trying to get out." The hapless pruner tries in vain. Even when following the "rules" by selectively heading back branches to shorter laterals, the result is a "funny-looking" plant, which is to say it starts to grow in a roughly v-shaped pattern. With the above caveats in place, let's review seven solutions to the too-big rhododendron.

concentrate on thinning out the worst, most interfering branches which crowd into nearby shrubs, the house, the window, the gutter, or the walkway. See if that just doesn't do the trick.

### SERIES: GENERAL PRUNING



Remove limbs touching the ground and deadwood.



After



If desired, prune a small amount to even out the crown.



After



Pruning the backside of a rhody can make it fit better and feel smaller.

### 1) Prune it.

A lot of people think their rhody is too big, but really it's just too oppressive and/or crowded. Real pruning for health and good looks often solves the problem. The horticulturally correct pruner takes out all the dead wood. Do this first and always. Prune out a few of the worst rubbing-crossing branches. Often it helps to take off some of the lowest branches, slowly working up and out from the inside. Also



*Rhodies are a dream to transplant.*

## 2) Move it or the bed it's in.

Given the touchy nature of the beast, it is often a better and longer lasting solution to increase the shrub bed size to accommodate the plant. This is a creative but unpopular solution due to the necessary removal of sod.

Rhodies have broad, flat, fibrous root systems and are a relative dream to move. Landscapers often move plants that are larger than people. Another old saying is "your rhody will appreciate a trip around the house." It may require up to four strong backs and a tarp to slide the offending rhody out of its present home and to its new one. Don't be afraid to cut off 50% or more of the roots, both large and small. Immediate watering, and lots of water throughout the first year is essential. Moving is the only logical solution for situations where shrubs were originally planted too close together or next to the walkway, as commonly seen in new landscapes everywhere.

## 3) Selective reduction.

Is it under the window? You can try to "work back" your rhody. You selectively head it a little every year. Locate the tallest branch and follow it down inside the shrub to where it meets a lower and shorter lateral. Cut it off there. Repeat with the next tallest branch. Continue until you sense you've gone too far. Quit, then come back next year. Selective reduction works better on upward facing branches (the top of the plant). Aggressive pruning on the more horizontal branches (sides of the plant) tend to develop new shoots that look like 'spaghetti'.

## 4) Stop it in its tracks.

If the plant in question borders high traffic areas—paths, stairs and such, you might try snapping off the new growth. After the plant has finished blooming you can either pinch out the new end-bud, or let the new supple shoot extend and snap it off with your fingers soon thereafter. Landscapers attest that this will not prevent blooming next year, though it is hard to understand why not. It is also exceedingly time consuming and must be done every year to restrict growth.

## 5) Arborize.

Under special circumstances, a "too-big" rhody can be thinned-up and turned into a nice small tree. The plant in question should be very big and old. It should have a thick, curvaceous trunk. Be sure to meticulously deadwood it as well, and perhaps generally thin the upper canopy to prevent the "lollipop" look.

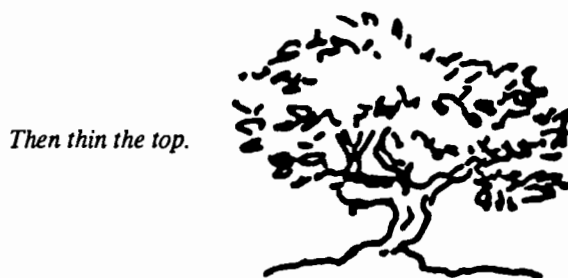
*There is an art to arborizing.*



*No lollipops.*



*Remove lower branches.*



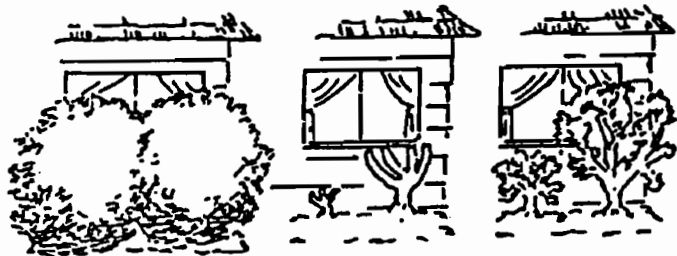
*Then thin the top.*

## 6) Radical renovation.

In especially desperate and hopeless situations, it is sometimes appropriate to cut the entire plant nearly to the ground and start it over. Like surgery, this is a serious move and you should exhaust other possible solutions first. Sometimes the plant dies. Most often it does not. I have been told that certain rhodies, called smooth-barked rhododendrons (ones with *R. thomsonii* blood in them) cannot break bud and therefore will die under hard pruning. Renovation works best on old and/or previously mal-pruned shrubs.

