

# Rhododendron Borer

By Carol Allen—Germantown, Maryland

I have long been passionate about native plants, native shrubs in particular, and most of all, rhododendron species. My native rhododendron season begins with *Rhododendron periclymenoides*, also known as pinxterbloom. Its graceful pink flowers dominate the local woods in late April and the early emerging swallowtail butterflies find them just as lovely as I do! My season continues with *R. viscosum* and its fragrant white blossoms in mid-May.

The warm-colored (yellow, orange, and red shades) native azaleas continue the show through June and July with *R. calendulaceum*, *R. cumberlandense*, and finishes with *R. prunifolium* in August. *Rhododendron arborescens* and its hybrids add a white, sweet-smelling counterpoint to the above by blooming from mid-June to mid-August.

I have many hybrids of the above species as well. With this concentration of the same kinds of plants in my yard, I have to be vigilant in scouting for their particular pests. The most worrisome for me is the rhododendron borer (*Synanthedon rhododendri*).

The rhododendron borer is a native pest that can be a problem for evergreen rhododendrons, deciduous azaleas, and mountain laurel. *S. rhododendri* is a type of clearwing borer. Clearwing borers are members of the order Lepidoptera (moths and butterflies) and the family Sesiidae (clearwing moths) and include some other nasty pests such as peachtree borer and dogwood borer. These day-flying insects look like wasps so they are difficult to identify as moths to the casual observer.

The rhododendron borer is the smallest of the group being less than a ½" long. Their bodies are a metallic blue-black with three yellow bands on the abdomen and coppery scales on the clear wings. The abdomen sports either a fan (male) or tufted (female) end.

The moths emerge fully mature in mid-May and females usually mate on the first day. The adults only live for a couple of days. Once inseminated, the female seeks a disturbed area on a rhododendron or azalea stem. Usual sites include old borer damaged areas, old pruning scars or where the plant was recently dead-headed.

After hatching, the borer chews an entrance into the heartwood of a stem where it will tunnel and feed until the onset of cold weather. In December, the not-quite-mature larvae ceases feeding and spins a cocoon deep inside the rhododendron branch or trunk. Sometime in March it will resume feeding. In late April to early May, the larvae pupates, then emerges as an adult later in May.



Rhododendron borer photo by Jim Baker, North Carolina State University, Bugwood.org.

The rhododendron borer is almost fully protected during its life cycle by being enclosed in the plant's stem. This enclosed environment makes bio-rational controls difficult. Nurserymen, landscapers, and rhododendron hobbyists can obtain pheromone traps to attract the male moths as they emerge. These traps emit a chemical scent similar enough to the scent of a female moth that the males are fooled and caught. Since the adults have only a few days to mate and lay eggs, these traps pin-point moth emergence so pesticide sprays (usually permethrin) can be applied to the stems and trunks of vulnerable plants.

A non-chemical control, and the one I use, is to closely monitor the new shoots during the summer growing season. As the borer feeds, it causes the young leaves to wilt and the stem to droop or "flag." Cut the shoot off below the wilt point and trace the borer's tunnel down until you see the larvae and destroy.

By reputation, clearwing borers prey on stressed plants. Site your rhododendron species and hybrids where they can get either direct morning sun with afternoon shade, or in an area of high dappled shade. They require acid soil with a high humus content. They do not do well in compacted, heavy soils and do not tolerate water-logged roots. Water during times of drought and keep the root zone cool, moist, and weed-free with 2–3" of an organic mulch. Pine fines or pine bark mulch will do dual duty by maintaining the acidity of the soil.

## About the Author

Carol Allen describes herself as a committable plant-a-holic. She has more than 25 years' experience in the horticulture industry, with a special interest in plant pests and diseases; is a Licensed Pesticide Applicator in the state of Maryland; and is an ISA-Certified Arborist.