Hydrangeas in the Landscape

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Hydrangeas are flowering shrubs that are easy to grow and can provide color in the garden from mid-summer through fall. They are used as specimen plants and in shrub borders. The flowers of some species can be dried and used in flower arranging and crafts.

The name comes from the Greek “hydra” meaning “water” and “angeon” meaning “vessel” referring to the plant’s preference for moisture and to the shape of the seed capsule.

Culture

Most hydrangeas are woodland plants and require moist, well-drained soil in partial shade. Full sun can bleach and scorch the flowers. Overexposure to sun and/or too little water will cause the leaves to droop. The plants should be watered thoroughly during prolonged dry spells. Mulch will help retain moisture and suppress weeds.

Fertilizer should be applied based on soil test results. The majority of hydrangeas bloom on wood produced during the previous year, known as “old wood.” These hydrangeas should be pruned after flowering. Hydrangeas that flower on the current season’s growth or “new wood” can be pruned in winter or early spring before growth takes place. Gardeners should know when the flower buds are produced before pruning to avoid removing the season’s flowers. Flower buds may be killed by frost or cold winds.

Pests and Diseases

Aphids, rose chafer, scale, and two-spotted spider mites have been reported as pest problems of hydrangeas. See Bulletin 504 for insect and mite control recommendations.

Leaf spot, powdery mildew, and rust have been reported as disease problems. See Bulletin 614 for management options.

Selected Species and Cultivars

**Hydrangea anomala (Climbing Hydrangea)**

Climbing Hydrangea is an excellent clinging vine that grows 60’–80’ in height. The older stems have an interesting peeling, cinnamon-colored bark. White flowers open early to mid-summer. The plant is slow to establish but will grow faster after root establishment. It will need adequate support as the vine becomes very woody. Propagation is easiest by seed that has been cold stratified for 2–3 months. Climbing Hydrangea is hardy in zones 4–7.
Hydrangea arborescens (Smooth Hydrangea)

*Hydrangea arborescens* is a fast growing Ohio native shrub that will grow to 3’–5’ tall and wide. White flowers appear in late June through September on new wood. The plant can be cut to the ground in late fall or early spring. Supplemental watering will be required during hot, dry summers. ‘Annabelle’ and ‘Grandiflora’ are commonly available cultivars. Propagation is best by softwood cuttings in May–June or by division in late winter or early spring. Smooth Hydrangea is hardy in zones 4–9.

Hydrangea macrophylla (Bigleaf Hydrangea)

Bigleaf Hydrangea blooms on wood produced the previous year. The shoots are often winterkilled and no flowering occurs. Pruning should be done after flowering. This shrub grows quickly to 3’–6’ in height and must have adequate moisture or the plant will wilt and die. The flowers are usually blue or pink in flat-topped clusters. The flower color of some cultivars is affected by the soil pH. The color change depends on the concentration of aluminum ions in the soil. The concentration is highest in acid soil. Blue shades are produced in acid soils and pink in alkaline soils. Some cultivars do not turn blue even under ideal conditions for aluminum availability. Commonly available cultivars include: ‘Nikko Blue’, ‘Pia’, ‘Merritt’s Supreme’, and ‘Blue Wave’. Propagate from softwood cuttings in May–July. *Hydrangea macrophylla* is hardy in zones 6–9.

Hydrangea paniculata (Panicle Hydrangea)

*Hydrangea paniculata* is the most cold-hardy hydrangea species. The white flowers appear on panicles 6”–8” long in mid-summer. The flowers are set on new wood and pruning may be done in winter or early spring. This fast growing shrub can reach a height of 10’–20’. ‘Grandiflora’, also known as PeeGee, is the most commonly available cultivar. The flowers can weight the branches down. New cultivars are becoming available that do not have the tendency to flop. One cultivar showing up more in nurseries is ‘Tardiva’. Propagation is by seed or cuttings taken May–July. *Hydrangea paniculata* is hardy in zones 3–8.
**Hydrangea quercifolia (Oakleaf Hydrangea)**

Oakleaf Hydrangea is a slow growing shrub. It will reach 4’–6’ in height and wider due to suckering. The plant should be protected in zone 5. Stems and buds are subject to injury at temperatures below –10 degrees F. Older stems exfoliate to expose a rich cinnamon brown bark. The white 4”–12” long flowers bloom July–September. Flowering occurs on wood produced the previous year, so pruning should be done after flowering. It is prized for its autumn color of a spectacular mix of red, orange-brown, and purple. ‘Snow Queen’ and ‘Alice’ are two available cultivars. Propagation is by seed, layering, division, or cuttings taken May–September. *Hydrangea quercifolia* is hardy in zones 5–9.