

Hydrangea Hideaway

Green grass framed by a hedge of hydrangeas turned unkempt woods into a beautiful place to play

The short walk from the terrace gives an intriguing glimpse of the garden beyond.

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Bordered by 'Nikko Blue' hydrangeas, the rectangular lawn imposes formality on the previously wooded site.

It isn't often that you hear someone say they planted a lawn to reduce maintenance, but that's exactly why this Mountain Brook, Alabama, homeowner decided to get rid of most of her woods in back. "It was hard keeping it all neat and weeded and covered in pine straw," she recalls. Plus, she wanted a place for her family to entertain and her grandchildren to play.

She turned to Birmingham garden designer Troy Rhone of Integrity Landscapes. After removing trees and brush and adding soil to even out the terrain, Troy designed a rectangular 20- by 60-foot lawn framed by 'Nikko Blue' French hydrangeas. Although Southern magnolias and arborvitae planted at the far end help screen the neighbors, this garden essentially consists of only grass and hydrangeas.

You can't see the lawn as you first enter the backyard. From a rear terrace by the house, a narrow stepping-stone walk provides just a glimpse of the surprise beyond. Walk forward three or four steps and a scene you never expected suddenly opens up.

This is a spring and summer garden to be enjoyed mainly while the hydran-

HOW TO CHANGE A FRENCH HYDRANGEA'S COLOR

Strongly acid soil (pH 5.5 and lower) encourages blue flowers; near-neutral-to-alkaline soil (pH 6.2 and above) promotes pink. To acidify soil, sprinkle a cup of garden sulfur or iron sulfate around the plant. To make it less acid, use dolomitic lime.



geas are in bloom. The formal design offers the manicured look the owner prefers. It also feels like a secluded outdoor room. No more weeding, mulching, or mess—just mowing and occasional pruning.

PRUNE, DON'T PANIC

Worried confusion abounds when talking about how to prune French hydrangeas. Here are our guidelines.

1. You shouldn't have to prune them at all for the first four to five years after planting, except to remove dead wood.

2. If your hydrangea is a reblooming type, such as 'Endless Summer' or 'Penny Mac,' you can prune anytime and still get flowers, because they bloom on both old and new growth.

3. If your plant is a once-blooming type, such as 'Nikko Blue,' you must finish all pruning by the end of July to avoid cutting off next year's flowers.

4. There are two ways to prune: After blooms fade, shorten branches by cutting them back to where tufts of leaves emerge lower down on the stems; or cut one-third of the oldest blooming branches all the way to the ground. **SL**