

The Age-Old Question: When Should I Prune Hydrangeas?

By Susan Camp

That old question arises every spring. I even ask myself, “Now, when should I prune my hydrangeas?” I think I have finally figured it out for the ones in our garden, but there is no single answer. The right time of year to prune your hydrangeas is a tricky proposition. Pruning time depends on the species, and if you don’t know the species, you can ruin your flower display for the season. Some species of hydrangea bloom on old wood, and some on new wood. To confuse the issue, remontant or reblooming hydrangeas are bred to bloom on both old and new wood. Problems arise when you don’t know or can’t remember which type you have.

Hydrangeas that bloom on old wood should be pruned in June or July after flowering. If you prune them in the spring, you will cut off the buds that are waiting to bloom. Hydrangeas that bloom on new wood should be pruned in late winter before new spring growth appears.

Remove dead, damaged, or diseased branches at any time of year, cutting them to the ground. You can also remove branches that cross or rub together and those that stick out at weird angles and disturb the appearance of the shrub. Scrape the branch with a sharp knife to check for green wood underneath.

This information seems easy to remember, but what used to stump me was that I didn’t know my own hydrangeas well enough to remember whether they should be pruned on old wood or new. I fixed that problem by saving the plant tags.

Six species of hydrangea are planted in American gardens. The most popular species is the classic bigleaf hydrangea (*H. macrophylla*), which comes in two types: classic mopheads and dainty lacecaps. The traditional species bloom on old wood, and produce fewer new blooms as the summer progresses so the shrubs should be pruned in June or July after the flowers have faded. These shrubs set their buds in late summer or early fall. If you wait to prune until then, you will remove next spring’s blossoms.

The good news for me is that three of our mopheads are Endless Summer® hydrangeas, cold-hardy rebloomers that flower on both old and new wood and require minimal pruning in late summer or early fall. Pruning them amounts to removing the spent flowers and cutting the stems back to the first pair of healthy buds.

Our other hydrangeas include three varieties of oakleaf hydrangea (*H. quercifolia*): ‘Jetstream,’ ‘Snowflake,’ and ‘Gatsby Gal.’ Oakleaf hydrangeas are North American natives that reach heights of 5 to 10 feet with long, cone-shaped panicles of white flowers and large oak leaf-shaped leaves. *H. quercifolia* blooms on old wood, so it should be pruned in summer after it flowers.

Two species, panicle hydrangea (*H. paniculata*) and smooth hydrangea (*H. arborescens*), another North American native with white flowers, are most often seen in Northern gardens. Both species bloom on new wood, so their flower buds form after the spring leaves appear. These species should be cut back hard in January, February, or March.

The two other species, mountain hydrangea (*H. serrata*) and climbing hydrangea (*H. anomala* subsp. *petiolaris*) bloom on old wood and are pruned in summer. Remontant cultivars of *H. serrata* are available.

You can rejuvenate an old hydrangea by cutting old or dead wood back to the ground. This technique will stimulate new growth and flowers during the summer. Deadheading old flowers or not is a matter of preference and won't hurt the shrub either way. If you aren't sure of the type of hydrangea you have, another choice is simply not to prune at all. Your hydrangeas will survive without pruning, but they will produce lovelier, more abundant blossoms and healthier foliage if you prune them properly.

VCE Publication 430-462 "A Guide to Successful Pruning: Shrub Pruning Calendar" provides correct pruning times for most garden shrubs. Helpful websites include:

<https://extension.umd.edu/resource/guide-pruning-hydrangeas>;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGRNmUHzmWI>; and

<https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/.../3010-1463/3010-1463.htm>

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