

*Rhododendron ponticum*

[Synonyms : *Rhododendron baeticum*]

**RHODODENDRON** (Dutch, English) is an invasive evergreen shrub or tree. Native to the eastern Mediterranean it has brownish spotted lilac-purple flowers.

It is also known as *Adeleira* (Portuguese), *Bujo* (Spanish), Common rhododendron, Pontic rhododendron, *Pontische Alpenrose* (German), and *Rododendo* (Portuguese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ‘beware - I am dangerous’, danger, and intoxication.

The flowers are pollinated by bees.

Warning – all parts of the plant are poisonous (particularly the leaves and the flowers). It can cause watering eyes, salivation, nasal blockage, slow pulse, low blood pressure, vomiting, convulsions and paralysis. It is as poisonous for animals as it is human beings. Honey can also be poisonous unless it has been allowed to age.

*Ponticum* means ‘of or from Pontus on the southern shores of the Black Sea (the north coast of Asia Minor)’.

The French botanist, Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656-1708) who was a professor at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, was the first European to discover rhododendron when he was exploring on the Black Sea’s southern shores in 1700-1702.

Rhododendron was introduced to Britain in 1763 and is one of seven species from which today’s garden hybrids are derived. But this species itself is no longer popular there as in some areas it has smothered the natural habitat for many birds and butterflies and is avoided by grazing animals that might otherwise have controlled its invasive characteristics. (Some authorities have noted that llamas are about the only animal that finds rhododendron edible.) This problem was considered to have become sufficiently severe for the The National Trust in Britain in early 1995 to decide to cut the plant down on its land in the West Country (especially on Exmoor and in the Quantock Hills). Apparently it has also begun to threaten upland areas in Welsh Snowdonia and lowland heath just outside London in Surrey. Authorities suspect that not only does this rhododendron destroy established habitat but also that it can be a significant hinderance to any attempts made at regenerating oakwoods (*Quercus*).

It is the birthday flower of 18<sup>th</sup> October.