Do not try to be nice by cutting less severely. Remember, after a plant is pruned the new growth starts just below the cut and grows up from there. It will be too big again very soon. And if your reduction cuts leave too much of the framework,

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Radical renovation. Prune very low (left shrubs). Right side shrub is pruned too high and obscures the window again very soon.



One foot framework forces all new growth up. Rhody, one year later.



Cutting too high causes the rhody to look mismatched top to bottom.

you wind up with a mis-matched plant. The new, smaller leafy crown is stuck on top of thick, old 'legs'. It just doesn't look right. Plus you are more likely to produce the wild, re-growth common on hard pruned rhodies. But if it is cut lower to the ground, making a framework of one foot or less, the new shoots have no place to go but up.

Also I think it is wiser to cut the plant down (to a foot or so from the ground) all at once, instead of in stages as some recommend. If one cuts one third of the trunks to the ground, like a cane-grower, the remaining evergreen canopy is likely to shade out the returning new shoot growth. Others advise cutting the entire plant back by a third, and then a third again the next year, and then again lower, to achieve a smaller shrub in stages. I have come to believe that this causes the plant more stress than a single, severe pruning to a low framework. The plant must deal with the injury three times instead of just once. But that's my opinion.

It will take several years to recover and look like anything. It will still need almost as much room to live and look good. Do it in the early spring, February or March. Do not fertilize. Water well throughout the next year.

### 7) Adjust your attitude.

Most often the only thing a rhododendron is too big for is somebody's idea of how big it should get to be. In this case, the cheapest and best solution is to learn to appreciate "mature" plants. A mature rhododendron can grow to be ten to twenty feet—that's two stories high. And some get up to forty feet. Get used to it.

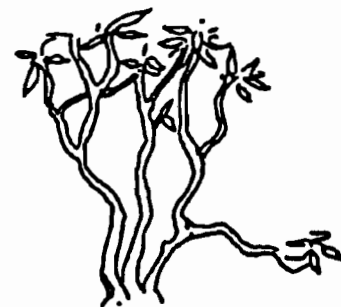
### MY RHODY'S TOO LEGGY

A brave but unskilled gardener at the local pharmacy overthinned a rhody on the grounds some fourteen years ago. Instead of looking like a nice little tree, the internal branches were so skinny and awkward that it looked like a collection of broken arms and legs. And it's looked that way for most of the following fourteen years. This year I noticed for the first time that the canopy had finally grown back together, hiding the internal branchwork. It looks okay. But no buds ever broke inside the shrub, all the new growth has been at the ends.

Many people have a skinny, leggy rhody that is the result of bad culture, not bad pruning. By this I mean it was planted in too much sun, or too much shade (like between two buildings) or there has been insufficient water or too many weeds. These are all 'cultural conditions' that have caused a problem as opposed to pest or disease problems.



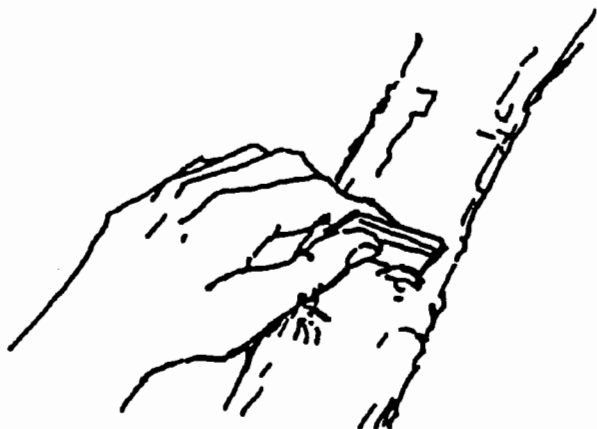
Some rhodies are naturally open and tree-like.



Some rhodies are leggy due to bad culture.

Like the pharmacy's rhody, there's not much help for them. It's a good idea to try to eliminate the cause of legginess, but it will still take a long time, and perhaps never look better. The best thing you can do is deadwood like crazy. Get inside and remove each and every bit of it. And old yellow leaves too. On many branches you will find a tiny 1/2 inch pointy peg of dead wood. It is the last bit of stem from an old bloom, still hanging on. Take those off too. Remove any branches hanging on the ground. Then the shrub will look cleaner and maybe sort of artistic, or at least not so annoyingly awful. And I recommend that you plant some lower story plants to bring the eyes down. Use sword ferns, epimedium, Lenten rose (*Helleborus o.*) and half-buried, low maintenance rocks. Then your focus is shifted.

