

Hydrangea Happiness, Hydrangea Hysteria

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How They Form Flowers

Most blue and pink flowering types (& some white) bloom on "old wood." In other words, they form tiny buds the year before in July and August that will become flowers the following year. Some (*Penny Mac, Endless Summer, Twist n' Shout* etc) form flower buds on old *and* new growth, but most blooming is from buds formed the previous year. These are usually *H. macrophylla* & *H. serrata*.

Many of the white flowering hydrangeas (*Annabelle, Quick Fire, Pee Gee, Limelight* etc. plus new pink *Invincibelle Spirit*) form flower buds in the spring on the current season's growth. These are *H. aborescens* and *H. paniculata*.

What does the above mean to you? See Pruning and Blooming below.

Keeping Them Happy

You have to take the "Hydra" part of their name seriously. If a hydrangea dries out during flowering, the blooms go by very quickly. Automatic sprinkler systems may not be watering deeply enough to keep them from wilting. In general, deep soaking less often is better than a little every day, but you might need to supplement in high heat.

The ideal is to plant hydrangeas where they get morning sun and afternoon shade. They tolerate full sun but will need more water and the flowers won't last as long. Hydrangeas won't flower in *deep shade*.

Amend sandy soils with compost/composted manure when planting. Top dress existing plants with 1 to 2 inches compost or composted manure every year. Use 1 to 2 inches of bark mulch on top of that in the spring to control weeds and retain moisture.

In general, fertilize with an organic fertilizer in the spring.

Color

You can alter the color of many, but not all, of the pink and blue flowering types. In acid soils they will be blue, alkaline soils they will be pink. Light blue can be changed to light pink but not to dark blue or deep purple. Dark pink will turn dark blue to purple in acid soils. White (*H. aborescens* and *H. paniculata*) will always be white. Color has nothing to do with planting nickels, rusty nails or pennies. Use sulfur or Aluminum Sulfate to acidify soils, lime to make soil alkaline.

Blooming/Not Blooming

Hydrangeas may not bloom for the following reasons:

1. Too much shade: plant them where they get at least 3 hours of morning sun for the best flowering. Hot sun browns flowers.
2. Pruning: If you cut down the canes of most mopheads and lacecaps (*H. macrophylla* & *H. serrata*) you'll have fewer or no flowers the following summer no matter when you do it. See pruning below.
3. Winter temperatures that go down to zero or below: this zaps the buds, killing the flowers for the next summer.
4. Warm March temps followed by a cold April: If the buds begin to swell early in the spring, and then get hit by cold, April off-ocean winds, that can be cold enough to kill the germ of the flower.

Pruning

Prune pink and blue types in early May by removing *deadwood only*. Since hydrangeas will replace their growth in one summer, *give up on keeping them short*. Prune *H. aborescens* and *H. paniculata* (usually white) in the spring by first removing deadwood, then shaping as desired. Prune climbing & oake leaf hydrangeas right after flowering.

Using Hydrangea in Your Landscape & Home

Some tips for success:

1. Group hydrangeas together, or with other plants that appreciate more water. Don't place hydrangeas next to plants that like it dry.
2. There are many shorter growing varieties for foundation plantings that won't grow above the windows.
3. The smaller varieties of blue/pink *H. macrophylla* & *H. serrata* do very well in containers. In cold areas, over-winter in a garage.
4. Research the expected height a variety will grow, add at least a foot to that, and plant accordingly. Don't try to keep small by pruning.
5. Black spots on hydrangea leaves come from frequent splashing of foliage – alter automatic sprinkler systems if this is a problem. Leaf spot is a cosmetic problem only and does not kill the plants.
6. Dry the flowers after they become "papery" in the late-summer or fall. Blue flowers can't be dried when they are new in summer.
7. For fresh flower bouquets, cut when the flowers are new, always in the early morning, remove the leaves right way and plunge into warm water immediately.