

Hydrangea Shrubs

By Wayne Jewell

Many years ago, I planted two types of hydrangea shrubs here at Sunset Memorial Park.

The first type is called *Hydrangea arborescens* or “Smooth Hydrangea”. The specific cultivar in this case is Annabelle White. This particular plant flowers from June through September on current years growth. The flower clusters are white and about 4” across. These 4 shrubs will grow to about 3 to 5 feet high by 3 to 5 feet wide. They are located on each side of the east and west steps leading in to the section 1D-Sunken Garden. To keep them looking neat and tidy, they are normally trimmed in late March just before the new growth begins. Weaker spindly stems are cut back to the ground while sturdier stems are cut back to the first set of green buds from the end of the stem. Sometimes, gardeners will simply “wack” the entire plant down to the ground in the fall or late winter.

I prefer not to do this because I feel that it takes too much energy from the plant and lessens the beauty of the large, white, puffy, flower heads. Other than some minimal pruning each year, all Annabelles really require is a little water during a hot, dry, summer.

The second type of hydrangea that we currently have here in the park (which happens to be my favorite) is a *Hydrangea macrophylla*. The particular cultivar in this case is called “Big Daddy”. It’s common name is Big Leaf Hydrangea. This plant is located in the rear of the Westwood Abbey Mausoleum situated on the north side of the north air conditioning unit.

When I first planted this particular shrub, many years ago, it had large purple flowers at planting time. The next several years, it did not flower at all and only produced vegetative growth. To say that I was disappointed was an understatement. However, after several years, it did come in to bloom from July through August. The flowers were a bright pink.

The interesting thing about this particular species of hydrangea is that the pH of the soil will determine flower color. For example, at pH of 6.5 or higher, the

flowers will be pink. At pH of about 5.5 or lower, they will be blue while in between, they will be more of a lavender color. For a few years now, I have been giving this plant an annual application of sulfur to try to lower the soil pH down to the point that the flowers will be blue. At this point in time, this plant seems to be flowering in a lavender color which suggests that the soil pH is now somewhere between 5.5 and 6.5. Of course, the best way to know for sure would be by way of a soil test.

This shrub is normally pruned immediately after it is finished flowering because the next season's flowers form on the previous season's growth. Unfortunately, I had so many projects going on at one time this past fall, that I didn't get a chance to prune it. However, my training and years of experience with hydrangeas has taught me the difference between old and new growth and it will certainly be on my agenda to clean this plant up in the next few weeks.

One thing that I am concerned about is that although a harsh winter can be a good thing in many respects, it is not a good thing for this type of plant and new flower buds that have already formed last summer may have already been killed off for this season. In time, we will know for sure but as long as the over all plant survived, there is always next year for more flowers.