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## Why Isn't My Hydrangea Blooming - Again?

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Few sites are as beguiling to gardeners as mature bigleaf hydrangeas (*H. macrophylla*) covered with huge clusters of sky blue flowers. Because blue flowers are so rare and beautiful, many of us were lured into believing that we could recreate this heavenly vision in our USDA hardiness zone 5 yards. And occasionally, we are rewarded with gorgeous blue flower heads in June but more often than not, these past few years have been hard on this species of hydrangea and all we end up with come spring are a bunch of dead, leafless stems sticking out of the ground.



Image by Lisa Rivers



Image by Dawn Pettinelli

Because this scenario was repeated time and time again with older bigleaf hydrangea cultivars, excitement mounted when repeat blooming mophead hydrangeas such as 'Endless Summer' and the 'Let's Dance' arrived on the scene. These produced flower buds on both the previous season's growth (old wood) and on current season's stems (new growth). So supposedly, even if the old wood is injured or killed by harsh winter weather, the plants would flower at the end of the season from buds on new growth.

If we could move a bit southward to zone 6 or higher, we would most likely be delighted in these plants but alas, here in the zone 5 section of Connecticut, the rebloomers do not behave the way we would expect. This is because of several reasons.

The most common is winter injury. Flower buds formed the previous fall can be damaged by extremely cold temperatures, like those we experienced for two weeks this past January. Even without the frigid temperatures that we had this winter, over the past few years we have had episodes of fluctuating temperatures. One day this past February reached close to 70 degrees F if I remember correctly. The warming temperatures caused many plants to start stirring from their dormancy.

Then in March, we had a return to cold temperatures and quite a bit of snow. If plants start to come out of their dormant state, both the leaf and flower buds become more susceptible to injury from cold. Although many of these

reblooming hydrangeas are root hardy to zone 5, their stems are not and die to the ground each year. Some hydrangea cultivars are more winter hardy but their flowers are often white or pink, and not blue.

Where hydrangeas are planted also affects their blossoms. An ideal location would be a somewhat sheltered one by a foundation or fence or other object. Plants appreciate early morning sunlight and afternoon shade. If you are growing a bigleaf hydrangea that receives hot afternoon sun, you probably notice that it wilts most afternoons during the summer. This stresses the plant and may cause poor flower bud formation. Often the next year following a prolonged drought, there may be few or even no flowers even if the stems survived the winter.

Which brings us to proper watering. Bigleaf hydrangeas need moderately moist but not overly wet soils. They should not be allowed to consistently wilt each hot summer afternoon if you want healthy plants with lots of flowers. Make sure the soil has adequate amounts of organic matter in it and use a mulch to minimize evaporation from the soil.

Sometimes out of frustration, hydrangeas are over fertilized in hopes that greater amounts of nutrients will produce more flowers. They do require nutrients on a regular basis but make sure the fertilizer has a higher phosphorus content than nitrogen content. A fertilizer with an analysis of 5-10-10 works well. The three numbers stand for the amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Nitrogen promotes green leafy growth and too much nitrogen does this at the expense of flowering. Phosphorus is for root growth and flowering so any fertilizer used on hydrangeas should have a higher middle number. Without recommendations from a [soil test](#), follow the directions on the fertilizer package.

Also, while new growth arises from the roots each spring, often it does not bloom or flowers sporadically. This may be because plants do not receive enough water and nutrients for the stems to fully mature and develop flower buds or it may be because the growing season was not long enough.

So if you want those true blue bundles of flowers and live in zone 5, what could you do to get them? One suggestion is protecting your plants over the winter. Erect a wire or burlap screen around the plants and then after Thanksgiving when colder temperatures stabilize fill your screen full of non-compacting leaves, such as oak, or some other loose material like straw. Remove it sometime in mid-March or thereabouts depending on the weather.

Another option is to replace those blue hydrangeas with white or pink ones. ‘White Dome’ and ‘Invincibelle Spirit’ are woodland hydrangeas (*H. arborescens*) and flower reliably here. For a more lavender blue, try the reblooming lacecap (*H. macrophylla*) ‘Twist n Shout’ or the lacecap mountain hydrangea (*H. serrata*) ‘Tuff Stuff’. For some reason, the lacecaps, even the big leaf ones seem to suffer less damage than the mopheads.

So if your hydrangea is not flowering regularly each year, consider protecting it or replacing it with one of the other cold hardy hydrangea cultivars. Water and fertilize it regularly and see that it gets shelter from the hot afternoon summer sun.

If you have more questions about growing hydrangeas or on any other garden topics, feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center at (877)486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.