

by Dawn P. Cannon

GARDENING | IN SEASON

French Hydrangeas

Long-lasting blooms on an easy-care plant. What more could you ask for?



Take your soup tureen out of hibernation, and fill it with French hydrangeas for an easy summer centerpiece.

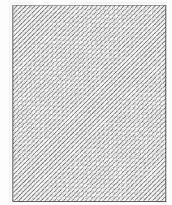
A SENTIMENTAL FAVORITE

of mine, French hydrangeas provided the something blue at my garden wedding. Their brilliant blooms made the perfect backdrop for the ceremony and allowed me to save money on my flower budget.

As testament to their longevity, you'll see vibrant shrubs of French hydrangeas (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) in many established gardens and at old home sites long after the houses have succumbed to neglect. So if you have neither the time nor the inclination to fuss over your shrubs, they are a good choice. The flowers of *H. macrophylla* come in two forms: mophead and lace-cap. The mopheads are more common. Their round, beefy blooms smother the plants and resemble an old-fashioned kitchen mop. Lace-caps, with more delicate-looking blooms, are so named because of their resemblance to the caps worn by Victorian housemaids.

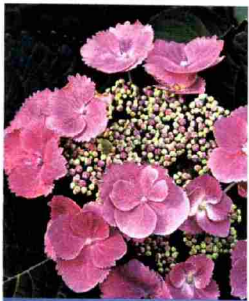
Planting

In the Lower and Coastal South, hydrangeas are happiest in light shade, but make sure they get at least three to four hours of sun a day. The farther north you go, the more sunlight they can take. A location with morning sun and afternoon shade is ideal. To plant, dig a hole twice the size of the container, and amend the soil with one-third organic material. Add a slow-release fertilizer, and you won't have to fertilize again that year. Make sure the



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LACE-CAP HYDRANGEA



MOPHEAD HYDRANGEA

plant is at the same level as it was in the pot. Water well, and mulch with pine bark or pine straw, taking care not to mulch around the stems of the plant. Hydrangeas are thirsty; water consistently in the first year, especially in the spring.

Pruning

Elizabeth Dean of Wilkerson Mills Gardens and Hydrangea.com says the biggest mistake people make with hydrangeas is pruning at the wrong time of year. She finds that customers tend to cut them down in the winter when the plant just looks like brown sticks. If you do this, she explains, “you’re cutting all of your flowers off.” The best time to prune is after the blooms fade in the summer. On mature bushes, remove one-third of the oldest canes by cutting them to the ground. Other types of hydrangeas have different pruning requirements. If you’re confused, Dean offers this rule of thumb: Prune them right after they bloom.

Repeat Bloomers

Remontant, or repeat, bloomers have been making news in the industry. The trademarked ‘Endless Summer’ is what you will most likely see in the garden centers, and it has generated a lot of buzz. Dean has heard mixed reviews from customers. “It’s easier to grow them in a colder environment where they come out of the winter more gradually,” she says. “When we have warm spells, and then get hit with a late frost, it puts all *macrophyllas* at risk of losing flowers.” She also says to keep expectations in check. “Remontants don’t bloom all summer. They bloom. They pause. They bloom. They pause. But if you deadhead and feed them, you’re more likely to have more blooms.”

Cutting

For arrangements and even for drying, wait until the blooms are just past their peak. “You know when you are young and your skin is plump and full of moisture? When a

PHOTOGRAPHED BY VAN CHAPLIN

hydrangea looks like that, don't cut it. Wait until it looks like skin that is my age," Dean says with a laugh. "It's gotten a little bit crêpey and you can see that it's starting to lose moisture. That's when you should cut the bloom because it's very difficult to keep that moisture."

Bloom Colors

When you buy a hydrangea at the nursery, you may be surprised when you plant it at home and your blue blooms turn pink or your pink blooms turn blue. Hydrangeas are sensitive to the pH of the soil. The more acidic it is, the more blue your flowers will be; alkaline soils produce pink or red blooms. Dean recommends Espoma's Holly-tone fertilizer for acidifying the soil. But, she suggests, "if you have high control needs about colors, maybe hydrangeas aren't the plants for you. I take them like I take my children—as they come." ♦

For details, see Sourcebook, page 126.

Companion Plants

Astilbe (*Astilbe* sp.)

They have the same water requirements as hydrangeas, and their feathery plumes complement the cloudlike hydrangea blooms.

Rohdea (*Rohdea japonica*)

Their straplike foliage counterbalances the big, round leaves of hydrangeas.

Spiraea (*Spiraea japonica*)

Spiraeas have great foliar texture and color. Select ones that are smaller in stature, and place them at the feet of a big hydrangea.

Sweet box (*Sarcococca ruscifolia*)

These shrubs are evergreen, so you have greenery in the winter when the hydrangeas are brown and naked.

Where To See

Aldridge Gardens Known for its oakleaf hydrangeas, but mixes in some French hydrangeas. Birmingham, 205/682-8019, www.aldridgegardens.com.

Atlanta Botanical Garden The Woodland Shade Garden claims to be 10 degrees cooler than the rest of the garden in summer. 404/876-5859, www.atlantabotanicalgarden.org.

Norfolk Botanical Garden Home of the Kaufman Hydrangea Collection, with more than 200 types. 757/441-5830, www.norfolkbotanicalgarden.org.

Stephen F. Austin Mast Arboretum Ten-acre garden in Nacogdoches, TX. 936/468-4404, www.sfasu.edu.