



When Should I Prune My Hydrangea?

by Norm Phillips, UC Master Gardener

If your garden has hydrangeas, then you need to know that there are two distinct types of hydrangeas which are pruned very differently. One type produces flower buds on “old wood” and the other type produces bloom buds on “new wood.” Hydrangeas are deciduous shrubs.

What is “old and new” wood?

Stems are called old wood if they have been on the plant since the summer before the current season. New wood are stems that develop during the current season.

The type most commonly found in the garden is the one that produces buds on “old wood”. This includes the old garden hydrangeas such as Mophead, Big Leaf, and Lacecap types (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) and the Oakleaf hydrangea (*H. quercifolia*). They all produce blooms on old wood.



Old Wood Bloomer: Mophead

Old Wood Bloomers

When can pruning be helpful? Ideally hydrangeas should be planted in areas where pruning is not necessary. In other words, plant them in a large enough location so that the hydrangea bush can grow to full size. Bloom size and quality will continue to be consistent for many years. Sometimes however, you may want to prune even well placed hydrangea bushes to increase bloom size, to remove all dead or damaged stems, to revitalize older plants (after plants are 5 years or older) and to reduce the plant’s size.



Old Wood Bloomer: Lacecap

When to prune? Prune these hydrangeas only after bloom in the summer and not in the fall.

Old wood hydrangeas start developing their bloom buds for next year in August and September. If you don't prune your hydrangeas real soon, then it is better to wait until next year. Otherwise you won't have any blooms next spring. Believe me, many people make the mistake of pruning their old wood bloomers in the fall, and then they regret doing it.

What about removing old blooms? Hydrangeas should be deadheaded after blooms fade. When you cut for flower arrangements before August, cut long stems back to buds at the axil of the leaves. When you cut back the blooms after the first of August, it would be safest to remove them with a very short stem so not to disturb any developing buds for next summer.

How to prune? Thin out weak stems to control shape and size. Remove dead or crossing stems. Cut these stems close to the ground. Remember buds for blooms are produced on old wood and the more old wood you remove the less floral display in the spring and summer. To rejuvenate the hydrangea, remove up to 1/3 of the older living stems down to the ground each summer. This will revitalize the plant. If necessary to control the size of the plant, cut back before late July to allow for buds to develop. Usually the plant will return immediately to its former size. This is why it's best to plant hydrangeas where they have enough space to grow.

New Wood Bloomers

These are the hydrangeas that set flower buds on current season wood (new wood). It is easy to grow these hydrangeas because they bloom every year regardless of how they are cared for or treated. They can be pruned to the ground in the fall and they will emerge in the spring with bountiful blooms. However over a period of time this drastic pruning may cause the plant to slowly weaken. Included in this group are the PeeGee types (*H. paniculata*) and the Annabelle types (*H. arborescence*). Both of these are gaining in popularity and more available in nurseries.



New Wood Bloomer: Annabelle

'PeeGees' can be pruned in the fall or winter. Trim out dead and crossing stems and prune to shape the plant. It is not necessary to prune every year. These types can also be trained as a tree. Careful pruning is required to develop the trunk and main branches.

'Annabelle' can be planted as hedges. Pruning can consist of selectively removing weak, crossing and dead stems. They also can be pruned to the ground each dormant season, but over time they will start developing weaker stems and will need to be staked.

There is one exception - "Endless Blooming"

'Endless Summer' variety produces flowers on old and new wood. It blooms in early spring and then blooms later on new wood. This plant can continue to produce flowers all summer. Cut faded flower stems to half their length to encourage new growth and buds. Prune after last bloom in the fall to control shape and height.

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