WHY ISN'T MY HYDRANGEA BLOOMING?
Let's Explore Hardy Hydrangeas for Northeast Gardeners

By Chris Ferrero, Master Gardener Volunteer

At the Ask the Master Gardener desk at the Dutchess County Fair, on the weekly Master Gardener Hotline, or during myriad programs we present at libraries and garden clubs, this question always tops home gardeners' lists: Why won't my hydrangea bloom?

The answer can be as complicated as the genus Hydrangea. It starts with "That depends..."

1. **It depends on whether your hydrangea is hardy for our Zone 5 winters.** Most reputable nurseries and garden centers only sell appropriately rated hydrangea varieties, but it's imperative to check the plant stake before purchasing your shrub.

   For example, every spring the Big Box stores and supermarkets are full of gorgeous, greenhouse-grown gift hydrangeas called "florist hydrangeas", none of which are meant to be planted outdoors here. Their job is to grace your interior spaces until the flowers are done. The best you can expect out of a florist hydrangea next year is beautiful foliage, so be sure to check the tag for Zone 5 before you plant.

2. **It depends on which Hydrangea species you're talking about.** Of 23 commercially available in the US, only 6 are hardy to our northeastern climate. And they all have different needs... but....

   "inevitably, you're asking about ONE species, macrophylla, the one with the big blue mopheads that are evoked in many people's minds when they hear "hydrangea". It's also the one that author Tim Boebel calls "the rebel of the plant world. They don't obey the rules."

With Hydrangea *macrophylla*, the bigleaf hydrangea - both mophead or lacecap varieties - bloom depends on siting, nutrition, winter protection, and, well, an increasingly temperamental Mother Nature, who often renders ineffective even those things under our control.

So you may have sited your *macrophylla* perfectly, in morning or filtered sunlight and afternoon shade...and you've given it moist, compost-rich soil and mulch and a nice, organic, slow-release acidic fertilizer in fall and spring... and you may still not get blooms in the spring.

That's because these bigleaf hydrangeas primarily bloom on *old wood* - last year's stems - and the quickest way to sacrifice bloom the following spring is to cut the unsightly old wood to the
ground in fall. But even if you don't, the flower buds on your old stems are easily destroyed over the winter. Vibrant new growth emerges from the crown in spring, producing lovely foliage but no flowers.

*Macrophylla* is traditionally a Zone 6 or warmer species, but breeders continuously strive to develop new varieties to survive colder winters. In 2004 the breakthrough "Endless Summer" *macrophyllas* were introduced, bred to bloom on both old and new wood, convincing us that we were guaranteed a spring show of blue mopheads. However, many gardeners have been disappointed by hardiness of their old wood, sparse bloom on new wood, and lackluster foliage.

New smaller *macrophyllas* have been bred at a compact 1-3', said to be somewhat easier to protect against the vagaries of winter, such as Proven Winners' "Cityline" series and Monrovia's "Forever and Ever" series. Let's hope for harder *macrophyllas* to join them in local garden centers.

**So what Hydrangeas are more reliable bloomers for northern gardens? There are 5 that are harder than *macrophylla*.** All thrive in moist, fertile, acidic soils, and benefit from mulching, even a natural leaf mulch.

1. **Hydrangea serrata**, the mountain hydrangea. A cousin of *macrophylla* but smaller at 3-4', *serrata* varieties are almost all charming lacecaps, and not only tolerate more sun but need it to produce beautiful fall color. However, even with their better stem-hardiness, they need to be carefully sited to protect from winter winds.

2. **Hydrangea arborescens**, the smooth hydrangeas that bloom right after *macrophylla*. One of two hydrangea species native to the U.S., this is the one easiest to grow in the northeast. It tops out at 5', can make beautiful mass plantings (in fact, colonizes), and its gorgeous white mopheads make wonderful cut flowers, or dry on the shrub for winter interest. This one can take quite a bit of shade, and does not need pruning, but can benefit from selective pruning of stems - or even cutting to the ground - in early spring. "Annabelle" is an old favorite that still delights.

3. **Hydrangea paniculata**, the panicle hydrangeas, that may be the most rugged of all the hydrangeas. They include the big old-fashioned "pee-gees" (*Paniculata Grandiflora*), typically trained to tree form. The huge, cone-shaped flowers of this large family of summer-blooming hydrangeas often age from sparkling white to shades of pink. They need more sun than other hydrangeas, and are more drought tolerant as well. They can take any kind of pruning - from none at all (which can result in a 7-10' shrub with wonderful trunk and branch forms), to selective

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*Hydrangea serrata 'Bluebird'*  
Photo: Wiki Commons

*Hydrangea arborescens 'Incrediball'*  
Photo: Chris Ferrero

*Hydrangea paniculata "Tardiva", known for its upright flowers.*  
Photo: Norma Chang
pruning of stems, to full cut to the ground in early spring. Varieties include ‘Limelight’, whose blooms start out with a beautiful green glow before becoming white, ‘Pinky Winky’ and ‘Vanilla Strawberry’ that play with pink flower reveals, and ‘Quickfire’ which blooms a couple weeks later and turns shades of red to complement red stems. *Paniculata* varieties have a wide range of sizes -- even dwarf versions like 'Little Lime' and 'Little Quickfire' are readily available - so make sure to consult plant tags before purchase..

**Hydrangea anomola petiolaris**, the climbing hydrangea. Like most perennial vines, it can take 3-5 years to establish and bloom, but it's the only one that tolerates shade. It blooms best in morning sun or bright light under a high tree canopy, which can be ideal if you have an old tree for it to climb. Woody stems cling by aerial rootlets, stretching out lateral branches to make it a 3-dimensional charmer covered with fragrant blooms. This vine can camouflage an old tree stump or ramble along an old rock wall.

**Hydrangea quercifolia**, the oak leaf hydrangea. Three words: Four-season value. This U.S. native has gorgeous, huge panicles that turn from bright white in early summer to shades of rose and bronze through fall, but its enormous leaves are even more spectacular come fall. When they finally drop, after evolving through the fall palette to a deep burgundy, they reveal beautiful stems with a cinnamon exfoliating bark to decorate your gardens through winter. They tolerate a lot of shade, and benefit from a protected site. This species blooms on old wood, so early spring trimming of winterkill may be all it needs; try not to prune heavily till after bloom, in time to allow new buds to form for next year’s flowers. The old favorite variety ‘Alice’ is still popular, as are new dwarf varieties like 'Munchkin', 'Ruby Slippers' and 'Sike’s Dwarf'.

**Want more on Hydrangeas?** Visit the Cornell Woody Plant Database at www.woodyplants.cals.cornell.edu.
Suggested reading: Michael Dirr’s “Hydrangeas for American Gardens” and Tim Boebel’s “Hydrangeas in the North: Getting Blooms in the Northern Climates”

Chris presents “Hydrangea Success for Northeast Gardens”, an information-packed 1-hour presentation with dozens of beautiful slides to inspire home gardeners, at libraries, garden clubs and other groups. To schedule this and other presentations, email Joyce Tomaselli: jdt225@cornell.edu