

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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HEADLINE:

Hydrangea care and propagation

BODY:

Hydrangeas (*Hydrangeaceae Saxifragaceae*) are a garden favorite in the Pacific Northwest—and no wonder. They are easy to grow, tolerating a variety of soil conditions. They are relatively pest- and disease-free, and bloom late into the summer. They are an “old-fashioned” flower that has become valued for its intense colors and huge blossoms. The flower is ideal for bridal bouquets, floral arrangements and garden color. The flowers dry easily after cutting (maintaining their color up to four months) and can be used indoors to augment winter floral displays.

There are many varieties of hydrangea that can be grown in our area. In some varieties, soil conditions determine the color of the blooms. In an acid soil (below pH 5.5) blue blossoms are produced. Pink or red colors are produced in neutral and alkaline soils (pH 7.0 and higher). Flowers can be made (or maintained) blue by applying aluminum sulfate to the soil. To maintain pink or red hues, add lime to the soil.

Hydrangeas prefer rich, porous soil. To maintain the shape you want, prune accordingly. If you want large flower clusters, cut out the weaker shoots to decrease the total number of stems. Untouched, most hydrangeas will produce many medium-sized flower clusters.

If you're the kind of gardener for whom too much of a good thing is never enough, you might want to try your hand at propagating your hydrangeas. This is easily done, usually by following one of two methods:

1. Bend a branch that is close to the ground and bury the middle of the stem in the soil. Leave it until next year, by which time you should have a new plant. Separate the new plant from the parent plant.
2. Stem cuttings: Take a cutting from the tip of a healthy stem during late spring to early summer. Remove the lower leaves, leaving two to four leaves at the top of the stem. Cut just below a leaf node at the lower end of the stem. The base of the cutting may be dipped in plant-rooting hormone, if desired. Put the cutting in potting soil and keep moist. Place the cuttings in the shade until new growth appears, then move into filtered light. The cuttings should take about a month to root.



PHOTO CAPTION (filename: hydrangea_photo by Jason Miller.jpg):

This freshly planted 'Frau Kinue' hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) will grow to 5 feet tall and wide in its new home, which provides exactly what the plant prefers: a partly shaded site with no direct afternoon sun. Photo by Jason Miller.

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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.