Species Description

**Scientific name:** *Rhododendron ponticum*  
**AKA:** Rhododendron  
**Native to:** South-west Europe and south-west Asia. Northern Ireland’s stock is believed to have come from Spain  
**Habitat:** Common on acid, peaty or sandy soils in woodland, heathland, rocky hillsides, rivers banks, gardens and parks  
A large evergreen shrub with leathery leaves, attractive purple to pink flowers and solid stems forming into a trunk when mature. Relatively easy to identify by its distinctive flowers but can be confused with cherry laurel or horticultural varieties of rhododendron. However, horticultural varieties of rhododendron are relatively rarely found in the wild. Spreads by suckers and seed, which are small and carried long distances by wind.  
Introduced by gardeners in the late 18th century into parks and woodlands, where it was also used for game cover. Still widely planted, particularly by gardeners. Often grows in ecologically sensitive habitats, such as heath, broad-leaved woodland and dunes, where dense growth out-competes native plants and can considerably alter the structure of the habitat. *Rhododendron* can also prevent access to sites by the sheer mass of plant material blocking paths and right of way.

Key ID Features

- **Leathery leaves** with dull green upper surface  
- **Pale underside**
- **6-12 cm**
- **Leaves in spiral at end of stem**
- **Stem usually up to 15cm diameter and 5m tall**
- **5 petals**
- **Stems / trunk often dense and twisted**
- **Seed pods are formed after flowering**
- **Usually pink / purple, occasionally whiteish**

Report any sightings via; CEDaR Online Recording - [https://www2.habitas.org.uk/records/ISI](https://www2.habitas.org.uk/records/ISI), iRecord app or Invasive Species Northern Ireland website - [http://invasivespeciesni.co.uk/report-sighting](http://invasivespeciesni.co.uk/report-sighting)
Identification throughout the year

Varies little throughout the year as leaves are evergreen and woody stems remain the same. Flowers appear May to June followed by seed pods.

Cherry laurel
Non-native
(Prunus laurocerasus)

Leaves arranged alternately ending in a single leaf

Flower heads white and clustered to form a spike

Rhododendron leaf
(for comparison)

Cherry laurel leaf
Toothed edge
Glossy surface

Varieties of Rhododendron

There are a large number of highly sought after species and varieties of rhododendron, of which the invasive Rhododendron ponticum is just one. It is unusual to encounter other varieties or species outside of planted habitats.

References in the further reading list can be used to distinguish between the different varieties if necessary.

References and further reading:


Photos from: Olaf Booy, David Fenwick, Mike McCabe, Helen Parish.

Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.

Adapted for Northern Ireland Environment Agency 2020