2020 is the Year of the Hydrangea

Hydrangeas are one of the most sought-after shrubs in North America! Known for their nostalgia as well as their modern design appeal, hydrangeas are a perfect fit in the landscape, a container garden or used as cut flowers. When choosing a hydrangea (there are more than 20 species!), keep in mind these things: your growing hardiness zone, available space (they can get quite big!), soil makeup, moisture levels and amount of sunlight received per day.

Common Hydrangea Types

**Bigleaf** (*Hydrangea macrophylla*)

This is the most common type, featuring the classic mophead bloom (also known as lacecap) is reminiscent of Cape Cod’s signature plant. With blooms of blue, pink, purple, and more, these classic hydrangea flowers bring color to areas with morning sun, some afternoon shade and moist, well-drained soil. Avoid planting Bigleaf hydrangea on hot, dry, exposed sites. Well-known varieties include Endless Summer® (which includes Bloomstruck® and Summer Crush®), Nikko Blue, Cityline® Series, Seaside Serenade® Series and L.A. Dreamin®.

**Smooth** (*Hydrangea arborescens*)

With a big white (or sometimes pink) pompom bloom, these native hydrangeas are sometimes called ‘Annabelle,’ which is one of the most popular cultivar names. Perfect for full sun or dappled shade (in hotter climates) locations. Well known varieties include Incrediball®, Invincibelle® Spirit II and Invincibelle Limetta®, and Seaside Serenade® Bar Harbor.

**Panicle** (*Hydrangea paniculate*)

These types have gorgeous cone-shaped blooms that emerge white in mid-summer and age to various shades of lime, parchment, pink and red as fall nights cool down. They are some of the most cold hardy, many will survive up to zone 3, making this the perfect choice for colder climates. Panicle hydrangea's upright form means it can be pruned into a tree form. Well known varieties include Vanilla Strawberry™, Limelight, Pinky Winky®, Berry White™ and Quick Fire®.

**Oakleaf** (*Hydrangea quercifolia*)

Aptly named, this hydrangea is accented by leaves that resemble an oak tree. One of the earliest blooming species of hydrangea, the incredible foliage also gets amazing fall color. Native to North America, this woodland species is well adapted to the American landscape. In northern or cooler climates, oakleaf hydrangeas do well in full sun to light shade but in southern or warmer climates, some afternoon sun protection is advised. They will grow best in rich, well-drained, slightly acidic soils. Well known varieties include Jetstream™, Gatsby Series, Snowflake and Alice.
Caring For Your Hydrangeas

Pruning depends on the species. Bigleaf requires very little pruning. They bloom on growth from current and previous years, thus too much pruning removes potential blooms. The Smooth type blooms on "new wood" so they should be pruned in late winter or early spring. Pruning encourages new growth, which produces flowers. Panicle also blooms on "new wood" so they should be pruned in late winter or early spring to the ground, or leave the stems 1-3 feet tall for taller plants. The Oakleaf type blooms on previous season’s growth so prune right after flowering.

Pink or Blue Flowers?

One of the most common questions about hydrangeas is how to get blue flowers. You can change a pink hydrangea flower to blue by changing your soil’s pH. (You cannot change the color white or green flowered varieties). Only two hydrangea types undergo significant color changes depending on the soil: Bigleaf and the less common Mountain hydrangeas. To get blue flowers, there must be aluminum (which is present in most soils) in the soil. In acid to neutral soils this isn't a problem. But in alkaline soils, the roots can't take up the aluminum and the flowers will be pink. Do a soil test to find out what you have. If your soil is acid to neutral, and your flowers are pink but you’d like blue, apply some granular aluminum sulfate, sulfur or iron sulfate to acidify the soil. If your soil is alkaline, you can try to acidify it by working in lots of organic material and adding elemental sulfur gradually over several years.

Ask a local expert for advice on what works best in your area. Always follow package directions carefully as it may take several months or a season for it to work.

Enjoy!

Hydrangeas can be used in so many ways in your garden, from a focal point to establishing a border and filling the foundation around your house. And they don’t just have to be planted in the landscape anymore either. Many hydrangeas, especially the newer varieties, are more compact and do incredibly well in a decorative pot. And don't forget to cut some blooms for an indoor flower arrangement. If you’re looking for inspiration for how to use hydrangeas visit our website as shown below.

For more varieties, visit ngb.org

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