“My mom always said her hydrangea blooms were a deeper blue if she put iron nails in the ground.”

Burying nails around hydrangeas to change their color is an age-old trick. As with many age-old tricks, this one has been replaced by faster and better methods—but the science is sound.

Hydrangeas (Hydrangea macrophylla) bloom in colors ranging from pink or dull red to deep blue. The differing pigments result from the plant’s uptake (through the roots) of the minerals iron and aluminum. A hydrangea’s ability to absorb these minerals is strongly affected by the acidity or alkalinity of the soil.

In alkaline soils, hydrangeas are unable to absorb aluminum and iron, so they lose their ability to manufacture blue pigment. The result is pink blooms. Adding iron oxide (in the form of rusty nails) acidifies the soil, which enables the absorption of aluminum and iron and turns the blooms blue.

But there are faster and better ways to acidify soil. For blue hydrangeas, most garden experts recommend adding aluminum sulfate, available in garden stores. For pink hydrangeas, add lime to soil to make it more alkaline. But be patient: Color changes may take weeks or even months.

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