Rhododendrons are widely cultivated and well-known members of the heath family (Ericaceae), an important family commercially for a number of popular ornamentals, and for blueberries and cranberries.

Approximately 800 rhododendron tree and shrub species occur worldwide; about 20 are native to North America, and of these, two shrubs are native to California. One of these species, Pacific rhododendron, is the shrub of the redwood region and other coastal forests famous for its large masses of pink to rose-purple flowers. Locally, we are fortunate to lie within the range of the other equally attractive native California rhododendron—western azalea.

Western azalea, *Rhododendron occidentals*, is an upright, multi-stemmed and loosely branched deciduous shrub ranging in height between 3 and 10 feet. The leaves are bright yellow green, generally elliptic in shape and about 1.5 to 4 inches in length. This shrub is renowned for its fragrant flowers that bloom during early spring through mid-summer, depending on location. Western azalea flowers grow in clusters of five to 15 individuals and are very fragrant; often one can smell them from dozens of feet away and if there are many shrubs in proximity they can “deodorize” a large area. These attractive traits have made the plant popular in the horticulture trade and many cultivars have been developed.

In early spring before the leaves fully develop, the flowers begin to emerge from swollen buds found at the ends of the branches. Western azalea flowers are

Western azalea flowers are white with a yellow-blotched upper lobe. Five long curving stamens and a pink-tinted style give the appearance of an exploding star. Photo by *Len Lindstrand III*. 

Western AzAleA Offers Showy, Fragrant Flowers
by *Len Lindstrand III*
July 6, 2013
white, tubular flowers about ¾ to 1.5 inches long with spreading undulate lobes. They may be tinged with pink and most have a yellow-blotched upper lobe.

From each flower, five long curving stamens and a pink-tinted style project beyond the petals, giving the appearance of an exploding star. Besides attractive flowers, western azalea also provides nice fall color as the leaves typically turn a golden yellow and occasionally orange to deep red.

Western azalea occurs west of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Mountains and is known from Mt. Palomar in southern California north to the Umpqua Valley of southwestern Oregon. It is found from sea level to approximately 7,000 feet elevation and grows in moist conifer forests, near streams and lakes, and in wet meadows and springs. The shrub is tolerant of acidic soils and is commonly found associated with the unique plant communities of serpentine soil landscapes.

Western azalea is arguably one of our most beautiful native shrubs and well worth any effort to add it to your home. In the garden, western azalea grows in open sun to partial shade and makes a great specimen or companion plant. The root zone should be kept somewhat moist but not too wet, and adding a humus layer or mulch around the plant will improve growth. Plants located in open sun will require a bit more water than those in partially shaded locations.

At home, our azalea grows in the open, has a bit of cover from the late-afternoon sun, and receives overspray from lawn sprinklers—that all seems to do the trick. The plant is generally disease free, though leaf mildew can occur on plants in locations lacking good airflow, and requires no maintenance besides a little pruning if you wish.

The combination of an attractive shrub, large showy flowers, and a wonderful aroma make encounters with this plant in the wild memorable, and with some effort you can have this experience in your garden as well.

Western azalea is renowned for its fragrant flowers that bloom during early spring through mid-summer. Photo by Len Lindstrand III.