

Hydrangeas For The Garden

By Trica Barron

Plant Health Care Technician

Hydrangeas are old fashioned plants that are a beautiful addition to any landscape. There are new varieties being produced every year. They come in all different sizes and flower shapes. Some have fall color and all can provide some winter interest.

Contrary to belief, most hydrangeas are not fussy plants and don't require any special attention or soil amendments. In general, hydrangeas prefer two things; moisture and some shade. I emphasize the some shade because a common mistake made is the placement of hydrangeas in too much shade. Most are happier with a morning sun exposure or dappled shade. As for moisture, hydrangeas have a reputation of being thirsty plants; no hydrangea will tolerate drought. An overly wet soil can become compact, lose aeration and damage the hydrangea. On hot summer days usually in a sunny location, leaves will give the impression of wilting even when the soil about them is moist; watering them again will only do more harm. This type of wilt is temporary and is due to rapid transpiration from the large foliage. Once the evening arrives, they will perk up again on their own. This is why it's important to know what is normal for a particular plant. Hydrangeas do benefit from organic mulches (avoid the red dyed stuff) and annual fertilization around mid-June. For the fertilization, a slow release such as Osmocote would be a good choice. If you prefer organic fertilizers, use alfalfa meal, blood meal, fish emulsion, or rotted manure.

When purchasing a hydrangea be aware of planting it too early in the spring. A late frost can zap the foliage back and there is a good chance it may not thrive. Same goes for planting them in the hottest part of summer.

Now let's talk about selection for our area. The hardiest members of the hydrangea family are the panicled hydrangea, oak-leaved and especially the North American native species, smooth hydrangea. Select plants that grow well in our area. Hardiness ratings can be found on plant labels in reputable nurseries. A hardiness rating gives the minimal temperature plants can withstand to survive. Chicago is USDA Zone 5; closer to the lake is Zone 4. The panicled and smooth hydrangeas flower buds form on this season's growth; therefore cold damage usually is not an issue. Most other hydrangeas flower on old wood, so their flower buds are produced during the previous year. Flower buds are more sensitive to the cold than leaf buds. Therefore, it is easy for flower buds to be damaged in early winter or late spring when cold winds and temperature fluctuations occur. If bud damage occurs there will be no to minimal blooms that year, only the deep green foliage. Plant these types of hydrangeas in an area more protected from cold, drying winds, and mulch the crown of the plant for the winter.

For pruning care, it is very important to know when and how your hydrangea blooms. There are hydrangeas that flower on new wood (this year's growth), so old stems can be cut down to the ground in late winter or early spring. Hydrangeas that bloom on old wood (buds produced on last year's growth) should be pruned right after flowering. Waiting until fall can stimulate tender new growth that might be killed during winter. For branches that have significant dieback after winter, prune back to live wood, but be aware that this will reduce flowering. There are hydrangeas that will grow and flower without ever needing much pruning. You can prune out any dead, diseased or broken branches and stems at any time of the year.

There are three general shapes of hydrangea flower clusters;

- Mopheads which are rounded, pompom like clusters of infertile flowers, can be found on various selections of *H. arborescens*, *H. serrata* and *H. macrophylla*.

- Lacecaps are flat, or slightly rounded, clusters of numerous small fertile flowers surrounded by larger sterile flowers (sepals). They are found on various selections of *H. arborescens*, *H. serrata*, *H. macrophylla* and climbing *H. petiolaris*.
- Panicles, which are on most selections of *H. paniculata* and *H. petiolaris*, consist of large conical or pyramidal clusters of small fertile flowers and showy infertile flowers

Selections;

Hydrangea arborescens-- smooth hydrangea (mophead/lacecap)

- Annabelle hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle')
- White Dome™ hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens* 'Dardom')
- Hills of Snow hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens* f. *grandiflora*)

All flowers bloom white in July and August on new wood. The shrub increases by underground suckers, but not invasively.

Hydrangea macrophylla--big-leaf hydrangea (mophead/lacecap)

- Endless Summer™ hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Bailmer'), pink flowers, blooms on new and old growth.
- Light-O-Day™ hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Bailday'), pink flowers, blooms on old wood.
- Blushing Bride hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Blushing Bride'), white flowers, blooms on old and new wood.
- All Summer Beauty hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'All Summer Beauty'), pink flowers, blooms on old and new wood.

