

## Why, When and How to Prune Hydrangeas

Most hydrangeas will survive with minimal pruning if they are in a suitable location. However, pruning can help gardeners to achieve a desired plant size, bloom size or plant shape. It can also help the plant thrive by focusing its energy on new growth.

There are three main hydrangea pruning methods: removing dead and dying wood, removing spent blooms and hard pruning. The first two types of pruning can be done at almost any time of year, but hard pruning is best done by paying attention to the kind of hydrangea being pruned. Each hydrangea species has its own pruning guidelines for optimal results.

### Removing Dead and Dying Wood

It is important to remove dead and dying wood to maintain the health of the plant. This can be done at any time. Very old canes are usually darker and have more peeling bark than the younger ones. Therefore, it's easier to identify which ones to remove if you look in late winter or early spring before the plant has fully leafed out but buds are just beginning to show. Cut the canes back to the base of the plant. Also remove dead wood and leaves from the base of the plant.

### Removing Spent Blooms (Deadheading)

This is optional – blooms will eventually disintegrate and fall on their own. Spent blooms can be attractive when left on the plant, particularly those of the Oakleaf Hydrangea. If you choose to remove dried blooms, you can do so at any time. Cut back to a good bud or leaf.

### Hard Pruning

Reshaping, resizing, thinning (renewing) and removing most of the plant (rejuvenating) are called “hard” pruning because they remove healthy wood in order to achieve their effect. When healthy wood is removed, it stimulates new growth that needs to mature or

“harden” before winter to avoid cold damage. For this reason, *hard pruning should not be done in the Fall.*

In addition, it's important to know what type of hydrangea you have. Some hydrangeas bloom on the current season's growth, while others bloom on growth from prior seasons. Pruning at the wrong time won't hurt the plant, but you may not have blooms when you expect them. The general rule is:

- If it blooms on the current season's growth, do hard pruning in late winter or early spring before significant growth has started.
- If it blooms on prior seasons' growth, do hard pruning in the spring or summer after blooming but before mid-July.

Hydrangeas usually do best if they have long canes without a lot of branching. Therefore, when doing hard pruning, cut canes back to the base to keep a compact shrub shape. PG and Oakleaf types are an exception if you want them to reach their natural heights. See following page for guidance on identifying and pruning each hydrangea type.

### Resources

“A Quick Guide to Pruning Hydrangeas” at University of Maryland Extension ([www.extension.umd.edu](http://www.extension.umd.edu))

“How to Prune Hydrangea” at University of Illinois Extension ([extension.illinois.edu](http://extension.illinois.edu))

“Hydrangea Selection, Pruning and Care” at Virginia Cooperative Extension ([www.ext.vt.edu](http://www.ext.vt.edu))

“Pruning Hydrangeas” at Clemson Cooperative Extension ([hgic.clemson.edu](http://hgic.clemson.edu))

Pruning & Training: What, When and How to Prune, by Christopher Brickell and David Joyce, 2017

### Guidelines for Pruning of Hydrangeas

Hydrangea Species	How to Identify	Blooming and Pruning
<p><b>Bigleaf Hydrangea</b>  <i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i>                      e.g., 'Nikko Blue'                      It's the most common variety in garden centers.                      A.k.a. French hydrangea.</p>	 <p>Large, fairly-round leaves. Both spherical (mophead) and flat bloom (lacecap) varieties.</p>	<p>Blooms on previous seasons' growth.</p> <p>→ Prune after blooming, no later than mid-July.                      → Deadhead to good buds in early spring just after buds emerge.                      → Remove old or dead canes completely when deadheading.</p>
<p><b>Oakleaf Hydrangea</b>  <i>Hydrangea quercifolia</i>                      Mid-Atlantic native</p>	 <p>Very large conical blooms and oak-like leaf shape. Peeling bark adds fall/winter interest. Up to 15 feet tall.</p>	<p>Blooms on previous seasons' growth.</p> <p>→ Prune after blooming, no later than mid-July, if desired. Usually, no pruning is recommended unless to reshape or reduce, because attractive peeling bark is on old canes.</p>
<p><b>PG/PeeGee/Tree Hydrangea</b>  <i>Hydrangea paniculata</i>                      e.g., 'Limelight', Pinky Winky®</p>	 <p>Conical blooms. Certain varieties can get up to 25 ft tall if not rejuvenated regularly.</p>	<p>Blooms on current season's growth.</p> <p>→ Thin to 5-10 primary canes (renew) each year in late winter/early spring for larger blooms.                      → Cut to base (rejuvenate) every few years in late winter/early spring to maintain size and shape. It will still bloom. Otherwise, it may grow larger than desired.</p>
<p><b>Smooth Hydrangea</b>  <i>Hydrangea arborescens</i>                      Mid-Atlantic native                      e.g., 'Annabelle'</p>	 <p>Round, white flowers. Native type has "fuzzy" blooms.</p>	<p>Blooms on current season's growth.</p> <p>→ Thin to 5-10 primary canes each year in late winter/early spring for larger blooms.                      → If desired, cut to base (rejuvenate) every few years in late winter/early spring. It will still bloom.</p>
<p><b>Reblooming Hydrangea</b>                      Certain varieties of Bigleaf Hydrangea  <i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i>                      e.g., Endless Summer™ varieties</p>	<p>They look the same as their regular Bigleaf cousins and will be labeled as Reblooming at the nursery. They come in mophead and lacecap varieties.</p> <p>For existing plants, you can tell they're Reblooming by observing them for one season to see if they bloom twice. If in doubt, treat as a regular Bigleaf Hydrangea.</p>	<p>Blooms throughout season on both new growth <u>and</u> previous seasons' growth.</p> <p>→ Prune any time. Hard pruning in late winter limits spring blooming. Pruning in early/mid-summer limits summer blooming.</p>