



## SHADE LOVERS: Hydrangeas grow best in moist areas Gardeners' Dirt by Brenda Heinold, Victoria County Master Gardener

June 2, 2023



*Hydrangeas provided good landscape plants for the author's difficult flowerbed. Plants were placed 3-4 feet apart. An oakleaf hydrangea in the foreground provides interest with large leaves.*

*Photo by Brenda Heinold, Victoria County Master Gardener*

Every home gardener has some area of the landscape that seems difficult. Mine is near my back entrance. Shaded throughout most of the day, it faces north, providing little protection from winter cold. Nothing really seemed to grow well in that spot.

A few months ago, I began research for a Master Gardener presentation on [hydrangeas](#). I knew little about hydrangeas except that I had unsuccessfully planted them several times. My impression was that they were difficult plants. Many other gardeners share this impression, telling me that they always found them too difficult.

My research revealed some surprising facts. First was that many hydrangeas are native to eastern North America. Even closer to home, oakleaf hydrangeas (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) are native to the southeastern United States, including east Texas.

Second, hydrangeas do not absolutely require acidic soil. Contrary to my assumption, some hydrangeas tolerate slightly alkaline soil like mine if other needs are met.

What are those needs? For one, hydrangeas need some shade. Although they require sunlight to flower well, they do best with just a few hours of morning sun followed by afternoon shade or dappled shade throughout the day. They also need well-draining soil that contains lots of organic matter, consistent moisture, and good air circulation to prevent fungal problems.

My previous hydrangeas had been planted in a poor location with inconsistent moisture. I realized that if I could meet the hydrangea's requirements, they might provide a solution to my landscape problem.

The spot was already shady due to overhanging trees. It had mounded, well-draining soil and a drip system. To make it even better, I could add compost and mulch. Finally, the space was large enough to provide plenty of air circulation around the plants.

My next step was to research the available varieties and to decide what flower shape, color and growth habits best met my space.

I began where most gardeners begin: I looked at the flowers. A hydrangea "flower" is really an arrangement of both sterile and fertile flowers. Sterile flowers consist of five colorful petals whose job it is to attract pollinators to the fertile flowers. The particular arrangement of the sterile and fertile flowers results in three basic flower shapes.

The most familiar shape is the mophead or snowball. This flower, so traditional at Easter, resembles a ball of flowers in shades of white, pink, green or blue. Inconspicuous fertile flowers hide within the ball.

In the second shape, the lacecap, showy sterile flowers make a ring partially enclosing a cluster of tiny fertile flowers. Lacecaps primarily are white, pink and blue.

The third shape is panicle, where sterile flowers form a large cone hiding the fertile flowers. Panicles begin in shades of white fading to pinkish-brown in fall.

Five varieties that can be grown in our area are:

- Oakleaf (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) – white, panicle flowers
- Big Leaf (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) – white, pink, green or blue mophead or lacecap flowers
- Mountain (*Hydrangea serrata*) — colors and flowers similar to *Hydrangea macrophylla* but in a smaller size.
- Panicle (*Hydrangea paniculate*) – white, panicle flowers
- Smooth (*Hydrangea arborescens*) – large round, white flowers

A complete guide to growing hydrangeas is beyond the scope of this article, but interested gardeners can find more information and growing advice at [aggie-hort.tamu.edu](http://aggie-hort.tamu.edu). [CLICK for info](#).

So, what hydrangeas did I choose? *Hydrangea quercifolia*, of course, along with two *Hydrangea macrophylla* and one *Hydrangea serrata* in a container. My research project challenged my assumptions about hydrangeas and provided me with the information that I needed to try something new in my garden. That is what gardening is all about.



***Hydrangea serrata* is often planted in containers due to their smaller size. This Tiny Tuff Stuff hydrangea, an example of lace cap bloom, tops out at 2 feet tall and wide. As with other container-grown plants, the gardener must be careful to provide consistent watering.**

*Photo by Brenda Heinold , Victoria County Master Gardener*

*The Gardener's Dirt is written by members of the Victoria County Master Gardener Association, an educational outreach of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Victoria County. Mail your questions in care of the Advocate, P.O. Box 1518, Victoria, TX 77901; or [vcmg@vicad.com](mailto:vcmg@vicad.com), or comment on this column at [Victoria Advocate.com](http://VictoriaAdvocate.com).*