

Grow Great Hydrangeas for summer colour

Hydrangeas are native to North and South America and East Asia. They range from small shrubs to climbers. For example one of the most interesting is *Hydrangea Quercifolia* (oak leaf hydrangea) with creamy-white flowers and deep red leaves in autumn. The common garden hydrangea is a form of *Hydrangea macrophylla*, known as 'Otaksa', that grows wild on the east coast of Japan.

There are mainly two types grown, the *hortensia* and the *lacecap*. The *hortensia* flowers are mop-headed mostly of sterile ray florets. The *lacecap* is flat-topped consisting of small fertile flowers in the centre and large ray florets in an outer ring. Within these groups there are also singles, doubles, semi-doubles and frilled petals. A wonderful variety to choose from.

Position Hydrangeas can either be grown in the ground or in pots. They need plenty of light but protection from the direct heat from summer sun which may burn the flowers—especially hot summer sun and wind. On the other hand poor flowering can be the result of insufficient light.

Soil Most soils are suitable, but they must be well-drained. In pots use premium grade potting mix.

Watering During the growing season the soil must never be allowed to dry out. Mulching in spring with a combination of cow manure covered with lucerne hay or Canberra Organic Mulch from Canberra Sand and Gravel. Watering with drip irrigation is recommended.

Feeding Apply regular applications of a high potassium plant nutrient to encourage flowering until March. Newly planted hydrangeas will benefit using **Maxicrop Seaweed Plant Nutrient** to encourage strong root development. **Multicrop EcoFish** is another excellent natural organic fertilizer.

Pruning Remove spent flower heads progressively. The flowering time is from early summer until autumn. By March most of the flowering is finished, an ideal time to remove spent flower heads and any dead and old wood and old flowering stems. This will stimulate new growth from the base of the plant. If more flowers are required, cut back the unflowered stems to three to five leaf nodes from the base of the plant in late winter/early spring.

Colouring Flower colour (with the exception of the pure whites and some reds) is governed by the concentration of aluminium in the soil, related to the *pH* level. Acid soils produce blue flowers whereas alkaline soils produce pink flowers. You can buy chemicals to change the colour from your local garden centre. These chemicals are best applied every six weeks from July to December as specified by the manufacturer. Changing colour is much easier with potted hydrangeas.

Pests and Diseases Hydrangeas are not prone to any pest problems when grown under ideal conditions. In shaded, moist sites with poor air circulation powdery mildew may occur. Use Pyrethrum to kill aphids if they attack the new shoots or **Multicrop EcoPest**, an organic pesticide.

Cedric D. Bryant *'Designing Gardens with Passion'*
Tel: 02 6241 8752 Internet: www.cedricbryant.com

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