

HYDRANGEA CULTURE & CARE

LOCATION Locate your hydrangea where it will receive morning sun and shelter from hot afternoon sun. Avoid dry windy sites, as their large, soft leaves lose water quickly, especially on hot, windy days, causing the foliage to wilt. Hydrangea will not perform well in heavy shade, such as under an oak tree. The blooms will be sparse and will not develop fully. Be sure to place the hydrangea in an area where it can get plenty of moisture!

WATER / FERTILIZER Hydrangeas like water (The root word "hydra" is actually the Greek word for water). The leaves will begin to droop quickly if the soil is too dry. Supplemental moisture is especially important the first year or two, and is a good idea during the hot summer months. Hydrangeas grow best if they are fertilized regularly. We recommend applying a slow release, balanced fertilizer once or twice a year. Both applications should be in the summer.

VARIABLE FLOWER COLOR Hydrangea macrophylla is the litmus test plant of the garden. They generally prefer a slightly acidic soil, more so if you want blue blooms. The color change from blues to reds is actually caused by the amount of *available aluminum* in the soil. Since aluminum availability strongly depends on soil pH, it is generally assumed that pH alone is the determining factor of flower color. Generally, the aluminum is already in the soil and will become available once the soil pH is low enough to unlock it. A pH between 5.0-5.5 (6.0 *maybe*) will allow enough aluminum to turn flowers blue, the lower the pH the bluer the color. A pH of around 6.8 (no higher usually, as the plant won't like it) is perfect if you want nice pink-red blooms. Plant genetics also plays a big role in just how far you can stretch those color changes, as the different varieties tend to lean one way or another on the color spectrum. The lesson here is not to buy 'Red Star' or something similar if you want a vibrant blue – you just can't stretch the color that far and will usually end up with more of a purple (can be nice) or sickly mauve color (not so nice). To supplement the fertilizer and increase the acidity of your soil you can use egg shells, coffee grounds, or ground up orange or grapefruit peels. Rhody/Azalea fertilizers tend to make the soil more acidic also. Most methods of lowering soil pH take some time, but there is one quick (yet potentially hazardous) method that you can use. Aluminum sulfate will change bloom colors rapidly, but can severely burn or kill a plant if applied too heavily. We are talking maybe a cup for a big plant, then see what happens before adding more. Again, we need to stress that heavy applications can be toxic and cause major harm to the plant.

STRESS / FUNGUS / INSECTS Hydrangeas will usually be the first plant to start wilting when it gets dry. Drooping, yellowing, or malformed/shriveled leaves are often signs that the plant is just not getting the level of water it desires. If you detect black spotting or brown/gray coloration in the leaves, you may be experiencing a fungus problem. This can come from poor air circulation around the plant or sometimes uneven watering. Try thinning the plant a bit if it is old and overgrown or trim back vegetation around the plant to try and encourage better air circulation. Application of a fungicide may be necessary to combat this problem if it is chronic. If you find evidence of leaves being eaten, you should try and determine what type of critter is responsible so that you can treat accordingly. Slugs and caterpillars are two of the worst offenders, but other insects can also cause problems at times. Remember that not all leaf damage is caused by insects; fungus or mechanical damage is often misinterpreted as the work of a bug. If you are not sure how to treat your problem, please ask a sales associate.

STEMS / PRUNING Pruning techniques vary according to the species of hydrangea, please refer to the Hydrangea Varieties handout for specific information. Two concepts that run through the whole group concern dead-heading and thinning. Once a stem blooms, the dead flower should be removed. Generally that means pruning that stem with flower back by 1/3. Hydrangeas also benefit from occasional thinning by removing older growth.