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Pruning Hydrangeas for Best Bloom

SUMMARY

To maximize bloom on Hydrangeas, you need to know which type you have and then adjust the pruning time according to type.

Q: I planted a blooming hydrangea last year but this year there were far fewer blooms. Did I prune at the wrong time?

A: It is very possible that when and how you pruned is responsible for fewer blooms this year. There are three basic types of hydrangeas: old wood bloomers, new wood bloomers and endless bloomers. If you prune at the wrong time you may disturb developing buds for the following year's blooms. If you are in doubt about what type of hydrangea is growing in your garden, wait until after the plant blooms and prune only those stems that have already bloomed.

Old Wood Bloomers:

Most of our gardens contain old wood bloomers, which includes the familiar Lacecap or Big Leaf (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) and Oakleaf (*H. quercifolia*) hydrangeas. This group flowers from bloom buds developed on last season's stems, i.e., old wood. Whereas new wood stems are green and succulent, old wood stems are brown and woody.

The bloom buds on old wood bloomers starts developing in August and September after the plant finishes blooming.

In California, and depending upon your microclimate and the plant's growth, it may not be necessary to prune every year. However, you may want to prune if you plant is overgrown or lanky. It is recommended that you prune after bloom in the summer and before the plant starts developing its bloom buds. As a general rule, you should limit pruning to 30% of total plant mass. If you didn't prune earlier and want to do so now, limit pruning as follows: moving from the tip of the stem to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch above the first bud set, make a clean diagonal cut with the bud facing outward. If you cut further down on the stem you will be removing next season's blooms. The later you prune old wood bloomers and the more you prune, the more blooms you will be sacrificing. Removal of broken, crossed or dead stems should be done annually. To determine if the stem is dead, use your thumb to scrape along



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the stem. If it does not scrape green, the stem is dead and can be cut to the ground. Also, remove dead leaves and debris around the base of the plant.

New Wood Bloomers:

New wood bloomers include PeeGee (*H. paniculata*), with their distinctive cone shaped bloom heads, and Annabelle (*H. arborescens*), which produces large white bloom heads, some ten inches in diameter. This group develops their bloom buds on the current season wood, i.e., new wood.

New wood bloomers can be pruned any time of year except when they are preparing to bloom. Annabelles bloom in the spring and PeeGees in the summer. Many publications state that new wood bloomers can be cut to the ground in the fall; however, the American Hydrangea Society cautions that such drastic pruning may result in decreased stem size that cannot hold up the large bloom heads and will require staking. As with old wood bloomers, you should annually remove broken, dead or crossed canes as well as leaves and debris at the base of the plant.

Endless Bloomers:

This group blooms on old and new wood, producing flowers from spring through summer. Prune if necessary to shape the plant and control the height.

Endless bloomers can be pruned after their last bloom in the fall.

General Hydrangea Care:

All hydrangeas require a rich porous soil and even moisture. If needed, they can be fed with compost (preferable) or a balanced fertilizer (equal parts of nitrogen, phosphorous & potassium) in the spring and again in mid-summer. However, do not apply fertilizer after August when the plants are preparing to enter dormancy as this could trigger growth which would likely to be too vulnerable to withstand winter.

For More Information:

The following University of California IPM web page contains information on the management of the common pests and diseases of hydrangeas:

<http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/GARDEN/PLANTTS/hydrangea.html>

