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Hydrangea Care

Hydrangeas combine romantic tradition with bold and exciting modern varieties. Their easy care, adaptability, long bloom time and shade-loving qualities make them a garden favorite.

Sun or Shade?

In nature, most hydrangeas are found in woodland areas under a high tree canopy that provides the **dappled shade** that protects their flowers from becoming faded or sun-scorched. In this semi-shade, hydrangea flowers appear to glow, yet the plants still have access to life-supporting rain and light. In a garden setting, most hydrangeas also perform best in filtered sunlight, although needs do vary by species:

- *Hydrangea arborescens* (**smooth hydrangea**) prefers light shade and regular summer water.
- *H. macrophylla* (**bigleaf or garden hydrangea**) prefers some shade, although lacecap types (flat or slightly rounded heads with tiny fertile flowers) don't scorch in open sun as easily as mophead types (round, globelike heads).
- *H. paniculata* (**Pee Gee**) will flourish in full sun but its brittle stems need protection from strong winds.
- *H. quercifolia* (**oakleaf**) prefers light or full shade but will take full sun if you keep its soil moist.

Soil Conditions

Hydrangeas thrive in well-drained, humus-rich soil in their natural woodland environment, but they can handle sandy, clay and stony soils if you improve the planting site with our Organic Compost and keep the soil evenly moist. It also helps to use our compost as a mulch to help preserve soil moisture, provide nutrients and reduce weeds.

Color Change

With many hydrangeas, flower color and intensity is affected by your soil's pH. **Acidic** soil tends to produce blue flowers and **alkaline** soil tends to produce pink or red flowers. Some hydrangea varieties stay constant or vary little in their flower color, regardless of the soil.

If you have **moderately** acidic soil (unless a soil test tells you otherwise, in our area it is pretty safe to assume this is the case), you may be able to adjust the pH enough to change the color of your hydrangea's flowers. You will have the best luck with the mophead and lacecap varieties of *H. macrophylla*.

- To make **blue flowers more intense**, add 1 tablespoon of aluminum sulfate to 1 gallon of water and apply to the soil during the growing season to make your soil more acidic. **Caution: overuse of aluminum sulfate can cause root damage.** Fertilizing with rhododendron food will also help acidify your soil.
- To make **blue flowers turn pink**, add 2 cups of lime to the planting hole to make the soil more alkaline, adding more twice a year during the growing season. **Caution: Adding too much lime can cause chlorosis (inability to absorb sufficient iron), which results in yellow leaves.**

Note: When a *H. macrophylla* cultivar is first planted in the ground, or transplanted from one spot to another, its color has a natural tendency to edge toward red (blue flowers could become lilac, pink could become red, etc.). This may be because the plant is temporarily unable to absorb the natural aluminum in the soil. So give it a chance to settle in before adding *even more* aluminum sulfate or lime to try to force a color change.

Pruning

The various hydrangea species require different pruning techniques. Hydrangeas will grow and flower if they are never pruned at all, but careful pruning can encourage bigger blooms, enhance the shape and symmetry of branches and boost the plant's overall vigor. There are four species that have specific requirements:

- *H. arborescens* - In February or March each year, cut all branches back to 1 foot from the ground. There is no danger of frost damage, as the flower buds have not yet formed at that time. The plant will grow rapidly in the spring and bear large flowers the same season.
- *H. macrophylla* - In spring or early summer, after all danger of frost is past, clip off spent flowers and cut back each stem to just above the new buds. Cut out any damaged or dead branches to allow light and air to flow through the plant. Do not prune in the fall, as the resulting new growth would be too tender to withstand the coming frosts. Lightly prune young plants, saving more extensive pruning for when the hydrangeas are at least six years old.
- *H. paniculata* - There are two ways to handle this species.
 - 1) Prune back to only 2 buds at the base of each stem in February or March, or
 - 2) Remove entire branches if you need to reduce the size of the plant.
 Both of these methods will increase flower size. If left unpruned, you will get more, but smaller, flowers.
- *H. quercifolia* - This species produces blooms on the previous year's growth, so thin lightly, primarily cutting out weak or dead branches. The best time to prune is in the spring, or after flowering.