

## Pruning Hydrangeas

By Manette Lazear, Fairfax County Master Gardener

One of the critical factors for successful hydrangea bloom is when and how to prune. Although often thought to be confusing or mysterious, hydrangea pruning is actually quite easy and straight forward. The key factor determining pruning is whether the plant blooms on new or old wood. That is, do the blooms develop on this season's new growth or last year's mature stalks? It is always best to choose a plant that fits the space it will occupy. In that way, pruning can be kept to a minimum and done only for the wellbeing of the plant and to promote vigorous flowering.

There are five types of hydrangeas, which fall into two pruning groups.

Group I, generally, bloom on old wood. These plants produce flower buds on stems from August through October for the following summer's blooms. If these stems are pruned in the fall, winter, or spring, the bloom buds will be removed, and there will be little or no bloom the following summer. Types in this group are:

- ◆ Hydrangea macrophylla (mophead and lacecap)  
(Hydrangea serrata is a sub-species of macrophylla)
- ◆ Hydrangea quercifolia (Oakleaf)

Group II bloom on new wood. These plants produce flower buds in the current season, beginning about a month or two before they bloom. Therefore, they can be pruned anytime after they bloom and up until they begin producing flower buds. Types in this group are:

- ◆ Hydrangea arborescens ('Annabelle' and family)
- ◆ Hydrangea paniculata (PeeGee and family)
- ◆ Hydrangea anomala petiolaris (climbing hydrangea)

The everblooming or perpetual blooming varieties of Hydrangea macrophylla also belong to Group II.

The following table summarizes hydrangea growth, flowering and pruning.

Type	Height/Width	Bloom Time	Blooms on:	Pruning Group	Pruning Details
Hydrangea macrophylla	3-6 ft high & wide	late spring thru summer	old wood	I	Generally prune to shape after flowering.
Hydrangea macrophylla ( <u>everblooming varieties</u> )	3-6 ft high & wide	reblooms spring thru fall	old and new wood	II	Deadhead promptly to encourage continuous bloom.
Hydrangea quercifolia	4-12 ft high; wider than tall	peak bloom in July	old wood	I	Prune immediately after flowering.
Hydrangea arborescens	3-5 ft high; wider than tall	June thru summer	new wood	II	Prune sparingly or to the ground in fall or late winter.
Hydrangea paniculata	10-20 ft high and wide	July to September	new wood	II	Prune fall thru early spring.
Hydrangea anomala petiolaris	30-80 ft vine	June to early July	new wood	II	Prune if needed in summer after flowering or in early spring.

Some types of pruning can be done at any time, regardless of hydrangea type:

- ◆ Removing old blooms down to the closest set of leaves, called deadheading, can be done continuously and, in some types, will encourage a prolonged bloom season. Removing old blooms, however, is not absolutely necessary. Many people let the blooms mature on the bush and use them for dried flower arrangements in the fall. Spent blooms that remain on the plant over the winter may protect the tender growth buds below them from winter damage. Instead, remove the dead flowerheads in early spring when the shrub begins to leaf out by cutting back to the first strong, healthy pair of buds lower down the stem.
- ◆ Removing dead stems should be done each year. Any obviously dead stalks can be cut at anytime. Care should be taken, however, to wait until the plant begins to leaf-out in the spring so it will be clear which stalks are really dead.
- ◆ Cutting blooms for display can be done as needed. When harvesting flowers in June and July from Group I types you can cut them with as long a stem as you like because bloom buds have not begun to form for the following year. Beginning around August first it is best to harvest these blooms on short stems, above the first set of large leaves, so as not to disturb next year's buds developing further down the stalk.
- ◆ Shaping a plant by removing a few stalks can be done occasionally at any time of year.

Some additional comments on each of the hydrangea types may also prove helpful.

**Hydrangea macrophylla** is the bush that produces blue or pink blooms, according to soil pH. In general, these hydrangeas do not need pruning. However, as they can get quite large, it is important to plant these where they will have space to reach their natural size. Mature plants may be rejuvenated by removing about one quarter to one third of the oldest stems down to the root line in the spring. This will promote new growth from the root for the following year's bloom while still leaving enough mature stalks to bloom in the current season. This technique can also be used to prevent a bush from becoming too large. The most reliably reblooming (remontant) *Hydrangea macrophylla* varieties are those in the 'Endless Summer' series. 'Nikko Blue' will often produce blooms on new wood late in the season.

**Hydrangea quercifolia** is called oakleaf because its leaves resemble those of oak trees. Depending on the variety, it can become quite large. Ideally, this hydrangea should be left unpruned, except to remove dead or injured stems. If pruning does become necessary to limit size or for shaping, it is best done in late summer or early autumn, after it has bloomed. Some varieties such as 'Pee Wee' recommend shearing annually after flowering to achieve a formal appearance. The variety 'Vaughn's Lillie' advises pruning annually in late winter to promote vigorous new growth.

**Hydrangea arborescens** can be pruned at any time except within a month or two before flowering. Different varieties are grown in different ways to produce different effects. Often they are cut almost to the ground each fall to avoid drooping, dead-looking stalks during the winter. This type of pruning can also be done in late winter. Plants pruned in this way can still achieve a height of up to six feet and bear huge flower heads that may need staking to prevent drooping. Planted closely together to help hold each other up these *Hydrangeas* can create an attractive hedge. Pruning less drastically to 18-24 inches from the ground will allow stems to thicken a little each year. In this way they will become stronger and better able to support the large blooms. Unpruned shrubs can reach ten feet or more. Once established in this way their flower heads will be more plentiful but smaller, and less likely to droop. Initially, however, the shrub may be top-heavy and flop to the ground by midseason.

**Hydrangea paniculata** can be pruned in the fall, winter, or spring. Corrective pruning of dead, over-vigorous, or crossing branches that do not contribute to an attractive form is advised as this shrub can rapidly become overgrown. The fewer the number of branches on the shrub, the larger the panicles will be. It may be pruned to 18-24 inches of the ground to promote new growth and a controlled size and shape. This hydrangea can also be developed into a single or multi-stemmed tree form.

**Hydrangea anomala**, **Hydrangea petiolaris** are closely related, with *petiolaris* sometimes classified as a subspecies of *anomala*. They require little pruning except as necessary to confine the plant within its designated space. Removing dead flower heads close to the main stems will promote future bloom. Once established, this vine can develop a bushy habit, with lateral branches growing out a foot or more from the support structure, giving the foliage a tiered effect. In mature plants it is good to shorten these outward growing laterals from time to time to allow more sunlight into canopy. This should be done in summer after blooming or in early spring. It can be pruned hard if rejuvenation is required.