If there is no significant die back on the old wood from the winter, you still can get flowering from the new wood. Wait until new leaves have emerged on canes, or until new shoots have emerged from the ground, to cut away any dead canes or trim away dead portions. Our low winter temperatures, early fall, and late spring freezes can often reduce or eliminate the flowering potential. These hydrangeas are also known to break dormancy late. A protected site for this plant is essential. The flower color in this group is affected by the availability of aluminum in the soil, which depends upon the soil acidity. To get your hydrangea to produce blue flowers, your soil pH needs to be below 5.5 pH. You can test your garden soil to find out its pH level with an inexpensive kit that can be purchased at any garden center. You can help lower your pH by .05 units by applying iron sulfate or 8 oz. sulphur for a 3 x 3 foot area. Do not use aluminum sulfate, it can burn the roots. Most of our soil is neutral to alkaline (7.0 and above), so it takes a lot of constant work to try to lower your soil pH and to keep it low. If you're set on blue flowers, try growing your *hydrangea macrophylla* in a container where you can control the soil pH more easily.

Hydrangea serrata--mountain hydrangea (mophead/lacecap)

- Preziosa hydrangea (*Hydrangea serrata* 'Preziosa'), white flowers changing to pink, then crimson red, blooms on old wood.

Like the big-leaf hydrangeas, the mountain hydrangea needs to be planted in a protected site. Foliage turns reddish in the fall. Preziosa makes an excellent container plant.

Hydrangea paniculata -- paniced hydrangea (panicle)

- Pink Diamond hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'Pink Diamond'), pink flowers
- Tardiva hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'Tardiva'), white flowers
- Limelight hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'Limelight'), light green flowers
- Pee Gee hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'Grandiflora'), white flowers
- Pee Wee hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'Pee Wee'), white flowers
- Unique hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'Unique'), white flowers

Pee Gee is available in shrub and tree forms. Pruning of these large shrubs are unnecessary, unless you want to prune to create a smaller plant with fewer but larger flowers. Also to improve the shape, structure and reduce stem crowding, prune established plants by removing stems back to a main branch before new leaves emerge. They will look best if one-third of the old growth is pruned back in late winter.

Hydrangea quercifolia -- oak-leaved hydrangea (panicle)

- Alice oak-leaved hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia* 'Alice')
- Snow Queen oak-leaved hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia* 'Snow Queen')
- Pee Wee oak-leaved hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia* 'Pee Wee')
- Sikes Dwarf oak-leaved hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia* 'Sikes Dwarf')

This hydrangea is a four season charmer! All have white fragrant flowers that blossom in July and August. Oak –like, deep green leaves change to beautiful shade of red-wine, purple, and rose in the fall. Then there is the bark; young stems are cinnamon-colored that age like a fine wine. With plants that are two to three years old or older, the bark and branches exfoliate into papery sheets of rich cinnamon-brown. All oak-leaved hydrangeas bloom on old wood and need to be planted in a protected site.

Hydrangea (anomala) petiolaris -- climbing hydrangea (lacecap)

- Climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea (anomala) petiolaris*)

This woody vine attaches firmly to rough surfaces via root-like structures. Avoid letting this vine grow on a building wall. The stems, if removed, leave a residue that is difficult, sometimes impossible to remove. They are worth growing just to experience its white flowers dripping with a honey fragrance that appear in late May and June and, with age, exfoliating cinnamon-brown bark. The climbing hydrangea is slow to establish, sometimes taking two to five years of growth before flowers appear, but grows rapidly thereafter. Flowers on old wood, so flowers are susceptible to damage by late frost. Keep fertilization to a minimum in young plants. Those that are established become self-sufficient. This vines motto is that less is more.

Hydrangeas are wonderful highlights in the garden. Know what's best for your plant and use good cultural practices. It'll be worth your while because in bloom these beauties can bring a smile to your face. Some books I highly recommend are "*Hydrangeas for American Gardens*", by Michael Dirr and "*Hydrangeas A Gardeners' Guide*", by Toni Lawson-Hall and Brian Rothera.