

Way to Grow in Orinda

Do's and Don'ts For Your Best Hydrangeas

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Of all the gardening questions we're asked, questions about pruning and proper care of landscape plants far outnumber the rest. This article on hydrangeas is the second in our series of plant-care articles written to provide you with the knowledge you need to get the most from your landscape plants. Our first plant care article ran in February's *Orinda News* and was titled *Rose Care Tips and Tricks*. If you missed it, you can find a copy online at www.orindaassociation.org/online-edition.htm.

Unfortunately few homes come with a landscape manual and most maintenance companies train their employees only on how to mow, blow and go. Some landscape maintenance employees have limited knowledge of pruning and fertilizing but it's often very general and not species specific. For this reason, it's important that homeowners who care about the investment in their garden have some basic knowledge of how to care for their plants.

We decided to write about hydrangeas care because they're one of the plants we're asked about frequently and because we're coming up on the months when pruning usually occurs. The No. 1 question or complaint we hear about hydrangeas is "they aren't blooming," or "what can I do to increase their blooms?" The answer lies almost entirely within the nuance of proper pruning.

There's lots of conflicting advice out there about when and how to prune your hydrangeas. Our garden has 15 varieties of hydrangeas, and we've been testing the timing and techniques of pruning them for the past 10 years. Through this experimentation, we can provide advice to help cut through the confusion.

The most familiar types of hydrangeas are the Oakleaf, Smooth and Tree Hydrangeas (those with white or pale green flowers) and the Bigleaf hydrangeas, which include Mophead, and Lace Caps varieties (these come in many shades of blue, pink, purple and wine).

The white or pale green flowering va-

rieties are easy to prune because these hydrangeas bloom on new wood and they can be cut back by as much as a two thirds in the winter or early spring. In our Orinda climate, you can trim back again after the first flowers fade to get another run of blooms in the late summer through fall. This pruning schedule keeps our pale flowering hydrangeas in continuous bloom from June through November.

Bigleafs such as the Mopheads and Lace Caps all bloom on old wood, or last year's growth, hence the lack of early blooms when they are cut back heavily in the fall. If you have any of these bright flowering hydrangea varieties in your garden, be sure you stop yourself or your maintenance crew from the typical, uneducated practice of pruning all hydrangeas back by two thirds or more when they begin to lose their leaves. This practice, when used on these "old wood blooming" hydrangeas cuts off most of next year's blooms, especially the spring blooms. If you were to cut open the little buds at the end of these hydrangeas branches and look at them with a magnifying glass, you would see something resembling a small head of broccoli. These are next spring and summer blooms so don't cut them all off in the fall.

In Orinda, it is best to wait to prune your deeply colored hydrangeas until the new growth greens up nicely in the spring. Prune off the obvious dead branch tips and there should be nice big fat buds visible on the healthy green growth below.

Not all of these big fat buds will produce flowers. When they open, some will have flower buds, others will reveal themselves to be non-flowering vegetative buds. If the flowering ones aren't high enough on the plant when the buds begin to open, remove the non-blooming wood above and around them to improve the display of your blooms. When these spring or summer flowers begin to fade, you can then cut the plant back safely, up to a quarter of its total size, without risking its health or the following year's blooms. If the plant is getting too large for its spot, the best time to shape or cut it back is also after its first spring bloom.

You might even want to consider cutting off the first run of flowers while they're nice and fresh. Enjoy these spring blooms in your home as a cut flower, (tip: crush the stem ends of your cut hydrangeas and they will last much longer in a vase) then feed the plants and wait for a second run of blooms to appear. We leave the last run of summer blooms on our bigleaf hydrangeas to protect the plant through the winter while the dried flower heads add some winter interest to our garden.

It's important to note that most hydrangeas don't need pruning at all. That is, if you have ample space for very large plants. When provided with plenty of room to grow, hydrangeas can become huge magnificent shrubs like those seen in Golden Gate Park. Most of us, however,



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Hydrangeas come in many colors that often depend upon the type of soil they are planted in. Above is a Pink Mophead.

don't have that much space.

Since hydrangeas are often sold in nurseries, garden centers, and even supermarkets when they are in full bloom they frequently are planted in the wrong spot because people just don't realize that they will get much, much bigger. Most varieties of hydrangeas are not dwarfs and should be given plenty of room to grow. Fortunately, even the biggest specimen is easy to transplant, especially when dormant.

Colored blooming hydrangeas are unique in the plant world in that you can manipulate the color and depth of color of their blooms. A neutral to alkaline soil will produce pink flowers while a more acidic soil will produce blue blooms. Studies have shown that the amount of aluminum in the soil is actually more important in determining the color of the bloom, but aluminum absorption into the plant is blocked by alkaline soils. Most soil in Orinda is neutral or slightly acidic with a small amount of aluminum, leading most old-fashioned Mopheads in our area to naturally bloom blue. Therefore it is not uncommon to see a pink hydrangea in our neighborhood slowly turn to blue.

To keep them pink or change their color to pink can be difficult. Your best bet is to try adding lime around the drip line of your shrub several times a year and use a high phosphorus fertilizer. This becomes tedious after a couple of years so science has come up with a better alternative. The "always pink" hydrangeas are bred to block the plant's ability to take up aluminum and keeps them from getting the blues. Try Forever Pink for a darker pink bloom, or for a dwarf variety try Pink 'n Pretty or the very Dwarf Pia.

Hydrangeas can be picky about their location. They're one of those plants that appreciates living on the edge of sun and shade. Hydrangeas prefer morning sun and afternoon shade. The white and light green varieties can handle more sun than those with blue, pink or wine-colored blooms.

Some of our Annabelle (light green) hydrangeas are in full sun and are always in bloom. No hydrangea however, will thrive or flower in heavy shade, nor do they tolerate extremely hot temperatures well. When the thermometer reaches the 90- to 100-degree range, give your hydrangeas some afternoon watering (just a sprinkling) to increase their humidity level. Some of our favorite hydrangeas include hydrangea paniculata; Limelight with lime green to

white cone flowers; Unique, with giant white cone flowers on 4- to 6-foot stems (all Hyd Pans.); Pink Diamond, much like Unique but with a pink cast to the blooms (Hyd. Arborescens); White Dome, a smooth hydrangea with huge 4- to 9-inch blooms (Hyd. Quercifolia); Snow Queen, an Oakleaf hydrangea that lives up to its name with cone-shaped white blooms and 12-inch wide oak-shaped leaves that turn a gorgeous burgundy fall color. Several of these leaves are displayed under our Cinderella pumpkin fall flower arrangement every year on our Thanksgiving table. This favorite has the added bonus of peeling cinnamon colored bark. There is also a dwarf variety available called Spikes Dwarf.

Among our top picks for blue bloomers are hydrangea macrophylla Bluewave, which has huge 8- to 10-inch true, blue blooms held high above its foliage which is tightly packed with light blue and white blooms. Nigra' blooms with a blue-mauve flower held by a striking blue/black stem. (All Hyd. macs.) Lemon Wave is the only lace cap type hydrangea we grow, and we grow it mostly for its beautiful yellow and green foliage. This is a great choice to brighten up a shady border.

For more information on caring for your hydrangeas or to suggest a topic for a future "Way to Grow" article email us at GardenLights@comcast.net.