

# Hydrangea FAQ's

## The #1 Most Asked Question... "How do I change the color of my Hydrangeas?"



Aluminum Sulfate 'HYDRA BLUE' (acidic soil)



Superphosphate (highly alkaline soil)  
Similar results with Dolomitic Lime added

Before attempting to change the color of a hydrangea, it is important to note a few things about certain hydrangeas:

White hydrangeas can NOT be changed to pink or blue, although sometimes a slight coloration will show as blooms age.

There are no "true red" hydrangeas, no matter how convincing those pictures in the catalogs are or how much lime is added to the soil, you can only achieve a very deep or dark pink.

The intensity of a color (how deep or pale the color is) develops for a number of reasons: plant heredity, weather conditions (hot or cold, humid or dry), health of the plant, and possibly other natural factors. A regular fertilizer program IS one way you can contribute to a more intense color. (See Fertilizing).

A few varieties of hydrangeas are extremely difficult to change, such as Pia which wants to stay pink.

The way to change the color is to alter the soil chemistry:

If your soil is alkaline (most common in Contra Costa), then the color will naturally be pink/lavender. **To change the color to blue—add MasterNursery™ HYDRA BLUE Aluminum Sulfate.**

If your soil is acidic, the color will naturally be blue. **To change the color to pink—add Dolomitic Lime (or Superphosphate where available).**

Soil additives should be applied four to six months before blooming begins.

**Dolomitic Lime** should be applied 2-3 times during the late fall and winter. Try 3-4 cups sprinkled around the base of a large shrub. It is almost impossible to add too much lime, but too little will give disappointing results.

**Aluminum Sulfate** should be applied at a rate of 1 Tbs. to ¼ cup depending on the age and size of the plant. Make 2-3 applications starting in late fall through winter.

It is common for blooms on a hydrangea shrub to be several colors—from pink to lavender to blue. This is especially true the first year the hydrangea is planted or after the soil chemistry is altered.

*Note: Our examples shows 3 Hydrangea macrophylla treated to change their color.*



Nothing added (typical of Hydrangeas grown in Contra Costa soil)

## How Should Hydrangeas Be Fertilized?

Most hydrangeas are pretty tolerant of some abuse once they are established (1-2 years). But they will respond beautifully if they are given extra supplements of fertilizer. Rich mulch applied from your mulch pile is excellent nutrition. Or, if you don't have a mulch pile, a fertilizer such as **MasterNursery™ MultiPurpose Fertilizer (16-16-16)** applied twice a year (Spring and Fall) will do very well.

## How Should Hydrangeas Be Pruned?



*Mophead Hydrangea*

If you don't read any further than this sentence—the best advice for pruning hydrangeas is—“DON'T”

Unless a hydrangea is quite old and the blooms have become small, it is not necessary to prune a hydrangea to maintain good health. But if pruning is necessary to revitalize it or to reduce its size, the following guidelines should be considered (by the way, it is fine to cut the blooms off for arrangements or just to neaten the plant at any time.)

For pruning purposes, hydrangeas can be placed into two categories: (1) those that bloom on new wood (“new wood” means branches that emerged on the shrub in Spring of the current year). (2) those that bloom on old wood (“old wood” means branches that have been on the shrub throughout at least one summer and winter before Spring bloom).

### HYDRANGEAS THAT BLOOM ON NEW WOOD.

If a hydrangea blooms on new wood, it can be pruned almost any time of the year, as close to the ground as one wishes. It will still bloom at its normal time since blooms form on the current new growth.

Two popular hydrangeas that bloom on new wood are **Annabelle** (*H. arborescens* ‘Annabelle’) and **Pee Gee** hydrangeas (*H. paniculata grandiflora*). Both bloom creamy white and can be pruned regularly. Other *H. paniculata* varieties would also fall into this category.

### HYDRANGEAS THAT BLOOM ON OLD WOOD.

Most commonly grown hydrangeas bloom on old wood (last year's branches). Hydrangeas that bloom on old wood set their flower buds in late summer or early fall to bloom the following spring. It is important that this type be pruned before the end of July to assure abundant bloom the following Spring. Do not prune “old-wood” types in the fall, winter or early spring, because most of the flower buds will be removed and few blooms will appear. (Cut blooms for arrangements any time)

The best-known species in this category is *Hydrangea macrophylla*. This group includes the commonly grown “mophead” varieties with blooms of pink and blue and occasionally white. There are also many lovely “lacecaps” in this category. In addition, the following are old-wood bloomers: *H. quercifolia* (Oakleaf hydrangea), *H. aspera*, *H. serrata* (such as ‘Grayswood’ and ‘Preziosa’), *H. petiolaris* and some other lesser known species.



*Lacecap Hydrangea*

## Why Won't My Hydrangeas Bloom?

The two most common reasons hydrangeas fail to bloom are:

The shrub has been pruned at the wrong time of the year. (See “Pruning”)

Late Spring freezes have damaged the flower buds. Cold winters do not usually do much damage to hydrangeas that are acclimated to the zone in which they grow. But quite often, late Spring freezes, especially after a warm winter, devastate the blooms for the coming season. After a late freeze one is naturally anxious to know how much damage has been done, but the only real way to determine the extent of the damage is to “wait and see”. Covering shrubs when heavy frosts are predicted in Spring will often save the buds from damage. Use sheets or light blankets rather than plastic.