

# HYDRANGEA CARE

## **Planting**

Hydrangeas thrive in a moist, but well-drained soil, in a cool, semi-shady part of the garden. Try to avoid exposed east-facing sites, where cold winds may damage young spring growth, and also avoid dry, sunny spots.

Work plenty of organic matter into the soil prior to planting, and periodically over time. This could be well-rotted leaf mould, garden compost, composted bark, or farmyard manure.

On lighter, sandier soils, feed in early spring with a flowering shrub fertiliser. This should be enough for the season, but should not be necessary on richer soils. Too much feeding can encourage excessive soft, leafy growth, with plants less likely to develop flower buds and more at risk from frost in colder winters.

## **Care**

One of the most interesting quirks of some hydrangeas is the ability of the flowers to change colour. This is not true of all hydrangeas, only the mophead cultivars (*H. macrophylla*).

This colour change is due to the soil pH which affects aluminium availability. Those with blue or pink flowers tend to be blue in acid soil conditions (high available aluminium levels), mauve in acid to neutral soil conditions, and pink in alkaline conditions. To get the best flower colour, choose cultivars that give the best colours for the pH in question.

White flowers, and also green-flowered cultivars, remain white or green regardless of soil pH.

Try to use rainwater to water hydrangeas, since mains hard water can affect the flower colour, turning blue flowers mauve or pink.

Cultivars with blue flowers can be kept blue by growing the plants in acidic soil (pH 4.5-5), or by using hydrangea blueing compounds according to the manufacturer's instructions. These compounds contain aluminium sulphate and are available from most garden centres. If the soil is very alkaline, or if there is any obvious chalk in the soil, this treatment will not work, but can be very effective for container-grown plants.

## **Pruning**

Shrubs like hydrangeas flower from mid to late summer on the previous year's growth. Mophead and lacecap hydrangeas will bloom satisfactorily with little attention, but regular pruning encourages new, vigorous growth that can produce a better display.

The most commonly grown hydrangeas in gardens are lacecap's and mopheads (*Mopheads are identified by their full, roundish heads of large petals; lacecap's have tiny flowers in the centre of the bloom and an outer border of large petals*).

## **Dead Heading**

Dead blooms on mophead hydrangeas can, in mild areas, be removed just after flowering, but it is best to leave them on the plant over winter to provide some frost protection for the tender growth buds below. Remove the dead flower heads in early spring, cutting back to the first strong, healthy pair of buds lower down the stem. Lacecaps are hardier, and the faded flower heads can be cut back after flowering to the second pair of leaves below the head in order to prevent seed developing, which saps energy from the plant.

## **Established plants**

Cut out one or two of the oldest stems at the base to encourage the production of new, replacement growth that will be more floriferous. Poor or neglected plants can be entirely renovated by cutting off all the stems at the base. However, this will remove all the flowers for that summer, and the new stems will not bloom until the following year.

The climbing hydrangea (*H. anomala* subsp. *petiolaris*) should have overlong shoots cut back immediately after flowering. Most flowers appear towards the top of the plant, so try to leave as much of this un-pruned as possible. Established plants will tolerate hard pruning in spring, but extensive cutting back all in one go is likely to reduce flowering for the next couple of summers. To prevent flower loss, stagger drastic pruning over three or four years, reducing the size of the plant gradually.

## **Pruning other hydrangeas**

*Hydrangea serrata* can be pruned in the same way as mophead and lacecap hydrangeas.

*Hydrangea paniculata* and *H. arborescens* are treated differently. Although the only essential work is to remove dead wood in spring, these species flower more prolifically when hard pruned. Each spring, cut back last year's stems to the lowest pair of healthy buds, creating a low framework of branches. This usually results in a pruned framework of no more than 25cm (10in) high but, if more height is required, cut to about 60cm (24in) tall.

Most other hydrangea species, including *H. aspera*, *H. quercifolia*, *H. sargentiana* and *H. villosa*, need only minimal pruning in spring to remove dead and over-long stems.

## **Problems**

If there is any frost damage in spring, prune back damaged shoots to just above the first undamaged pair of buds on live, healthy wood. Also remove any weak, straggly stems. In particular, cut out any stems that trail onto the ground.