



SHOWSTOPPERS

FOR DRAMATIC BLOOMS WITH MINIMAL CARE, PLANT HYDRANGEAS IN YOUR GARDEN

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZELENKA NURSERY

Years ago, when I was new to gardening, I staked, deadheaded, fertilized, and endlessly cajoled my shade-loving perennials, believing that with all this extra effort, they would somehow understand how desperately I wanted them to look their best during the fleeting weeks of summer so I could proudly show them off during garden tour season.

Some plants thrived, retaining their prime position in my compact city plot. But I eventually replaced many poor performers with colorful and dramatic hydrangeas. This hearty deciduous flowering shrub is now one of my all-time favorites, providing a non-stop show of bloom and garden structure that extends from early spring well into the first frost of autumn.

Planted in a partially shady location, judiciously pruned in the fall, and lightly fertilized in the spring, hydrangeas truly qualify as the “low-maintenance” alternative many gardeners are seeking today.

Some Top Performers

There are many delightful varieties from which to choose, depending on your space availability. Some get up to eight feet tall and wide, while others are quite compact at only three feet at mature height and width. Here are a few of my favorites:

Mopheads (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) are the most popular hydrangeas grown in home gardens. Most Mopheads are blue or pink, and a few varieties are white. ‘Oregon Pride’ has robust black stems and enormous blooms—nearly ten inches across—that tend toward a rich purple. This spectacular shrub is for a large space.

In a more compact location, a good choice is ‘Preziosa’, with better winter heartiness than most Mopheads and blossoms that begin white, changing to pink or reddish-purple.

Mature Lacecap Hydrangeas (*Hydrangea macrophylla normalis*) can be magnificent. Looser and more graceful than the showier Mopheads, they snuggle naturally into woody locations or beneath trees like dogwoods and other shrubs, or become the effective single focal point of a front yard.

The Oakleaf hydrangea is a dramatic, white-blooming shrub with four seasons of interest and one of the few hydrangeas native to the United States. It blooms best in areas where

summers are somewhat hot, but it is winter hardy farther north than the Mophead. A tremendous advantage of the Oakleaf is that it does well in drier locations. While Mopheads struggle in sandy soil without consistent water, the Oakleaf thrives with very little attention.

If your weather is too cold to support pink and blue hydrangeas or if your landscape doesn’t have much shade, consider one of the many types of the Pan-



iculata hydrangeas, of which the PeeGee (‘Grandiflora’) is perhaps best known. They grow and bloom in a wide variety of climates and are hardy to Zone 3. Paniculatas often get very large; eight to ten feet tall and wide is not unusual. Unlike Mopheads, they need several hours of sun to do well. Their cone-shaped blooms generally go from white to pink as they age, and they take well to pruning.

Pruning can be tricky with most plants, which bloom only on “old” wood of the previous year, making timing and method important. Visit www.hydrangeashydrangeas.com for detailed pruning instructions.

Michigan-based Zelenka Nursery’s Forever & Ever series of hydrangeas blooms repeatedly on new wood

each year, making them perfectly suited to northern gardens. Visit www.foreverhydrangea.com to see varieties and find a nursery retailer.

The Chameleon Effect

Adding dolomitic lime to raise your soil’s pH can often change the flower’s hue from blue to pink. To reverse that effect, add aluminum sulfate. When a plant is moved in the garden, it may change color on its own, so don’t be surprised if you have several color blooms on one shrub the year after you transplant it.

Another method for lowering your soil’s pH is to add organic matter. Use discarded coffee grounds, fruit and vegetable peels, grass clippings, and other items you normally throw in the compost bin.

Perhaps the best idea, though, if you are determined to alter the color of your hydrangeas’ blooms, is to grow the plants in large terra cotta pots, where it’s easier to control the soil’s pH than in the garden environment.

Pink, blue, red, pure white, or peppermint stripe—it’s up to you. These showstopping plants are sure to become the backbone of your garden, for many bloom-filled seasons to come. ■