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Hydrangeas

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Hydrangea and creepers cling, still to summer walks. Pink changing to white, beryl to opaline. These gems of days, these clever blossoms, flowers never cease. - Joshua John White, poet.

Hydrangea is a genus of over 70 species that are native to southern and eastern Asia and the Americas. Most are shrubs, but some are small trees and lianas that reach up to 98 feet by growing up trees. They can be either deciduous or evergreen; however, the temperate species are all deciduous.

Hydrangea flowers grow in flowerheads, botanically called corymbs, at the end of stems from early spring to late autumn. Typically, the flowerheads of all hydrangea, regardless of group, contain two types of flowers. Small flowers in the center of the flowerhead are surrounded by larger showy flowers combined with colorful sepals to give the appearance of a single large flower. Plants in wild populations have few to none of the showy flowers while cultivated hydrangeas have been bred to have more of the larger flower types.

Hydrangeas are roughly divided into two groups based on the climate in which they are to be grown.

Group one consist of Panicle and Smooth hydrangeas that are hardy to Zone 3. These plants have the ability to form blooms on both old and new growth (stems formed in the current year). Panicle and Smooth hydrangeas flower each year, need very little special care, and are suitable for growing in the Grand Rapids area.

Panicle hydrangeas, often referred to as the “Hardy Hydrangeas”, have large, cone-shaped flower heads, with PeeGee being one of the most common cultivars.

Smooth hydrangeas or “snowballs” also produce big blooms that resemble large white pom-poms. Examples of this cultivar are ‘Grandiflora’ and ‘Annabelle’. Additionally, there are numerous other cultivars in both the Panicle and Smooth hydrangea groups that are sold by Bloomers.

Group two are plants adapted for Zone 5 or warmer climates and are not normally suitable for growth in Minnesota. However, some references state that these hydrangeas may survive in a local protected area in southern Minnesota. These are Oakleaf hydrangeas, Climbing hydrangeas, and Bigleaf

hydrangeas that is often referred to in literature only by its genus and species names, Hydrangea macrophylla. Bigleaf hydrangeas are of interest because this is the most common hydrangea with about 600 different cultivars that bear either mophead (large blooms) or lacecap (frilly) flower types only on last year's stems. Group two plants do not produce flowers on the current year's growth.

Plant hydrangeas in spring or fall into rich, porous, and somewhat moist soils. If necessary, add compost to enrich a poor soil. Hydrangeas prefer full sun in the morning with some afternoon shade. Dig the transplant hole as deep as the root ball and 2 to 3 times as wide. Set the plant in the hole and fill it half full with water. After the water has drained, fill the rest of the hole with soil and water thoroughly.

For the first year or two after planting, water at least once a week as leaves will wilt if the soil is too dry. If the soil is poor, fertilize once a year in early spring. Choose a fertilizer low in nitrogen, such as a 5-10-10, as high nitrogen encourages leafy growth instead of blooms. In the fall, mulch plants with at least 18 inches of bark, leaves, pine needles, or straw for the first 2 years or so.

If pruning is necessary to encourage more branching, do so either in late winter or spring just as new growth appears. Branches can be trimmed back by as much as 1/3 each year as flower buds in Group one plants do not form until later in the spring.

Color change is determined by the availability of aluminum ions in soil as indicated by soil pH. Generally, color change is often sought but may not always occur in hydrangeas adapted to northern climates but occurs more readily in plants suitable for warmer climates.

The flower color of most hydrangea species grown in northern Minnesota is not greatly affected by changes in soil pH so don't be greatly disappointed if your hydrangeas fail to cooperate. In many cultivars the flowers are white and remain white, regardless of soil pH. However, some cultivars are bred to be blue, red, pink, or purple. In the fall, hydrangea flowers will naturally fade, often to a combination of pink and green. This is simply the aging process and the following year flowers will return to their original color.

If color change is attempted, wait two years for the plant to recover from transplant shock. A soil pH below 7 encourages blue and purple flowering. If the soil pH is less than 5.5, which already a very acidic soil, the only amendment suggested before planting is to mix sphagnum peat moss into the soil at the rate of one to two cubic feet per plant using a fifty-fifty blend of native soil to sphagnum peat.

If the soil pH is greater than 5.5 but less than 7, incorporate elemental sulfur into the top six to eight inches of soil. A suggested rate for sandy soils is about two cups per 100 square feet and for loamy soils about five cups per 100 square feet.

A soil pH above 7 may result in pink or red flowers. PH is raised by adding ground limestone to the soil around the plant. However, too alkaline a soil or a pH above 7.5 will result in poor growth.

Two caveats. First, potting soils or mixes have no aluminum ions and do not influence flower color. Secondly, water hydrangeas with rainwater rather than tap or hard water which tends to alter soil pH.

To dry flowers, harvest the heads when flowers have matured to a papery consistency. Remove leaves from stems and hang them upside down in a warm, dry, dark, airy room. When completely dry, store in a dry location out of direct sunlight.

Bloomers carries a variety of hydrangeas from Annabelle, Bobo, Invincibelle, to bush and tree varieties of Pee Gee and many more.

I see you in the cardinals, they fly free, this is where I see you among blue hydrangeas, - Jason Drury, actor and writer. Happy growing.