

# Littleton Courier

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## Live Free or Dig with the Littleton Garden Club

### *Winter damage*

BY MARY BINGMAN

Littleton Garden Club

Are two Rhododendron buds starting to unfurl in mid-January? That was what I saw while out on a neighborhood walk. One does not expect them to flower mid-winter. Very warm mid-winter temperatures were likely the cause. Tricked into thinking spring was here, they broke their dormancy.

Concerns about winter damage led me to garden books and some online research. I found an article by NH Master Gardener Henry Homeyer.

A similar weather pattern occurred in 2019. Homeyer consulted the University of New Hampshire (UNH) Extension Service for support. Many flower buds on "Rhodies" were damaged that year and did not bloom. Will the 2024 plants have similar problems?

Rhododendrons protect themselves from cold weather dehydration. They curl up their leaves in protection. We can help

them by using mulch to protect their shallow root system. Usually, three to four inches of organic mulch is good. Leaves, shredded bark, and straw are all options to keep plants cozy throughout winter by slowing water evaporation.

Windbreaks are also helpful, as they affect the exposed buds and leaves. Breathable winter covers such as burlap work well. Securing the material around shrubs is important. Plastics should be avoided, as trapped moisture could result in further frost damage.

In the spring, covers should be removed before new growth starts. Also, deep watering after a cold snap helps with recovery. Any damaged plant sections may be carefully pruned out at that time.

If damage is seen in spring, test a twig by scratching it with your thumbnail. If you see green, the branch is still alive. Branches that are brittle and brown are probably dead and should

be removed.

Branches with brown leaves will eventually send out new leaves. Also, the water-soaked appearance of a Rhododendron is a sign of frost damage affecting flowers, leaves, and stems.

Planting a suitable variety of a "Rhodie" may be the best way to deal with extreme weather fluctuations. Some varieties, such as PJM, are grown for their ability to adapt. Those that are suited to USDA Zone 3-4 are going to perform best for our area.

Hopefully, the spring of 2024 will arrive with many healthy plants ready to grow. Many of us look forward to the brightly colored flowering shrubs. It may be helpful to plan ahead to minimize adverse effects on Rhodies and other plants in the coming winters.

For more information about the club and our meetings, please visit [www.littletonnhgardenclub.org](http://www.littletonnhgardenclub.org).