

SNOW HARDY HYDRANGEAS

By Richard Aubert

Yes folks you too can grow those big beautiful pink, blue, and purple hydrangeas that Martha always has in her perfect garden, or like those you've seen on the west coast. You just have to put a little work into them in the fall that's all. Those great blue florist's hydrangeas are hardy in Ottawa zone 5 or even zone 4, but there is a catch.

These macrophylla and serrata types and their hybrids, unlike the common snowball hydrangeas, which are generally white (paniculata and others), form their flower buds on old wood or branches not new ones. That means next years flower buds are sitting there in the fall hoping not to get blasted by our winters. In an Ottawa winter the plant is hardy but the flower buds above the snow line are not. Down the 401 in Toronto (yeah, sure always Toronto, Toronto) my sister has no problem over-wintering her Martha-Blue hydrangea hedge. Not only is she a zone warmer, (zone 6 as opposed to our zone 5), but she has naturally acid soil that gives that great color to the flowers. Oh sure, if you just leave them to grow you will get these big, lush shrubs, that have only a few late flowers low down on the plant.

Here is what you have to do to get a whole lot of flowers every year. Never prune hydrangeas, except for dead or broken branches and spent flowers. Remember the flower buds are sitting in that year old wood, so don't cut them off. In the fall just after the leaves have been frosted and wilt, gather all the branches and tie them up. Then slowly bend them over to ground level, and put a rock or any weight to hold them down. The branches are quite flexible, even my old five-foot shrubs don't break. If they do, don't worry more will grow. Now that they are pinned down, take a pile of leaves and cover the whole plant. There you go, that's it, takes about 3 minutes per shrub (I don't like too much garden work, but I love to garden). Then let the snow cover that and you have just raised the zone by one more level (zone 6). It's like a Toronto winter under that mulch.

In spring well after any major frost, about the end of April or first of May in my Westboro yard, uncover them and shake them off. At this point they may have already started to bud so don't be too anxious to uncover them if it's still frosty out there. You will then get bigger well-branched shrubs with more flowers each year. Some of my older shrubs are about 4 to 5 ft tall and about 6 to 8 ft wide, with about 30-40 blooms.

OK, so now you have these big hydrangeas with piles of flowers that bloom pink. If you could just get that right shade of blue to match the trim on the windows like Martha does? Well don't fret, just acidify that soil and along comes the blue color. Hydrangeas are some of the few plants whose flower color is affected by soil PH. When I am in the Maritimes in the summer you see hydrangeas in blue shades, because of the native acid soil (the acid rain probably doesn't hurt either). Aluminum sulfate, sold in garden centers, can be used for a quick color change. It is best applied a few times starting with new spring growth. This treatment is not permanent and will need to be repeated each year.

There is some thought that the aluminum build up in some plants is lethal, but this may only be true in rhododendrons. My hydrangeas seem fine after many years. The other more natural and longer lasting method is to apply sulfur, sold at farm and feed stores, to your soil. This is best done in fall since it dissolves very slowly and also needs to be done for several seasons. I am switching to sulfur since much of what I grow prefers an acid soil and our Ottawa soil is only slightly acid to neutral. Depending on soil acidity, hydrangeas will be anywhere from powder blue to navy or burgundy. A few years ago I experimented with the color response to soil PH. I added aluminum only to the soil on one side of the plant. When it bloomed it actually had a range from dark blue on one side to light blue in the middle to pink on the non treated side, a tricolor plant. Of course if you like pink, just leave the plants alone in our local soil. I'd like to try for some of those burgundy colors I've seen on the west coast

Hydrangeas do seem to prefer some light shade as opposed to full sun. They like even moisture in their soil and mulching definitely helps. They don't like to dry out too much. Some mulch may be slightly more acid than others, such as pine needles, some barks, or oak leaves, but not enough to change soil PH and color substantially.

There are generally two types of what are called big leaf hydrangeas- macrophylla- or mop head, with flower heads up to the size of soccer balls.

Then there are serratas or lace cap that have flat heads surrounded by the sterile florets that can be up to two inches each.

If you prefer the first type a few of the many to try would be:

-Merritt' Supreme, a semi dwarf plant with large pink blooms that will turn purple in acid soil, with good fall colors that stay in perfect condition.

-Nikko Blue, one of the most common varieties, but will be pink in standard Ottawa soils.

-Glowing Embers, one of the best with reddish pink blooms in neutral soil, will be purple in acid soil. This one starts off with a white-eye zone then darkens. Most reds should give you purple coloring in acid soils.

-Ayesha; a great cultivar with interesting cupped petals in pale pink that can change to blue.

Madame Moulliere and Sister Theresa; both whites with pink or blue eyes depending on soil PH.

Todi or Prezoisa, red with a white eye.

As for lace cap varieties, try:

Blue Billows, Blue Lace, Bluebird, Blue Wave, or Lemon Wave, which has amazing white, gold and green foliage with the pink or blue blossoms.

Most hydrangeas will dry very well for arrangements, but I have noticed that waiting till the flowers are older and have changed to a darker color is best.

So bundle up your plants for our winters and have a pile of blooms in the color of your choice next year.