

Hydrangeas

by Anne Tofield

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Hydrangeas (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) have been in and out of fashion for years. They are now "in" with good reason: they provide a strong, leafy background and anchor a bed with height and structure. Starting now and continuing on into fall, their mass of color injects a welcome punch in the landscape. And, perhaps best of all, when planted correctly in well-drained, fertile soil, they need minimal care.

As a newcomer to Tallahassee seven years ago, fresh from the temperate gardens of England, and the tropical Far East before that, I thought north Florida gardens a bit tame. They needed a shot of something different. Imagine my chagrin when I discovered the magical jolt from old fashioned, been-around-forever hydrangeas. Intrigued by a neighbor's river of blue tumbling down a slope, I bought a *Hydrangea* 'Blue Wave' and, although it was only a marginal success, I was hooked. Sixteen plants later, there is a ripple, if not yet a river, of blues sparkled with white.

Hydrangeas are large shrubs from three to six feet tall and three to five feet wide. They produce clusters of white, pink or blue flowers, their color depending on the acidic level of the soil. In our acid soil blues are an automatic success. (A tablespoon of aluminum sulfate in a gallon of water intensifies the color). To make a blue flower pink, sprinkle lime and water well. This is tricky as sometimes the result is a splotchy lavender. White flowers, bought that way, stay that way.

Hydrangea macrophylla fall into two groups: mop heads with big round, dense balls of showy, sterile flowers and flat lace caps with an outer circle of showy, sterile flowers surrounding a center of tight, bud-like flowers. Lace caps are more subtle than blatant mop heads, but both have their uses. One delivers an explosion of color and the other elegance, particularly those lace caps with variegated foliage which work wonders in a dark area. Both are fairly sturdy plants though those that bend to the ground in heavy rain may need light staking.

Watering is essential. Hydrangeas are guzzlers, and, if forgotten, show their distress by wilting alarmingly. They will probably perk up once the sun goes down, but will need water for the following day. A good layer of mulch, pulled two inches away from the stem (to prevent rotting), helps to conserve moisture and discourage weeds. Hydrangeas growing in a little shade require less water, too.

Pruning is more complicated. There is no perfect time. As this year's buds form on last summer's wood the best time is to cut back immediately after flowering. You can prune stems of brown, papery flowers, left on for winter interest, in January and February but will have fewer flowers.

A handful of compost or 15-0-15 fertilizer will give a boost if necessary. But go gently: over-fertilization leads to too many leaves and small flowers.

Though hydrangeas tolerate a little sun, most are best in filtered shade. There are no-set-in-

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stone rules however. I have two silvery blue lace caps that glory in morning sun. The should-be-brilliant 'Blue Wave' in textbook shade has its fourth move coming up into filtered sun. My river overflows.

For more information on gardening in our area, visit the University of Florida IFAS website for gardening in Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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