

All About Hydrangeas

Giving attention to color

I took a break from my usual weekend trips to the river, a favorite pastime all summer long. Instead, I spent the whole day in my garden, finally getting to the chores I'd been procrastinating for a solid month or two. I yanked out a shrub that was never going to be as small as I'd hoped, no matter how much pruning I did. I even planted a thing or two against my better advice of not planting things in the hottest month. I did this so I could adjust the color scheme a bit, making sure all the flowering plants were blooming in harmony. I spend so much of my gardening time concentrating on form and texture that I often overlook the one thing that so many people use as the basis to their gardens: color.

I received an e-mail from a woman named Alyce that turned my attention to color. It's a common, daily question I would overhear at the retail nursery, and the answer almost always came out as easily as breathing. It has been a few years since I've had to answer the question, so it took a bit of research to get it right again, but like riding a bicycle, it just comes right back.

DEAR DIRTY DAN:

One of your last columns makes it sound like you might know something about hydrangeas ["Heat Wave," July 20]. How do you get the bushes to be fat, thick and fluffy? Mine are spindly but have great blossoms. When do you prune them? Also, how do you change the colors of the blue and pink flowers and get those lovely purples like my neighbors have?

ALYCE
Ladd's Addition

Alyce, changing the color of your hydrangeas is a matter of playing the part of a chemist in the soil around your plants. But first you should start by making your plants thick, fat and fluffy. *Hydrangea macrophylla* and all of its many cultivars enjoy a situation that mimics where they grow natively in Japan. They are an understory plant in the forests there, where leaves fall and decay, creating a rich, moisture-retentive soil. In your garden, the same effect of falling leaves can be created by mulching the root zone of your bushes. Regular watering of about every other week in the dry months will start to improve the overall health of your plants.

When it comes to changing the color of your flowers, a little saying that my pal Penny used to tell me always sticks with me. "Add lime for pink because the second letter in both words is 'i'." That leaves the blue to purple flowers up to the acid soil. There are a few things that you can add to intensify the color you are after, Alyce.


I have heard from folks that dump their coffee grounds around their plants. Another way is to score some aluminum sulfate, which is available at many nurs-



Get Dirty with Dan
BY DAN YOUNG

eries in town. Of course, I will suggest following the instructions on the package. As for the coffee trick, I personally wouldn't douse my plants in grounds more than once a week.

The color of your hydrangeas unfortunately won't change overnight. It can take a whole growing season for it to transform into the hue you desire.

Pruning should be done pretty much immediately, once all the flowers have faded. *Hydrangea macrophylla* will bloom on old wood, which means the branches that form this year will bloom next year. I have made the mistake of pruning one in the spring only to get only a few flowers come summer. If you do pruning now, the plants have enough time to flush out some new growth and harden off before winter arrives. Next year you will have so many flowers that you'll be making bouquets for your neighbors. If you start adding aluminum now, those flowers might even start to become that perfect shade of purple that you are after. 

To reach DIRTY DAN, who will answer any and all of your gardening questions, simply e-mail dirtydthegardener@yahoo.com.



Homegrown chemistry comes in handy when adjusting the hues of your hydrangeas.

JMV

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