

Pink and Blue Memories

by

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The sight of a certain blossom or bush can trigger memories of simpler times- growing up in the country or summer visits to Grandma's house. Sights, sounds, and smells from the past can come rushing back, transporting one back to lazy afternoons on the porch glider, drinking cold, sweet tea and listening to the grown-ups talk about "olden times". Few plants evoke that kind of reverie for me more than the lovely hydrangea. When I was a child, it seemed that every yard was decorated by hydrangea bushes. Children marveled at how there could be pink and blue flowers on the same bush and adults imparted their knowledge by explaining the phenomenon with scientific terms like "acid" and "base".

For a number of years, hydrangeas seemed to fall out of favor as garden plan, replaced by more exotic species. More recently, there appears to be a resurgence of interest in this lovely, colorful bush. Although there are approximately 23 species of *Hydrangea*, only five frequently are planted in the United States. *Hydrangea macrophylla*, a native of Japan, is the most popular species. Common names for *H. macrophylla* include bigleaf, garden, or French hydrangea. The inflorescence, or flowering part, of the plant is composed of large, conspicuous, sterile flowers with petal-like sepals and minute, star-shaped flowers that produce seed. Colors are restricted to pink, blue, or white.

There are two cultivars of *H. macrophylla*: mophead or Hortensia (*H. macrophylla* var. *macrophylla*) and lacecap (*H. macrophylla* var. *normalis*). The showy mopheads form rounded domes and are especially attractive in massed plantings. Lacecap blossoms are more delicate, with rings of larger flowers surrounding the smaller white flowers. There are hundreds of named selections from which to choose. Most nurseries and garden centers carry hydrangeas, but selection may be limited. Plants can be ordered online from reputable companies.

Hydrangeas are cold hardy to Zone 6. They are fast-growing and will need pruning to control growth, as they can reach 4-12 feet in height. Regular winter pruning of up to 1/3 of old wood will result in a fuller, stronger plant. Hydrangeas require moist, porous soil. They may require some shade, especially during the hot summer months. They can dry out quickly and may need frequent watering.

Bigleaf hydrangeas generally will flourish with a minimum of attention. Too much shade can reduce flowering, as can improper pruning and warm spring weather followed by a sudden freeze. It may be necessary to cover bigleaf hydrangeas in the spring to prevent bud loss from freezing temperatures. Most bigleaf hydrangeas flower on old wood, so pruning in the fall, winter, or spring would remove new buds. Some bigleaf cultivars that bloom on new wood have been developed, which means those plants would produce new buds and bloom even if freezing

weather had killed existing buds. Reblooming hydrangeas bloom on both new and old wood and can be pruned at any time.

The gardener can change the color of *H. macrophylla* blossoms by adjusting the pH of the soil. Blue flowers require aluminum, which can't be released if the soil pH is neutral to alkaline (6.5 and above). Flowers are blue when the soil pH is below 5.5, purple when pH is between 5.5-6.5, and pink when above 6.5. All three colors can appear on one plant at the same time.

Other species of hydrangeas also are available, including oakleaf (*H. quercifolia*), panicle (*H. paniculata*), and mountain hydrangea (*H. serrata*).

Plant hydrangeas and you will be rewarded with weeks of color from these gorgeous plants and plenty of time to sit on the porch with that tall, cold glass of sweet tea!

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