

HOME-GARDEN

Colorful hydrangeas are enchanting garden gems

Grace Elton Special to the Telegram & Gazette USA TODAY NETWORK

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There are few shrubs that make me feel the way that hydrangeas do. From the pillowy flower heads of bigleaf hydrangeas to the fall color of oakleaf hydrangeas, the whole genus makes me swoon. If you find yourself equally enchanted by these garden gems, here are a few tips to help you choose the right hydrangea and keep it thriving.

Dig Into Flower Color

Did you know the colorful flower parts of hydrangeas are not true petals? They are sepals, the tougher vegetative parts of a flower that protect the flower bud. Bigleaf hydrangeas (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) are known as nature's litmus paper, indicating soil pH by their sepal color. In acidic soil (lower pH) aluminum becomes soluble, allowing the plant to absorb it. More aluminum absorbed results in blue flowers. In basic soil (higher pH), flowers remain red or pink. Gardeners sometimes try to achieve their desired color by manipulating soil pH, but I usually only amend soil to address nutrient deficiencies and enjoy allowing nature to determine the flower color. Last summer, as many will remember, was a great year for blue hydrangeas.

Explore Flower Shapes and Forms

Perhaps the most familiar type of hydrangea is bigleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) with its large, round, serrated leaves. Bigleaf hydrangeas have multiple forms of inflorescence, or flower heads. Mophead hydrangeas have big,

round flower heads with flowers all the same size and shape. Lacecap hydrangeas have a ring of larger flowers that look like those of mophead hydrangeas but also contain a flat inner circle of much smaller and less showy flowers. Bigleaf hydrangeas grow best in part shade.

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Mountain hydrangea (*Hydrangea serrata*) looks very similar to bigleaf, but it is a more compact plant with smaller leaves and flowers.

Smooth hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescence*) also resembles bigleaf hydrangea, but its leaves are thinner and rougher to the touch. Flower heads are big spheres of similarly shaped flowers, but individual flowers are smaller than bigleaf hydrangea. The flower stems are longer and sometimes need support to hold up the heavy flower heads.

Panicle hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata*) has distinctive cone-shaped flowers and smaller, thinner leaves than bigleaf hydrangea. The flowers sometimes change color as they age and bloom from the bottom up, resulting in a beautiful ombre of flower colors on the same inflorescence. Panicle hydrangeas are one of the most cold-hardy types of hydrangeas and prefer full sun to part shade. They are generally 6 to 10 feet tall and can be trained to a single stem, but I prefer letting them keep their multi-stemmed shrubby form.

Oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) is my personal favorite. As the name indicates, their leaves are shaped like large red oak leaves and they display lovely fall color, turning shades of bright red. Similar to panicle hydrangeas, the inflorescence is cone-shaped, but the flowers are usually white. Oakleaf hydrangeas bloom best in full sun. Their stems become woody and have exfoliating bark, peeling off in bronzy strips, creating winter interest.

Climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea petiolaris*) is a woody vine that can climb 30 to 80 feet. It is important to give them a very sturdy structure to climb on as the thick vines can get very heavy. They have a flower similar to a lacecap hydrangea.

Focus on Foliage

The beauty of hydrangeas isn't just in the flowers. Many have striking foliage. The new growth of *Hydrangea serrata* 'Mountain Mania' is bright yellow to orange with bronze highlights. Eclipse® bigleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Bailmacseven') features dramatic dark purple to black foliage and cranberry-colored flowers. *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Yuki Gessho' is heavily variegated with white specks that look like paint splattered on the leaves. Silver-leaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea radiata*), a lesser-known species, has leaves with brilliant silver-white undersides.

Prune Mindfully

Some hydrangeas bloom on new wood, or the current year's growth, while others bloom on old wood, or last year's growth. Only prune shrubs that bloom on old wood right after they bloom so they have time to grow and set flower buds before the winter.

With their diversity of forms, colors, and textures, hydrangeas offer something special for every garden and gardener. By choosing the right variety and understanding its needs, you'll be rewarded with years of spectacular blooms and seasonal beauty.

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.