



Gardener's Information Service

WARY OF BLISTER RUST

I am looking for shrubs to plant along the northeast side of my house and was considering rhododendrons and *Tsuga canadensis* 'Bennett'. But in reading about hemlocks, I learned that blister rust can be a problem and is exacerbated by alternate hosts, including rhododendrons. How serious a problem is this and can you recommend alternatives?

—F.R., ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

Unfortunately, blister rust is only one of the myriad pests that prey on Canadian hemlocks, especially those that are stressed by improper siting or drought. "A lot depends on how well Canadian hemlocks are taken care of and your ultimate goal," says John Frett, professor of landscape horticulture at the University of Delaware, who notes that it usually takes a decade or more of stress in the landscape before you see problems.

Of more concern is hemlock woolly adelgid, a cousin of the aphid, which manifests itself as white cottony tufts visible on the needlelike leaves and twigs. Hemlocks also suffer from sun scorch when temperatures reach 95 degrees Fahrenheit and from injury caused by prolonged drought—both common conditions in your area.

For the long haul in light shade, consider mahonias. *Mahonia bealei* offers bold texture. The *M. aquifolium* cultivars 'Atropurpureum' and 'Smaragd' exhibit finer foliage that colors nicely in fall. Cultivars of yew (*Taxus × media*) should also do well, as will big-leaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*), doublefile viburnum (*Viburnum plicatum*), *Pieris japonica*, and their cultivars.

STUNTED DOGWOOD LEAVES

Four years ago, we bought a *Cornus alternifolia* 'Argentea' and planted it in full sun in rich soil on a well-drained slope in our coastal USDA Zone 7 garden. Each spring the tree's leaves unfurl only part-

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way, look puckered, and remain stunted. But there is no die-back, and the branches and twigs are flexible. Do you have any suggestions?

—J.L.G., LEWES, DELAWARE

Pagoda dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*), is an understory tree native to the eastern United States. The cultivar 'Argentea', bred in Europe and uncommon in American gardens, tends to be shrubby, with variegated leaves that are smaller than the species. Like most dogwoods, it does best in part shade and has a shallow, fibrous, spreading root system that requires moist, acid, well-drained soil.

Although it's possible that salt air or some other environmental factor may be causing the problem, the most likely culprit in this case is water deficiency. Your plant is situated on a slope where water tends to run off rather than soak in; it is in full sun where there is increased heat stress, and it is near the ocean, where wind increases moisture loss through transpiration. Make sure the soil in the root zone gets enough water to make it moist to a depth of eight inches weekly. A two- to three-inch layer of mulch will help conserve the moisture.

PRUNING FLOWERING ALMONDS

This past spring I planted three small flowering almonds (*Prunus dulcis*) in the front yard. They are located on the northwest side in open space. Do I need to cut them back for winter or prune them in any way?

—F.F., TACOMA, WASHINGTON

According to AHS's *Pruning and Training* by Christopher Brickell and David Joyce,

flowering almonds should be trained to a central-leader standard. In winter, cut back any branches that are competing leaders and leave up to five feet of trunk clear. Remove suckers from the rootstock in early spring and at any time they appear thereafter. Any other pruning should be done immediately after flowering. Thinning the crown is unnecessary. The twiggy growth produced by young trees usually results in increased flower production. Once established, your trees will need little pruning.

CONTROLLING ENGLISH IVY

English ivy (*Hedera helix*) has escaped from my neighbor's yard and is taking over my trees and garden. How can I get it under control?

—C.V., NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Winter is a good time to start eliminating escaped English ivy. The Wildland Invasive Species Team Web site of the Nature Conservancy suggests relying largely on mechanical control because the waxy coating on ivy leaves reduces the effectiveness of sprayed herbicides.

If you have a large area that needs to be cleared, set achievable goals: Stake off an area to be de-ivied and equip yourself with gloves, digging fork, and pruners. Dig out and pull up every piece of ivy in sight. Repeat at monthly intervals throughout the year or until you no longer see any plants. It will be most effective if you attack ivy after a soaking rain has softened the earth.

If you have ivy growing up trees, cut the stems at ground level and paint the lower face of the cut stems with an herbicide designed for woody plants.

For more information, visit the Nature Conservancy's weed Web site tncweeds.ucdavis.edu/index.html. ☞

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