



# Hydrangeas

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Hydrangeas have been actively cultivated since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. They are good companion plants for rhododendrons, azaleas and roses and can be grown in tubs. Remarkably simple to grow, hydrangeas are generally resistant to diseases and pests and range in size from a dense, bushy shrub to climbing vines and even a tree.

## **Location**

Hydrangeas will grow in full sun to partial shade but require relief from mid-day sun. The high shade created by deciduous trees and evergreens is perfect. Too much shade produces lovely leaves but no flowers.

## **Soil**

Hydrangeas prefer moist, well-drained, humus-rich soil. They dislike highly alkaline soil and should be fertilized very moderately. Do not use a high-nitrogen fertilizer. Generous watering and mulch will help to keep their feet cool.

## **Types**

*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 previous seasons 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 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.

*Hydrangea quercifolia*. The oak-leaf hydrangea will grow to 6’ 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.

*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. Creamy, flat flowers appear in late May or early June and will last a month. It hardly ever needs any pruning at all. If any pruning is needed, prune after the plants have flowered or in mid-summer.

*Hydrangea paniculata*. The old-fashioned PeeGee hydrangea blooms from mid to late summer with its flower cones showing first white, then pink and finally brown. Careful pruning will help PeeGee establish a tree form. The cultivar “Tardiva” will become a very large shrub and blooms until frost. Paniculatas, grown in a tree form (“PeeGee”), should be pruned lightly in late winter or early spring. Cut it back to within 2” of where last year’s growth started. Many people never prune PeeGee at all.

*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. They bloom on new wood, and 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.

### **Avoiding winter kill**

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. Site plants under a canopy of evergreens and use a temporary deep layer of winter mulch. Spraying with an antitranspirant (i.e. WiltPruf) can help protect stems from desiccation and winter injury.

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