

Hydrangeas- Simplified!

-Class taught by Travis Morcha-

Hydrangeas, Simplified! - This is a common problem many Midwest gardeners tend to have in our area. From correct cultivar selection for your needs, to selection the proper site for your new hydrangea, using the proper soil amendments, correct fertilizer, and finally, when do you prune! There's a lot to cover, so let's get started!

Blossom Types- The main types of blossoms are panicle, mophead, and lace cap. Depending on your site, we'll tell you what variety will work best for you!

Choose your Hydrangea!

Believe it or not, there is a hydrangea that is perfect for your particular site that you have in mind! With today's breeding programs, there has been a massive influx of new hydrangea cultivars! Here at Colonial, we have taken the guesswork out and only grow and produce the best new selections and continue to produce the venerable varieties that we remember from yesteryear! We're going to look at the main varieties, some of the best cultivars, and explain the best site for each of them!

Hydrangea paniculata- The Panicle Hydrangea are named after the cone shaped blossom and have an impressive range of sizes. Ranging from as small as 3'x3' all the way up nearly dwarf tree like size of 15' or more! These are the easiest hydrangea to cultivate in your landscape, as their needs are minimal for amazing bloom production! Unlike many hydrangeas, they can actually take more sun than their counterparts, and can thrive in full sun if their watering needs are met! Some amazing cultivars include the long-celebrated Limelight series, Quickfire series, the Sundae series, and some great older cultivars like Tardiva and PeeGee.

Hydrangea arborescens- The Smooth Hydrangea, wild hydrangea or sheepflower, is actually a Missouri native! While we do sometimes have the native, breeding programs have put forth a valiant effort to increase vigor, disease resistance and bloom size. Ranging from a diminutive 2'x2', up to a respectable 5-6'x5-6' and a few in between, they can fill just about any location. Word of warning, these little gems absolutely require shade in the afternoon, and that is not a polite suggestion. Like the woodlands they come from, they love moist, well-draining sandy loam. There are so many great cultivars here, but I'm just going to name my favorites. For

white blooming cultivars, go with Annabelle, Incrediball, or Wee White. For pink blooming cultivars, go with Invincibelle Spirit 2, Mini Mauvette, or Incrediball Blush!

Hydrangea macrophylla- The Bigleaf Hydrangea is the most easily recognized hydrangea, hands down! It is also the variety that is the most popular, albeit the most finicky variety to grow well here in the Midwest! The blossoms are large mopheads that come in a staggering array of colors! Native to Japan, this gem has been adopted and accepted with loving arms by any country that can grow it! Growing between 2'x2' all the way up to 6'x6' and all sizes in between, there is bound to be one to fit your site! Site selection for this variety is of **UTMOST IMPORTANCE**, as it requires some sun to bloom consistently well, but must be kept out of harsh afternoon sun. This Nurseryman recommends an East exposure and being in shade by Noon-1pm. Please heed my advice and you **WILL** have success! There are hundreds of different selections available, but my recommendations are the Cityline Series, Let's Dance Series, Wee Bit Giddy, and just because I have found memories of it, the venerable Nikko Blue.

Hydrangea anomala subsp. petolaris- The Climbing Hydrangea is one of the most beautiful flowering vines! It will take time to grow to a point where it consistently blooms well, so plant one this year! Growing upwards of 40', when in bloom, a mature plant will stop you in your tracks! Slow growing and rugged, the plant has deep green leaves, white lacecap blossoms, and very effective, exfoliating bark during the winter months. It will need a sturdy structure or wall to grab onto and will adhere itself to brick or masonry with its clinging rootlets. While it **CAN** take a little more sun, I have found a dappled sun location, or East exposure to be the best for cultivation. There are a few cultivars out there, Firefly (a yellow/green variegated form) Miranda (another variegated form) and Silver Lining (white/green variegation) but in my opinion, standard petolaris still reigns supreme.

Hydrangea quercifolia- The Oakleaf Hydrangea is one of the best blooming landscape plants in my personal lexicon. Native to Southeast United States but fits in well here in the Midwest. They have a huge range of plant sizes, ranging from 3'x3' all the way up to 10'-12' tall and wide! There is literally one that will fit anywhere, and you certainly should plant at least 1! The plant has large, oak leaf shaped foliage, hence its name. The blossoms are large white panicle shaped and often change to a beautiful blush pink to almost red. The fall color is nothing short of glorious, changing to a bright red orange to maroon, depending on cultivar. The stems are exfoliating as well, adding lovely Wintertime interest! Site placement for this variety is up for debate and could take as little as 3 hours up to all day long is properly irrigated. I've found that an Eastern exposure works the best. As far as cultivars are concerned, you **CANNOT MAKE A BAD CHOICE!** For smaller types, go with Sikes Dwarf, Ruby Slippers or Pee

Wee. The Alice is always a wonderful choice if you have the space. Snow Queen, Jet Stream, The Gatsby Series...I could go on.

Hydrangea serrata- The Mountain Hydrangea is a beauty from the mountains of Japan and known to the Japanese as Tea of Heaven. Underutilized and usually wrongly cultivated by home gardeners, this plant should have an honorable mention here. Growing between 2'-4' tall and wide, it makes a great addition to an East facing or shade garden. The blossoms are a lace cap type, ranging from blue, pink, purples and white. There are some noteworthy selections, The Cape Series, Tuff Stuff Series, and older cultivars like Blue Billow, Blue Bird and the always fabulous Preziosa!

