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# Pink or Blue - There's a Hydrangea Right for You

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Are you looking for a plant to add special interest to a partial shady spot in your garden? Well consider the hydrangea. This deciduous shrub has large, showy bold leaves and produces long lasting blossom clusters of light mauve to lavender blue tones. Hydrangeas are very effective in the garden, when planted in mass or as a stand alone specimen.

There's a climbing, peegee, and oakleaf hydrangea, but the garden hydrangea (Hydrangea macrophylla) is the most common. Garden hydrangeas are nicknamed mopheads and lace caps after the shape of their blossoms. The mophead consists of many sterile flowers with conspicuous large petals. The lace caps feature a cluster of fertile flowers (star-shaped and without petals) surrounded by a ring of sterile ones (with petals). Within these groups there are hundreds of named varieties.

An interesting fact about the common garden hydrangea is that a savvy gardener can change its flower color from pink to blue. Now that is anything but common!

The key to the color change is soil pH and the availability of aluminum to plants. Bluest color is produced in strongly acid soils (below pH 5.5) when aluminum in the soil goes into soil solution and becomes available to plants. Pink color is produced in neutral to alkaline soils (pH 7.0 and higher) when aluminum is locked up with other nutrients in the soil and does not go into solution so is unavailable to plants.

To test the pH of your soil, purchase a small kit at the nursery. Soils in our area range in pH from 6.0 to 8.0. So when we plant hydrangeas outside we usually see pink flowers. To keep flowers nice and pink add extra phosphorus to the soil, such as treble super phosphate fertilizer or bone meal.

Gardeners can take a different approach to getting blue flowers, since it is time consuming, difficult and perhaps unwise (most plants like neutral soils) to significantly lower the pH of the garden for a dozen or less hydrangea plants. Aluminum sulfate is available at nurseries and readily mixed in a watering can. When liquid solutions are applied to the soil several weeks ahead of bloom, the aluminum is absorbed by the hydrangea and the flower blooms blue.

If that sounds like too much work, there is one more way to get blue flowered hydrangeas. Plant in pots! Fill containers with soil media for acid loving plants and add extra peat moss. Fertilize with specialty fertilizers for acid loving plants and aluminum sulfate on occasion.

There are some limitations to changing blossom colors. Of course, white hydrangeas cannot be changed to another color. They remain their beautiful "snowy" white. The intensity of the pink or blue can rarely be changed (how strong or pale the color is), because it is generally determined by the specific variety, the health of the plant, and the climate (whether it is too hot, cold or dry or humid).

Pruning garden hydrangeas affects current season blossoms. Flower buds form on old wood. Old wood are stems that have been on the plant for at least nine to ten months before the hydrangea blooms. The buds form on the stems around August through October for the following spring. If these stems are removed or pruned in the fall or winter, the bloom buds for the spring will be removed and there will be little or no bloom the next year.

To prune your hydrangea, first remove all dead wood. After the plant is at least four years old, about 1/3 of the oldest stems can be removed down to the ground each summer. This will revitalize the plant. To reduce the size of the plant, it can be cut back in June or July without harming the next year's bloom.

One problem with hydrangeas is supporting the heavy blooms. The following are a few tricks to use: (1) Plant at least three shrubs together - three to four feet apart. As they mature, they will support one another. (2) Prune sparingly to allow stems to thicken each year becoming stouter and better able to support the other branches and blooms. (3) Put an 18" green wire fence around each plant before it puts out new branches in the spring. Then when the plants leaf out, the wire is completely hidden.

That's a quick primer on hydrangeas. Now you know how to make garden specimens of your hydrangeas.

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