

Climbing hydrangeas are vines for the shade garden

The first time I saw a climbing hydrangea, it was growing its way up the trunk of a majestic oak. I was smitten, and *Hydrangea anomala* subsp. *petiolaris* also climbed its way to the number one spot on my must-have plant list.

Climbing hydrangeas are easy to grow. All they require is well-drained soil rich with organic matter. They are not fussy about light conditions. A site with morning sun and afternoon shade, filtered light all day and even full shade are all acceptable planting situations.

A climbing hydrangea is the answer to a shade gardener's prayer for a vining plant that thrives without full sun. It sports glossy, dark green, heart-shaped leaves that are beautiful from the time they unfurl in spring until they turn clear yellow in fall. Exfoliating, cinnamon-colored bark is revealed for winter interest when leaves fall.

Caring for climbing hydrangeas is easy, too. Add a layer of mulch around the root zone of the plant to help keep the soil moist, and water in periods of drought.

I have never pruned my climbing hydrangea but if necessary, most pruning should be done after flowering. Remove dead or damaged branches whenever they are noticed. Newly planted vines should spend their energy establishing roots instead of producing new growth, so avoid pruning plants their first year in the garden.

Climbing hydrangeas grow large, 50 feet or more, and become heavy so be sure to provide supports substantial enough for their massive magnificence. They grow up their supports two ways: vines twine around and aerial roots, or holdfasts, attach. To encourage a climbing hydrangea to start climbing its support, plant it so it leans against the support or twine a few branches around uprights of the structure.

Climbing hydrangeas can also be utilized as a ground cover. Without a structure to climb, stems scramble across the ground. Wherever stems make contact with the soil, roots form and new growth begins.

Slow to establish in the garden, gardeners must be patient for two or three years while their roots are settling in. The vine will reward you with rapid growth from then on.

Climbing hydrangeas present large, fragrant, flattened flower clusters of tiny creamy white flowers in early summer. Climbing hydrangeas in more sun produce more blooms; vines planted in deep shade may not flower at all. Young vines may take a few years to bloom.

Flowers left on the vine will dry and turn reddish brown. Leave them for winter interest or cut them to use for decorating indoors.

Rarely bothered by insects, diseases or garden pests, climbing hydrangeas are valuable landscape plants for growing across pergolas and fences, clambering up trees and disguising unsightly

garden structures, sprawling over stone walls, providing screening, and covering ground in shady spots.

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