



Hydrangeas

447 Winthrop Road, Deep River, Ct. 06417
(860) 526-9056 www.acergardens.com
email – acer@acergardens.com

Hydrangeas have been actively cultivated in Europe and America since the great garden explorers discovered them in Asia and brought them back from their travels early in the 18th century. Remarkably simple to grow, hydrangeas require only good, rich, well-draining soil and adequate moisture. They prefer protection from strong winds and do not respond well to extreme heat and drought conditions. The moderate climate found in Zones 4 – 8 suits them very well. Generally resistant to diseases and pests, they range in size from a dense, bushy shrub to climbing vines and even a tree and are good companion plants for rhododendrons, azaleas and roses. Some newer varieties can even be grown in tubs or containers. All tend to be long-lived; some recent introductions will bloom both on new growth as well as one-year stems.

Location / Planting

Hydrangeas primarily grow in partial shade and require protection from strong mid-day sun. The high shade created by deciduous trees and evergreens is perfect for them. Too much shade produces lovely leaves but no flowers. Do not plant too close to a tree as the tree roots will compete for the rich soil hydrangeas need to thrive.

Soil / Fertilizing / Care

Hydrangeas prefer moist, well-drained, humus-rich soil. They dislike highly alkaline soil and should be fertilized once in the spring with a good general fertilizer. Do not use a high-nitrogen fertilizer. Mulching is always beneficial. Hydrangeas appreciate generous watering by hose (at least 1” a week) and will require extra watering during drought periods. Using a sprinkler can result in leaf spot or powdery mildew. The shrubs can be planted / transplanted in early summer or mid-fall.

Pruning

Hydrangeas do not require regular pruning. They will grow and flower well with nothing more than the removal of old flowers and any dead wood as they leaf out in early spring. Because many hydrangeas bloom on old wood, pruning at the wrong time can result in the loss of next year’s flowers. Cutting blooms for the house will often be enough to shape the plant as the summer progresses. With the big increase in available cultivars, gardeners can easily choose a hydrangea which will not outgrow its space.

Types

Hydrangea quercifolia. The oak-leaf hydrangea will grow to 6 - 8’ and grows happily in woodland shade. In late spring and early summer, the shrub produces conical, ivory flowers that take on a rosy glow as the flowers mature. In the fall, the large leaves change to wine red and purple. This group can grow in the most shade of all hydrangeas. If needed, prune right after bloom. Many gardeners appreciate the open and graceful look of this hydrangea “as is”.

Hydrangea arborescens. Among the hardiest of hydrangeas, this group includes the snowball “Annabelle” whose large white flowers bloom from mid-summer to autumn. They grow to 5’ and make wonderful deciduous hedges. Blooming on new wood, they are very useful in areas with cold winters. Since they bloom on the current

season's growth, you can cut these shrubs to the ground in the fall or early spring or simply prune and shape by removing crossing branches after they have bloomed.

Hydrangea macrophylla. The "typical" hydrangea, also known as the "big-leaf", produces 2 types of flowers: the mopheads (hortensias) and the flatter lace-caps. Averaging 6' in height, they produce blue flowers in acid soil and pink flowers in alkaline soil. They prefer light shade. Flowers are produced on buds from the previous season's growth. Therefore it is important not to cut this shrub back in the fall or spring or you might be removing your flowers. In the spring wait for your plant to leaf out and only remove parts of branches damaged by the winter (be patient). To decrease the height of your plant, prune immediately after it has flowered. To bring out the blue flowers in this group a low pH of 5.8 or less is best. Use ½ tablespoon of aluminum sulfate per gallon of water per plant once or twice a season.

Hydrangea petiolaris. The Climbing hydrangea. A native of Japan, petiolaris is slow to start but, after a few years, produces lush, vigorous growth and long-lasting blooms. It can reach to 40' and will cheerfully climb walls, pergolas, trellises and trees. Blooming on old wood, creamy, flat flowers appear in late May or early June and will last a month. It hardly ever needs any pruning at all but, if needed, prune after the plants have flowered or in mid-summer.

Hydrangea serrata

Native to the mountains of Korea and Japan, this species blooms from June to August. Its lace-cap flowers are smaller and flatter than many hydrangeas and it will tolerate full sun only if grown in consistently moist, well-drained soil. Bloom occurs on old wood and little pruning is required other than to remove dead canes at the end of the winter. The serratas bloom in various shades of pink or blue. Roots and stems are hardy to Zone 5 so these hydrangeas generally come through bad winters. Leaves and stems gradually turn burgundy red in the fall.

Hydrangea paniculata. One of the most cold-hardy species, this hydrangea grouping includes the old-fashioned 'PeeGee' hydrangea which blooms from mid to late summer with flower cones showing first white, then pink and finally brown. Careful pruning to a main stalk will help 'PeeGee' establish a tree form. After that, prune 'PeeGee' lightly in late winter or early spring. Many people never prune 'PeeGee' at all but merely remove old blooms. The cultivar "Tardiva", often used for hedges, becomes a very large shrub and blooms late in the season from August through September. These hydrangeas bloom on new wood in sun to partial shade, grow with minimal pruning and can take almost full sun.

Winter Protection

Because hydrangeas set their flowers in the fall, a severely cold winter can result in poor bloom. Today, growers offer bushes which are particularly cold-hardy but a late spring freeze can damage upcoming buds. A particularly severe winter can kill back branches but the roots will still be alive and the bush will grow new branches from the ground up although there will be few flowers that season. Using a 2" layer of winter mulch or wrapping a bush in burlap will afford extra protection. Spraying with an anti-transpirant (i.e. WiltStop) can help protect stems from desiccation and winter injury.