



Yes, Dorothy, There is a Hydrangea for Your Water Wise Garden

by Dorothy Downing, UC Master Gardener

I love shrubs that earn their keep in my garden by being low maintenance, looking good year-round, providing seasonal color, and very importantly, by not having a drinking problem. One of the last plants that I thought would meet my requirements is the hydrangea, a real workhorse in a moist shade garden. However, I don't have much shade in my yard, nor do I have a great deal of water. Bearing this in mind, oakleaf hydrangeas came to my rescue!

When I first came upon a sun and drought tolerant hydrangea, I couldn't believe what I read. The picture of 'Pinky Winky' was incredible! The gigantic floral structures (panicles) start out white and then turn pink to red as they age. Right away, I knew that I had to get one. I couldn't find any in the area, so I mail ordered one. When it finally came, I didn't have time to plant it. So it sat on the back porch for a few days, which stretched into a few weeks. When I finally planted it, the poor little plant was so stressed that it didn't last long.

Okay. I am a Master Gardener. How about I practice what I preach?! This time, I got my soil turned, compost added and flower bed watered before I brought the plant home. I chose a white oakleaf hydrangea named 'Snowflake' with huge leaves that contrast well with smaller-leaved plants near it. The white flowers on large panicles change to pink as they age. Its blooms are "hose-in-hose," which means that as new white petals emerge from the middle of the flower, the older petals stay on and fade to pink. And there's more. The oakleaf-shaped foliage turns red in the fall. The flowers hang on through the winter, and they complement the shrub's exfoliating red bark. Snowflake grows 6 to 10 feet tall and wide. It prefers sun, but in our area it benefits from some afternoon shade. If afternoon shade is not an option, it will make do with adequate moisture. My two shrubs are planted against an east facing wall, and receive full sun until early afternoon. On really hot days, they can wilt and look pretty sorry, but I don't water them then. I wait until the cool of the evening, and if they haven't recovered, I give them a sip of water or I wait until the next morning. By morning, they have usually perked up. I make sure that my shrubs are well mulched and that helps retain moisture and prevent afternoon wilting.



Snowflake



Ruby slippers

Because of my first name, I have always noticed anything related to the Wizard of Oz. So of course, I was an easy target for the 'Ruby Slippers' oakleaf hydrangea. One feature I really like about this plant is that it is a smaller shrub and takes up less space. It's shorter than 4 feet and only spreads out about 5 feet. It grows moderately fast, but doesn't require as much water as Snowflake. Ruby Slippers has a multitude of flowers on short stems that start out white and then mature to a striking deep rose/burgundy. Like Snowflake, the cinnamon bark exfoliates in the winter.



Winter leaf color

The oakleaf hydrangea came from the shore banks of the sandy streams of the southeastern US and is more drought tolerant than any of the other hydrangeas. It prefers medium moisture, but when established, will hold up to dry weather. These plants do not require annual pruning, but it can improve their performance. Oakleaf hydrangeas bloom on last year's growth, so the best time to prune them is in the summer after they finish blooming. Prune them lightly to shape the shrub, and also thin the stalks – if desired – to encourage fewer, but larger, blooms. In the spring, only remove stalks, if you are sure they are dead. Heavier spring pruning will result in lots of new stems, but they won't bloom until spring of next year.

Oakleaf hydrangeas are low maintenance, beautiful shrubs. They have no serious insect or disease problems in our planting zones. Aphids and spider mites are occasional visitors and there is some susceptibility to leaf blight and powdery mildew. The plants make an attractive flowering hedge and the flowers are popular for cutting and drying. They are now available in local nurseries.

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