Hydrangeas are showy and surprisingly easy

Source: Rick Durham, extension professor, University of Kentucky Department of Horticulture

If you’re looking for a head-turning effect in your garden, think about planting a hydrangea or two or three. Hydrangeas, with their diverse flower shapes and colors, are some of the most eye-catching plants in a garden. Many are particularly suitable for shade gardens, where a jolt of color is always appreciated.

You’ll find many varieties at garden centers. The macrophylla, or French, hydrangeas come with two distinctly different bloom forms. The commonly seen mophead flower has a large rounded bloom made up of both sterile and seed-producing flowers. Its colors range from blue to crimson, depending how acidic or alkaline the soil is, which changes the availability of soil aluminum levels. The more delicate lacecap form has a thick cluster of small, seed-producing flowers surrounded by a halo of showier, sterile flowers. Its colors are often softer, perhaps more refined, than the mopheads. Hydrangea paniculata has a conical flowerhead and blooms in mid-summer. If you’ve seen a showy, big-headed white hydrangea, that’s often the popular Annabelle variety, which is a H. arborescens or smooth hydrangea. Oakleaf hydrangea, or H. quercifolia, has conical blooms that start out white in late spring/early summer and fade to pink. They also provide great dried flowerheads for winter arrangements. Both the H. arborescens and the oakleaf hydrangea are natives.

Once established, hydrangeas require little care. Most don’t appreciate sitting in wet soil, but on the whole, they are remarkably forgiving, so they’re a good plant for the beginner gardener.

The older forms of the French hydrangea only bloomed from old growth, so pruning at the wrong time of the year, or a bad winter that killed old stems could reduce or prohibit the plant from blooming the next year. However, breeders have now produced macrophylla hydrangeas that bloom on both new and old stalks, almost guaranteeing a good display of color every summer.

And speaking of pruning, everyone wants to know when to do it. The good news is, for most varieties, you can put those pruners back in the shed, except maybe to trim back dead wood or old flower spikes. Pruning is not a requisite for producing good blooms, and in many cases, it can stymie blooming if done at the wrong time of year. Here are the proper pruning times for each type of hydrangea to insure the most blooms next season.

Summer, after the bloom fades: oakleaf hydrangeas, once-blooming mopheads or lacecaps

Late winter: Paniculata and smooth hydrangeas

Summer or late winter: reblooming or ever-blooming French hydrangeas

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