If the cause of the problem is eliminated (like cutting down the Doug fir nearby, or adding irrigation), you can try radical renovation. If the cause is not remedied, you will simply kill the plant or it will grow back leggy again. And take a moment to determine if your rhody is one of the species that is naturally open (leggy). Most of these rhodies have large, long leaves. If so, think of the one you have as a tree.



*Nick the buds in the early spring to create new growth.*

## NICKING THE BUDS

An old landscaper's trick to renew a big or leggy rhody is to nick the buds. But first I must explain apical dominance. The end bud on any branch is called the apical bud (apex, the top) or terminal bud (terminal meaning the end). This bud releases a chemical called an auxin (like a hormone) that travels down the stem (via gravity) just below the bark and keeps all the dormant (sleeping) buds from growing. If the terminal bud is removed (i.e. a heading cut) then dormant buds down below on the branch are released from apical dominance and are free to grow out (break bud). This is the plant's system of replacing damaged parts, like if a moose eats it or a storm breaks a branch.

You can trick a rhododendron into thinking that the top is gone by nicking some buds. In the very early spring, say February, locate the plumping buds down near the base of the plant. A bud will be about the size of a pencil tip point. Use a razor blade to take a tiny wedge out just above the bud. You are removing the bark and the first layer of green (the cambium) just below it. This will stop the auxin from reaching the bud. It will think the top is gone and begin to grow out.

You can select five or ten buds to nick. Be careful not to girdle your shrub by nicking all the way around like a ring. The vast majority of the cambium layer must be kept or the rhody will die. The cut should be about the size of a lady's fingernail clipping. Not a gardener's, because we don't have nails long enough to clip. Just a little sliver of a moon, 1/4 inch long, 1/8 inch or less deep.

That year the bud will grow into a stupid looking whorl of leaves. But next year it branches out into several leafy stems. The year after you have sort of a second shrub developing at the base of your old, leggy rhody. Then you can saw the top out.

Again, this process won't work if the cultural problem has not been corrected or if it is a smooth barked type rhody.

People love this gardening tip. So much so that it worries me. In reality most of these people have perfectly good plants, that are exactly the right size. The people just *think* their rhody's too big. I would much prefer that they transplant or simply accept their shrubs for what they are.

## LAYERING

Another landscaper's trick is to layer mature rhodies, letting new ones grow up while selectively cutting out some of the large parent plants. If one stakes or pins down a piece of green branch to the dirt, perhaps spreading a little soil over the point of contact, it will grow roots and become a new shrub. It's called layering, and it is how some people propagate rhodies.

## SPAGHETTI

Some rhodies are not just leggy, their branches are ugly in the extreme. You look inside and all you find are long, skinny, roller-coaster branches that have only one pathetic whorl of leaves on the ends. The cause is usually mal-pruning or sometimes too much shade. When a branch is headed back, the new shoot emerges, growing rapidly with soft wood. When the bud at the end blooms, the weight of the truss pulls the soft young shoot down. As the season progresses the shoot hardens off in that position. Next spring, off it goes again, headed up from the tip, then dipping down. I've heard these rhodies called spaghetti and they are the most difficult plants I prune.

