

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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“Even in the smallest and humblest garden, a sturdy hydrangea at once proclaims the place as the abode of a real gardener rather than a mere purchaser of plants to cover the landscape.” (Washington Park Arboretum Bulletin)

To grow really well, hydrangeas require a loamy, well-drained, acid soil in a reasonably mild zone free of early autumn or late spring frosts. Hydrangeas are thirsty plants so it would be well to work peat moss or compost into the soil around your plants. If the plants are young it is important to water well for several years to encourage deep root growth and to use a mulch to retain moisture.

Most of the species grow as understory shrubs or vines. These are well suited to full or partial shade and can be used on the north side of the house. However, near the coast, all species seem to flower more profusely in full sun. The oak leaf hydrangea needs the sun to develop its brilliant fall colors.

The color of the Hydrangea macrophylla flowers changes with maturity, the degree of shade or sun it is grown in, and the pH of the soil. Available aluminum in the acid soil ensures a blue color, so add aluminum sulphate if color starts to change. To maintain a pink color the soil must be 6.0 to 6.5 or slightly higher so you would add dolomite lime to “sweeten” the soil. If you want to treat for color it must be done months before the plant blooms.

There are several categories of hydrangeas that differ with respect to pruning.

Hydrangea anomala, the vine hydrangea, is pruned only if it gets overwhelmingly big for the tree or building it is growing on.

The Hydrangea paniculata produces flowers on the current year’s growth and should be pruned in late winter or early spring to within an inch or two of where the last year’s growth started. To have a taller plant, leave the leader three to four feet long and prune back to a node. It can be trained to a twenty-five foot tree but is better as a ten to fifteen-foot shrub. To identify: The leaves are about five inches long and turn bronzy in fall and it has a white conical-shaped flower cluster ten to fifteen inches long.

The H. quercifolia, or oak leaf hydrangea is a broad round shrub that grows to six feet high. It has deep-lobed, oak-shaped, eight-inch long leaves that turn a bronze crimson in the fall with a creamy white cone-shaped flower in June. If pruned to the ground in early spring, it makes a compact three foot shrub that could be used in a container. It blooms on new growth.

The Hydrangea macrophylla is the most common big-leafed garden hydrangea. It has thick, shining coarsely-toothed leaves, and the flowers are in many shades of color and in more rounded clusters. These hydrangea form their flower buds the year before blooming, and pruning must be done with discrimination. The winter mantel of dry flower heads protects the buds below from frost and therefore should not be pruned until early spring and then only back to the first node with buds. (You can use the pruned heads for mulch.) If you have a grossly overgrown bush, the best pruning method is merely to cut out the three oldest stems at the ground in late winter. (Never take out more than 1/3 of any shrub.) A young hydrangea shoot bears a flower at its tip the first year. The next year, two side shoots are made and they flower and so on. When the shoot has made 15-20 flowers in this way, it should be pruned at the base to make room for younger shoots.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.