

HYDRANGEAS

One of the flowers most Australians associate with Christmas is not an indigenous flora, but a fragile visitor from the hills of Japan. Hortensia hydrangea was introduced to England by the English botanist responsible for so many botanical expeditions, Sir Joseph Banks.

We have come to expect a little more than the traditional mop head or macrophylla in either blue, pink or white at Christmas. We now have lace cap varieties such as Lilicana and Blue Prince along the delicate but popular Hydrangea grandiflora with its slightly larger and pyramidal white head of flowers. This particular variety presents well as a standard, but like all hydrangeas only tolerates filtered light, or morning sun with protection from hot sun and drying winds.

Planting

When planting your hydrangea add a liberal application of Waldecks Bio-Ganic, dug well into the soil over an area at least 600mm deep by 400mm in diameter is recommended. Once planted, the ground needs to be heavily mulched with Waldecks Mulching Compost and an early spring application of slow release fertiliser incorporated with the mulch. If prepared in this manner, in the right location you will have no need to protect the plant with the traditional umbrella or shade cloth in summer - but remember that Hydra means water and that's exactly what they need along with frequent spring applications of a well balanced liquid feed such as Phostrogen.

Experience will show that soil type affects colour, acid soils tend to blue, alkaline soils to pink (note that white stays white and cannot be altered). To encourage the colour of your choice, applications of Aluminium Sulphate for blue and common garden lime for pink, in early spring about August and again in September should give you marvellous coloured blooms at Christmas. It is detrimental to feed plants from which you expect flowers any fertiliser high in nitrogen, so stay away from chicken manure and any of its compounded forms. A liquid feed high in potassium produces prolific blossom.

Pruning

There are many conflicting views as to the correct method and timing with regard to pruning - in fact all methods are okay. Text books recommend pruning off that which has blossomed to 3 nodes leaving those that didn't flower this year to flower the following year. However, some potted specimens up to 6 years old which grow to 1 metre each season and bloom profusely are all cut back to 2 or 3 nodes each year, and yet others are pruned sparingly and still produce blooms at Christmas.

Pruning can take place immediately after flowering in summer, but make sure that any new growth has had a chance to harden off before the onset of winter. This gives the advantage of producing a larger plant than if pruning is carried out in late winter. When pruning make sure you prune back to a double node or eye as these are the flowering buds for next season - the single bud produces the leaf.

For those of us who would like to propagate this shrub, take cuttings in August and leave 2 or 3 nodes on a 200mm hardwood cutting and dip in hormone powder - then place cutting in a mix of coarse sand and perlite, leave in a shady place and water sparingly. In about 8 weeks the heels should be callused and show fibrous roots, the cuttings can then be placed directly into potting mix, fertilising every 2 weeks with Phostrogen

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So why not give your garden a make-over this Christmas and search through our nursery for that different hydrangea with the unusual flower form and colour. Occasionally we may also carry standard hydrangeas, so keep your eye out and decorate the outside garden with this handsome lustrous leaved, bold blossomed plant for this Christmas.

Happy gardening