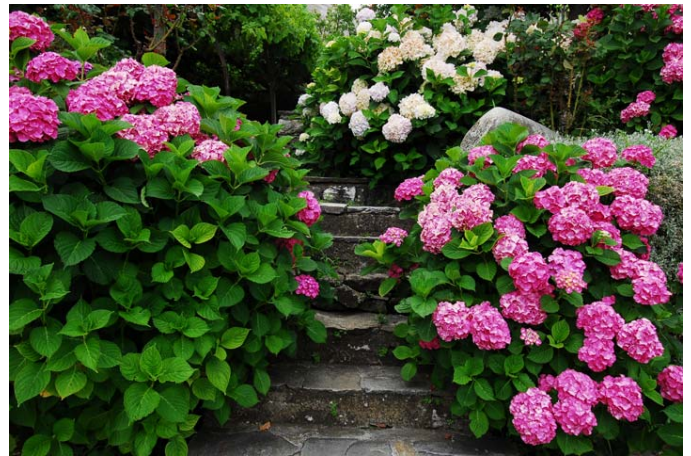


## How to Grow Hydrangeas in the San Joaquin Valley

By Carol Iskenderian, UC Master Gardener



If you haven't grown a hydrangea in your landscape, it's time to give this big blooming plant a try. Hydrangeas offer big, beautiful leaves and large clusters of long lasting flowers in white, pink, red and blue, which last from late spring to late summer, gradually fading in color. The flowers are quite spectacular and can conjure up warm memories of Grandmothers' garden. With their wonderful texture and blooms, hydrangeas are garden showstoppers.



Most species are deciduous shrubs forming 4-8 foot mounds, however one is a vine. All hydrangeas need well-drained soil, generously enriched with compost or leaf mold. They also need a constant supply of moisture and benefit from soaking once or twice weekly during dry weather. Choose hydrangeas that suit your taste and garden design goals.



Mophead hortensias are undoubtedly the most popular. Among varieties available locally are *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Variegata' or Tricolor, which has beautiful green and white variegated foliage to brighten a shady corner. Gaining in popularity are lace cap hydrangeas with their flat heads featuring a central area of tiny fertile flowers and an outer ring of large, showy sterile ones. There are even some miniature hydrangeas that grow to only 18 inches.

Most varieties are suited to our local zone 8 or 9, but they must have afternoon shade, especially in the middle of summer. Exposure to hot sun will cause the plants to wilt, even if they are well watered, and the edges of flower petals will brown. If you are growing them for perfect flowers, you may need to erect a temporary shade cloth over them.



An interesting aspect of hydrangeas is that soil pH often determines flower color. Blue flowers are produced in acid soil and pink in alkaline soils. Increase acidity by soaking the soil with ¼ cup aluminum sulfate dissolved in a gallon of water at weekly intervals in spring and fall. For pink or red flowers, make soil more alkaline by applying lime once or twice a year at the rate of 1 pound per 10 square feet. Both treatments, however, must be started well ahead of bloom. Some hydrangeas, such as the white flowering types, retain their flower color regardless of the soil pH.



Care of hydrangeas is very easy. In spring or fall, plant hydrangeas in well-amended soil. Fertilize with a balanced fertilizer or amend soil to change flower color if desired. Watch for chlorosis, yellowed leaves caused by iron deficiency, and apply chelated iron as needed. In the summer, keep well-watered and well-mulched and take cuttings to start new plants.



In the fall, cut flowers for drying. Hydrangeas continue to perform for years as spectacular dried flowers. Harvest heads in late summer or early fall, when flowers have matured and developed a papery consistency. If you cut and hang fresh flowers to dry too early, they will shrivel and lose their wonderful form. Hang your flowers upside down in a dry location, out of direct sun. In October, cut all stems that have bloomed to 6 or 8 inches tall to control growth and promote more flowers. Don't ever cut a hydrangea to the ground, since blossoms are formed on old wood.

Whether you prefer fresh or dried flowers, hydrangeas can be an outstanding addition to any garden. They can provide years of enjoyment for everyone, from novice to expert gardener.

**Oakleaf Hydrangea  
in the Fall**