Site preparation

While there are many things that you can save money on, it should never be quality amendments for a new plants home! All hydrangeas prefer to have moist, but well-draining soil. Unfortunately, here in Kansas City, we are plagued with clay soil! Using a blend of 50% native soil to 50% PlantRight compost is typically standard practice. If your soil is very compacted, or very thick clay, I will change my soil prep slightly. You may find that doing a blend of one third quality topsoil, one third PlantRight compost, and one third of the native clay might be beneficial for better drainage. As always, dig your hole twice the diameter of your root mass, and 80% of the depth, and use the blends listed above for your needs. A dressing of bark fines, mulch, or pine straw is beneficial for water retention. No rubber mulch or stone for a top dressing for hydrangeas, please!

Soil Ph can affect your colors!

The Bigleaf Hydrangeas and Mountain Hydrangeas are Ph sensitive! Meaning you can change the colors of the blossoms depending on the Ph of your soil! They are literally a living botanically active Litmus tester! For pink blossoms, the soil should be alkaline, meaning a higher Ph of 7 or above. For blue blossoms, the soil should be a Ph of 6 or lower.

- To raise the Ph levels in your soil, add horticultural lime twice a year until correct Ph is achieved, then as needed to maintain color and Ph
- To drop the Ph levels in your soil, add soil sulfur or aluminum sulfate twice a year until correct Ph is achieved, then as needed to maintain color and Ph

- Neutral soil will have purplish hues! Try planting one of these beauties and see what occurs naturally!

Proper pruning for Your Hydrangea!

Unfortunately, there is a host of misinformation regarding proper pruning of Hydrangea, and we're going to give you the correct information necessary for you to have success! All hydrangeas have different needs regarding pruning, but I got you covered! Let's sharpen our pruners and get to it!

- **Oakleaf Hydrangeas**- Oakleaf hydrangeas come in so many different sizes, it's best to just pick the right size according to your specific desired height. If you need to control the height of one, it's best to wait until the plant finishes its bloom cycle for the year. I do not recommend an overall shearing; the plant is best left to grow in its natural shape!
- **Bigleaf Hydrangeas**- Let the debate begin! It was long thought (incorrectly) that you needed to cut your Bigleaf back to the ground every Fall. Please do not do this! They are old wood bloomers, meaning they require the wood from the previous year to create a bloom! In mid-Spring, when your plant starts to wake up, it will produce copious amounts of new growth at the crown level, and some along the stems. Judiciously and lightly prune the dead tips of the branches off.
- **Panicle Hydrangeas**- Panicle hydrangeas are one of the easiest hydrangeas to cultivate! They are also one of the easiest to prune! Panicles are new wood bloomers, meaning that they bloom on this year's new growth. In mid-Spring, before the new growth begins, I recommend pruning the plant back by about one third of the overall height of the plant. You can also remove stems that are larger than a half dollar in diameter to increase overall plant vigor. For Tree Formed panicle hydrangea, prune the canopy to a ball that is roughly 18"-24" inch spread, it will create stronger branches, and a more prolific bloom cycle!
- **Smooth Hydrangeas**- These are easy to cultivate, and easy to prune! These are new wood bloomers as well, so it's very simple. In mid-Spring, prune plants to shape before new growth occurs. Prune out older, less vigorous branches as the years go on
- **Climbing Hydrangeas**- Almost no pruning is required for the beauties! If needed, lightly prune to shape after the bloom cycle has concluded.
- **Mountain Hydrangeas**- See Bigleaf Hydrangeas pruning guide

Fertilizing and Watering

Hydrangeas are heavy bloomers and require a steady supply of nutrients for a strong plant and consistent blooming. I recommend a good, well-balanced fertilizer. There's two that I have used for many years and have had wonderful success with!

- **Espoma Holly-Tone**- This is a slow-release organic fertilizer that is Omri Certified and packed with good organic matter like chicken manure, cottonseed meal, and rock phosphate. It also has many different varieties of beneficial biological organisms that helps with nutrient absorption, and helps combat fungal diseases
- **Jacks Multi-Cote Time Release**- This is a great long-term fertilizer that will feed for up to 6 months! I like this fertilizer because you can feed it twice a year, and you're done! Couldn't be easier!

Watering- Hydrangeas like the equivalent of 1"-2" of rainfall a week. Setting a hose with a stream of water the size of a #2 pencil twice a week for about 20 minutes each time is a good rule of thumb. You may have to adjust according to weather and plant type and age. If you ever have questions, please just ask your favorite Colonial Gardens employee!

Mulching

Mulching is paramount for your plant's success! Not only does it give your landscape a more finished and classier look, but it also has a host of benefits! No rubber mulch or stone around hydrangeas!

- Aids in moisture retention in the soil, and helps conserve moisture
- Helps maintain soil temperature, keeping the roots cooler in the Summer, and Warmer in the Winter
- It breaks down into a wonderful additive to your soil, helping with soil and plant health

On Bigleaf and Mountain hydrangeas, extra mulch for Winter protection is very beneficial! Putting a few extra inches of mulch around these plants for Winter helps keep the stems and roots warmer, ensuring that you have healthy, strong stems for the next years bloom cycle!

In Closing

Today we have covered a lot of ground and have learned a lot about one of my favorite landscape plants. At this point we should all be versed in the following

- Choosing the correct hydrangea for your needs
- Being proficient in the proper placement and site for your hydrangea
- The proper pruning techniques for your hydrangea
- The proper fertilizers for your hydrangea
- The importance of mulch for your hydrangea
- Proper watering techniques

At this time, if anyone has any questions, please ask away!

Thank you for joining us today at Colonial Gardens, and please reach out to me with any questions, and please let me know what other subject matter you would like to learn about in future classes!