

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

FACT SHEET

Have gardening questions? Contact the **Master Gardener Help Line.**

At *Mass Hort, Wellesley*: mghelpline@masshort.org, 617-933-4929

At *Tower Hill Botanic Garden, Boylston*: hortline@towerhillbg.org, 608-869-6111 x104

Please visit our website for Help Line hours: <http://massmastergardeners.org/what-i-do/>



HYDRANGEA BASICS

Hydrangeas are woody shrubs with large showy blooms that vary in size, shape and color. Depending on the variety, flowers may appear in summer, fall or even throughout the season. Once established they are easy to grow and maintain, and relatively disease and pest free. They look great planted individually or in groups, in perennial beds or with other shrubs.

The blossoms of hydrangeas are actually clusters of individual flowers known as an “inflorescence.” These flower heads are comprised of small fertile flowers and larger, showier sterile flowers. In the United States there are four varieties of hydrangea: *Hydrangea macrophylla*, commonly known as bigleaf, lacecap or florist’s hydrangea; *H. quercifolia*, our native oak leaf hydrangea; *H. paniculata*, also known as panicle hydrangea with ‘Pee Gee’ a popular cultivar; and *H. arborescens*, sometimes called smooth hydrangea.

Hydrangeas need to be planted in a space large enough for them to grow to their maximum size without much pruning. They are happy in sun to part shade, but too much shade will keep the plant from blooming. Plant in fertile, loamy soil. Make a hole as deep as the root ball and three times its width. Place the plant in the hole to the same depth as it was in its container. Back fill the hole with soil amended with organic matter to promote good drainage. Water deeply after planting, but do not fertilize. For the first year insure that the shrub receives one and a half inches of water a week. Fertilize established hydrangeas with a balanced fertilizer. Do not fertilize after August, this may promote new growth that will be damaged by winter freezes.

The variety of hydrangea determines when and how it should be pruned because the flowers bloom on either new or old wood.

Old wood-blooming hydrangeas (bigleaf, lacecap, oakleaf) rarely need to be pruned, but should be thinned once every few years to rejuvenate the plant. They bloom on stems that have been on the shrub since the previous summer. After the last frost, remove dead stems at the base and deadhead old blooms. They can also be deadheaded right after blooming in July. Deadhead down to the first set of leaflets.

Hydrangea paniculata and *H. arborescens* bloom on new wood. These shrubs can be pruned in early spring, fall or winter, but not when preparing to bloom in summer. They do not need to be pruned every year. However, they can be pruned to the ground every year once established to encourage vigorous new growth. One exception is the tree form which will revert to a shrub if pruned to the ground. Deadhead spent flower heads at any time, or leave them on for winter interest.

No other plant can so readily change its flower color by altering soil acidity. The ability of the plant to absorb aluminum from the soil is what determines the color. All hydrangeas grow best in a soil that is slightly acidic, pH 5.5 to 6.5. Hydrangeas with blue flowers must take up aluminum and the soil needs to be more acidic. Pink-flowered hydrangeas need no aluminum. To raise the pH to 6.5, lime can be added to the soil around hydrangea plants. Start preparing for pink flowers when the hydrangea is first planted by adding lime or bone meal to the soil. In the spring, as the leaf buds begin to appear, add a fertilizer that is high in phosphorous (NPK of 10-30-10) which ties up the aluminum in the soil.

Some new varieties guarantee the color of bloom without depending on assistance from the gardener. Remember: Pink – alkaline, add lime; Blue – acidic, add aluminum.

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics.

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