

Companion plants in the *Ericaceae* family collection of Vilnius University Botanical garden



Botanikos sodas

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The *Ericaceae* family collection of Vilnius University Botanical Garden covers an area of appr. 1,5 ha. It was created within a natural, sparse pine forest 20 years ago. Approximately 300 taxons of genus *Rhododendron* now grow there and make up about 60 percent of the collection. Other *Ericaceae* plants belong to 23 genera. Although not an equal match to rhododendrons in terms of their attractiveness for visitors, they are just as important for the collection. In addition, many other plants grow nearby, playing an important role in the structure of the area. They serve different purposes.



Ericaceae and non-*Ericaceae* plants, planted together with a particular species of rhododendron, because they grow naturally side by side in the wild or originate from the same range, usually perform both an educational and aesthetic function, mimicking natural plant communities.

Foto: plants of the east coast of North America: *Tsuga canadensis*, *Rhododendron vasey*, *Rhododendron pilosum*, *Kalmia latifolia*, *Leucothoe fontanesiana*, *Andromeda polifolia*.

Foto: *Pinus pumila* and *Rhododendron aureum* - both originating from the Kuril Islands.



Foto: *Tsuga canadensis* acts as a wind shelter for the *Rhododendron canadense*.

Companion plants improve the growth conditions of collectibles: create a shade, form shelters, acts as a 'soft' barrier between rhododendrons and visitors. Helps retain moisture in the soil, reduces fluctuations in the soil temperature, protects against weeds.



Foto: *Juniperus conferta*, *Euonymus fortunei* and *Hosta lancifolia* protect the roots of azaleas from trampling.



Foto: *Vinca minor* and *Waldsteinia geoides* arrange the corners perfectly.

Companion plants can help to create and maintain the structure of the garden: forms visual barriers and the background. Fills small or unsuitable corners and gaps between young or weak plants. Closes unwanted passages. Helps to overcome erosion.



Foto: *Astilbe*, *Hosta* and *Primula* are waiting for their time to become the main highlight of this area.



Foto: climbing plants, such as *Hydrangea anomala* and *Hedera helix* enrich the spatial structure of the collection space.



Foto: autumn attraction *Hydrangea paniculata*.



Foto: spring attraction *Prunus sargentii*.

One of the most important is the aesthetic function: non-*Ericaceae* plants prolong the attractiveness of the garden until the full season. Some of the plants themselves are a strong attraction for visitors. Highlights the rhododendrons, provides textural and colourful contrast even during the flowering season of rhododendrons.

The diverse but well-thought-out range of companion plants helps to increase the value of the *Ericaceae* family collection, making the garden a great place to study, explore and admire.