

Spanning the Gap

Mountain Laurel or Rhododendron?



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Spanning the Gap
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These two members of the plant kingdom are often confused. Especially before they blossom, they resemble each other with their bushy appearance and long, dark-green leaves. Both plants ARE shrubs, and they are often seen growing together.

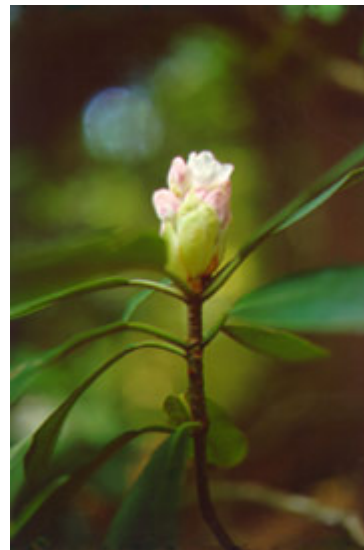
Another thing they have in common: although some species have **not** been proven dangerous, it is well to consider **ALL** members of the laurel-rhododendron-azalea group of plants as potentially toxic.



(Above) Rhodendron.

The **rhododendron** (*rhododendron maximum*) is undoubtedly the most conspicuous understory plant in the mountain forests of Pennsylvania. In ravines and hollows and along shaded watercourses it often grows so luxuriantly as to form almost impenetrable tangles. In June or early July, large clusters of showy blossoms, ranging from white to light rosy-pink, appear at the ends of the branchlets. People travel many miles to witness the magnificent show which is provided by the rhododendron at flowering time.

In the southern Appalachians the plant grows much larger than it ordinarily does in this area, often becoming a tree 25 feet or more in height. The dense thickets of rhododendron in the stream valleys and on the lower slopes of our mountains are favorite yarding grounds for deer when the snows become deep in the wintertime. The dark-green, leathery leaves react to subfreezing temperatures by bending downward and rolling into



Rhododendron.

a tight coil.

Although the shrub is often browsed to excess, it has little or no nutritional value.

The range of the Rhododendron extends from Nova Scotia and Ontario in Canada southward, chiefly along the mountains, to northern Georgia. It is abundant throughout the mountains of central and northeastern Pennsylvania, but rare and local in the extreme southeastern and western border counties.



Rhodendron.

In our region, the **mountain laurel**, or **calicobush** (*Kalmia latifolia*), is merely a large shrub, but in the southern Appalachians it commonly attains a height of from 25 to 40 feet. Tree-like specimens of record size grow in the Great Smoky Mountains. It grows profusely in our Pennsylvania mountains and is a common understory shrub in the oak and pitch pine forests of the dry and rocky ridges. The attractive pink or white saucer-shaped flowers are so abundant that the mountain laurel in full bloom is one of our most spectacular plants. It flowers in May and June, the later blooms ordinarily occurring on plants growing in the higher altitudes.

The mountain laurel has been chosen as the official state flower of Pennsylvania.

The range of the mountain laurel extends, from New Brunswick to Ontario in Canada, southward to Ohio and Tennessee and along the Appalachian Mountains to Georgia and western Florida. It has a wide distribution in Pennsylvania, but is quite rare in the extreme northwestern counties.

Please remember that all wildflowers within Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area are protected by federal law and may not be picked or dug up for transplanting.



Mountain laurel.



Mountain laurel.