

Singing the Joys of Hydrangeas in West Texas

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The sky blue and rose pinks of Hydrangeas have been a sought-after plant for many years. This is partly due to the popularity of the blooms used to decorate homes and in weddings and for other festive occasions, and the unique leaves. But can we grow them in West Texas? The answer is “yes.”

Hydrangeas are native to Japan, China, Korea, the Himalayas, Indonesia, and even North and South America. The mophead variety was found hidden in the secret gardens of Japan for years before being discovered by a Swedish botanist in the 1770s. In North America, Hydrangea can be grown in Zones 3-9, but do best in Zones 5-9. There are two varieties that grow well in the Big Country: (1) Oakleaf and (2) Endless Summer.

The **Oakleaf Hydrangea** is native to the southeastern states and found in woodland habitats. This Hydrangea can become a large shrub at least 6 feet tall and up to 6 feet wide in ideal conditions. It produces large white flower spikes in the summer, and provides an array of orange, red, and purple color in the fall, and a cinnamon-colored bark through the winter. It should be planted where it gets some morning sun, on the East or North sides of a home or other shade-giving structure, and can handle dappled afternoon shade. The plant needs to be placed in a hole slightly deeper than its root ball and 2-3 times wider; a bowl-shaped hole works well. The soil on the root ball should be loosened after removing from the nursery pot and can be mixed in with the soil to be used for planting, along with some organic material. Mulch needs to be added to the soil around the plants so the temperature of the soil stays more moderate, in both the summer and more thickly in the winter. This Hydrangea needs to be trimmed back immediately after flowering, as flower buds are produced on the second-year wood. Fertilizer is not really necessary.

Endless Summer Hydrangea comes in different varieties of bloom color--blue, pink, purple, red and white. It can even withstand our severe cold temperatures, though it does die back after the first hard freeze. It blooms on both old wood and new wood. So it's best to leave some of the plant's dead-looking stems on the plant after a freeze until the spring when one can see where the new growth actually comes from. This Hydrangea does best when planted in partial sun in order for the plant to bloom. It also needs to be planted in soil amended with organic material in a hole several inches wider and deeper than the root ball. The Endless Summer Hydrangea may be planted in a pot suited for its root ball size.

All Hydrangeas do best in a soil mixture that contains a mix of 1/3 dried manure or organic compost along with potash or peat moss, and 2/3 existing top soil. After planting, mulch should be placed around the plant to keep the soil temperature cooler in the hot weather. Be sure, however, that the mulch does not touch the base of the plant. Proper watering is important; they will droop if the soil is dry, but too much water will cause the roots to rot. It is beneficial to check on these Hydrangeas a couple of times during the day to get a feel of their water needs. Fertilize sparingly, with a higher ratio of phosphorus than nitrogen or potassium.

To survive our freezes, the Hydrangeas, like most of our plants, should be watered just before a freeze. Potted Hydrangeas need extra mulch on top and the pot should be wrapped with burlap or another thick cloth if left outside. This protects the roots from a freeze that may last more than a day or so.

Some Hydrangea blooming tips: white Hydrangeas stay white, while blue ones and pink ones can be manipulated by changing the soil pH levels. Unfortunately, Endless Summer Hydrangeas is a patented collection and may not be propagated. With a little extra care and attention, living Hydrangeas can become a favorite in our part of the country.

If you have any gardening questions, you can call the Taylor County Extension Office at 325-672-6048 or email us at mgardeners@yahoo.com. And visit the Big Country Master Gardeners at www.bcmgtx.org for information and future events!