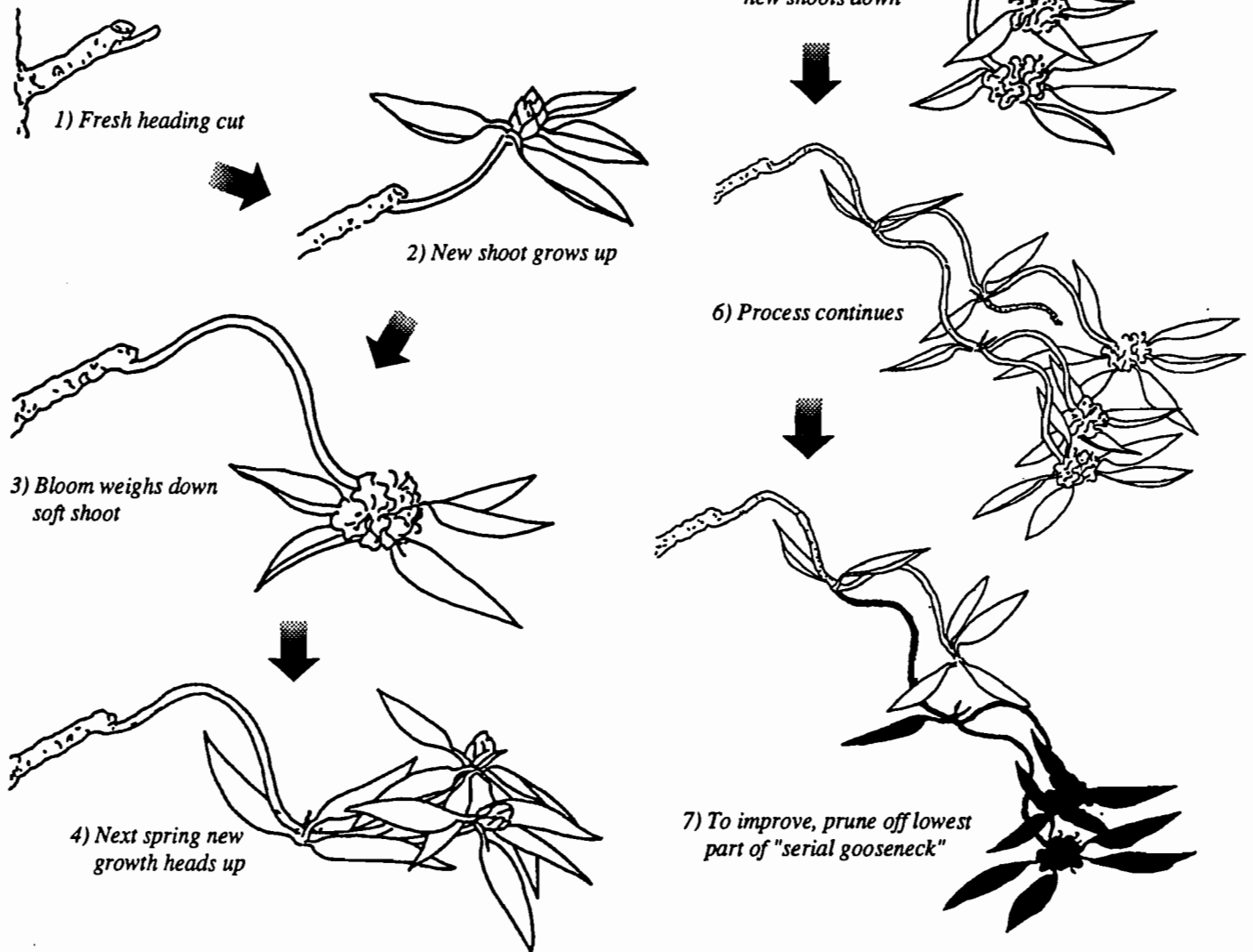
Taking off dead wood (as noted above) may be the best you can do. If you go after the ugly branches, you are likely to open the canopy, giving an even better view of the remaining ugly branches. Remember that each of those pathetic whorls of leaves provide some valuable cover for the rest of the ungainly interior. In my experience, the internal branches never fatten up and look right. Your best bet is to encourage the canopy to cover and hide.

That said, I sometimes do try to improve the spaghetti rhody, just a tiny bit. Here are the rules: Leave any branches that face upward and outward, no matter how horrible they seem. Then cut off the lowest hooks of what I call a "serial goosenecks". As always, remove any branches that actually touch the ground. Aside from detracting from the appearance of the shrub, these ground-touching branches act as root-weevil freeways, making it easy for the little guys to crawl up and munch on the leaves at night.

Needless to say, spaghetti rhodies are good candidates for renovation, assuming that they have their cultural requirements met.

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### HOW A SPAGHETTI RHODY IS MADE



### POWDERY MILDEW

There is a relatively new disease ravaging the rhododendrons of the Pacific Northwest, especially 'Uniques' and 'Virginia Richards'. It is a powdery mildew, but not the same powdery mildew that gets deciduous azaleas and Oregon grape. This is much worse. The symptoms do not resemble the gray powder of the other diseases either. Instead you will start to notice that many of the leaves turn blotchy, yellow and sometimes brown, and fall off in the summer. (Some yellow, internal leaf drop is normal in the late summer.) Live buds will remain and the shrub will grow new green leaves in the spring. But then it happens again. Rather than fight it with constant spraying, of either chemical or organic compounds, I suggest removal of the ones that continually look horrible. Some rhodies are more susceptible and others more resistant. The disease also favors close quarters, shade and high humidity. Just thought you should know.

### ROOTSTOCK

And a final word about rhodies. The very first hybrids were grafted (spliced) onto the roots of a vigorous species, *Rhododendron ponticum*. When put under stress, the rootstock grows out and new shoots from the base eventually grow up and take over the plant. If you have a rhody that has two colors of blooms, this is the case. *Ponticum*s have a purple bloom, some people call it 'fuchsia colored'. The leaves are skinny and the edges are wavy. And they get very, very large. In parts of England they have naturalized and become quite a nuisance. I tell you so that if you have one that you want to get rid of, you will know that it's nothing special and not even what the original gardener had in mind when it was planted. On the other hand, if you like it, by all means keep it. After all, there's nothing wrong with a big rhody. ▲