

HYDRANGEA MACROPHYLLA (BIGLEAF HYDRANGEA)

In the past few years, “ever-blooming” hydrangeas have flooded the nursery market. These large mophead hydrangea amaze gardeners and entice them into growing this species of hydrangea. Some of the favorites are: Endless Summer, Twist-n-Shout, Bloom Struck, Blushing Bride, Nikko Blue, Glowing Embers, Light-O-Day, and Nantucket Blue.

New plantings are trying to produce a good root system to survive and will often focus on this before blooms. Give your Macrophylla hydrangea at least two years to establish a sturdy root system. New plantings may have few or no blooms for several seasons. These newly installed plants will wilt easily in the heat of the summer. They may need watering every other day. A 2-3” layer of organic mulch will help keep roots cool. Even older plants suffer from extreme heat and may need supplemental watering during the summer months. Extreme moisture stress can cause a plant to underperform the following season.

This species blooms on both old and new wood giving you potential flowers all summer. Although not as big or reliably hardy as hydrangeas grown where the winters are milder, the big-leaf hydrangea can perform if people resist the urge to prune them. This is vital, as there is something about the twiggy mess in late winter that galvanizes neatniks into action, at their peril. The desire to prune is often driven not just by a craving for tidiness but by planting shrubs in spaces that are too tight for them. Here’s the scoop on big leaf hydrangea pruning: the majority of the summer blooms occur on wood formed the

previous summer. So if you cut a twiggy specimen back to six inches in March, as if it were a rose, you will get lots of new growth from the truncated canes but little or no summer flowering. To tidy a Macrophylla Hydrangea, remove the flower heads as soon as they begin to fade.

The earlier you get it done after bloom, the quicker the shrub can recover, producing more and larger blooms next season. If you forget to remove the spent blooms in fall and choose to prune in spring you may do so, just remember you are cutting off possible blooms for that season. You may still get blooms in late summer as they will produce some blooms on this new growth. You can also remove any wayward or straggly canes at the soil line.

Macrophylla hydrangea prefers a location of full morning sun and protection from the hot afternoon sun of the summer. This hydrangea will not perform if planted in a location of total shade. It will probably produce leaves, but it is unlikely to ever bloom. If the site receives fewer than four hours of sunlight a day, relocate in the spring. Generally when we speak about plants not blooming, we immediately think we need to feed them. With hydrangea this could be the opposite. Too much nitrogen fertilizer can cause a hydrangea to focus on growing nice leaves rather than blooms. Use a well-balanced granulated garden fertilizer (Ferti-lome’s Gardener’s Special 11-15-11) once in early May and again in mid-June. If the plant is older and has not bloomed for several season, another late May application of Triple Superphosphate may help set late summer blooms. If too much phosphorus is added to the soil, it can result in the aluminum, added to encourage blue blooms, to become completely unavailable to the plant. It can be a fine line to walk!

What must I do to get the pink blooms to change to blue? Or go from blue to pink? The color is governed by the soil pH. You need an acidic soil with aluminum sulfate periodically may produce the desired change in color. Since most of our clay soils are alkaline, using aluminum sulfate regularly will help ensure the blooms remain blue. Pink blooms develop when the hydrangea is grown in alkaline (clay) soils. Most soils in the metro area are alkaline. If you do not add aluminum sulfate, the blooms will be a pretty pink without the need for any additive other than the balanced 11-15-11 Gardener's Special that helps ensure blossom set.

Winterizing Macrophylla Hydrangeas

Because blooming is so dependent on last year's stem growth, the objective of winter protection to protect the crown and at least 18" of the branches. Snow is the maximum insulator, but recent winter weather has resulted in less snowfall and warm-ups between snows to make snow completely unreliable in the metro area. Shredded wood mulch is the best substitute for snow insulation.

Give the plants a thorough watering in late November just before the ground freezes. Do no pruning or fertilizing of the plant going into winter. Create a mound of at least 18" deep of shredded wood mulch in a cone pattern through the stems of the plant. In an exposed site, a ring of chicken wire will hold the mulch in place. If the plant is located where it is exposed to the north or west winter wind, it is recommended that the entire plant be wrapped in burlap and the mulch applied around the burlap wrapped stems. Leave this protection on in

the spring until the weather settles. Late hard frosts can damage the hydrangea just as much as not protecting them at all. Buds should be swelling on the exposed tops of the stems when the winter protection is removed.

