

Let's Get Growing

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The Resplendent Hydrangea

Hydrangea is a deciduous woody ornamental shrub known for its showy clusters of flowers. The most common types used in landscapes are *Hydrangea macrophylla*, also known as the mophead, or bigleaf, hydrangea, and a varietal of the bigleaf known as lacecap hydrangea. A less common type, *Hydrangea quercifolia*, or Oakleaf hydrangea, has leaves shaped like oak leaves and will turn red to purple in the fall.

All types of hydrangea should be planted in well-drained, fertile soil that has adequate amounts of organic matter. To get the most abundant blooms, plant them in full sun. If that is not an option, 3-4 hours of morning sun and afternoon shade will suffice. Too much shade will reduce or eliminate flowering. Oakleaf hydrangea does well in full sun or partial shade, but will have more colorful foliage if it receives more sun.

Hydrangea require 1" of water per week during normal conditions and 2" per week during hot, dry weather. Do not water the foliage itself if possible to minimize leaf spot disease.

A high in nitrogen slow-release fertilizer can be applied in late spring, around Mother's Day. In mid-summer, around the 4th of July, you might consider a bloom booster. Most hydrangea do well in a slightly acidic soil, (pH 4.0-5.0 range) which will give you blue blossoms. In order to get pink blossoms, the soil pH must be raised to 6.0-7.0. A soil test will tell you if you are dealing with acidic or alkaline conditions.

One of the most common problems with hydrangea is the failure to produce blooms. This is most often related to frost injury or pruning mistakes. Buds won't survive an April frost. For winter protection, cover the lower part of the plant with mulch and leaves. When pruning, count up three buds, then cut back to just above a set of leaves. Oakleaf hydrangea requires little, if any, pruning.

To preserve and dry the flowers, the most important factor is the proper timing of harvest. It's best to allow the blooms to dry partially on the plant, which means waiting until August through October before picking. After cutting the blooms, strip off the leaves and put them in a vase to dry. There is no need to hang them upside down unless the stems are thin and weak.

To propagate your hydrangea, dig them up when they are dormant, getting as much of the root ball as possible. Divide and water thoroughly and regularly. You can also try ground layering which consists of burying one of the lower branches that is still attached to the mother plant. If you decide to try layering, make sure you remove the leaves from the part of the branch that will be buried, scrape off a small amount of bark on the underside of the branch, and place it into a trench about 2" deep. Also, make sure that there is at least one leaf node in the buried section since this is where roots develop best.