



Hydrangeas

Hydrangeas are easy to grow in rich, porous soil, but they do require regular water. There are many different hydrangeas. Some hydrangeas have flower clusters containing sterile flowers (conspicuous with large petal-like sepals), others have fertile flowers (small, starry petaled) and others have both. These have small fertile flowers surrounded by big sterile ones (i.e. lacecaps and oakleaves). Fertile flowers are attractive to pollinators (e.g. butterflies and bees), but sterile flowers offer long lasting blooms.

Problems with blooming are usually (1) the result of pruning at the wrong time or (2) too much fertilizer promoting leafy growth, or (3) very deep shade.

Pruning timing matters. In order to ensure blooms next year, it is important to know when your hydrangeas bloom. Some hydrangeas bloom on old growth; these should be pruned soon after flowering. Other hydrangeas bloom on new growth and should be pruned in late winter or early spring before breaking dormancy, when they are no longer frozen. Pruning may improve the plant's vigor and increase bloom size. Hydrangeas can go many years without being pruned unless you need to manage size, improve the plant's vigor, increase flower size or don't like the looks of fading blooms.

The following bloom on old wood:

Prune in mid summer after the flowers begin fading (complete pruning by mid to late July)

***Hydrangea macrophylla*— Bigleaf, Hortensia or Florist Hydrangea**

This commonly grown hydrangea has large globe-shaped flowers. It is frequently forced by florists and sold as an indoor plant in spring. Once moved outdoors (if hardy), flower color depends on the soil pH where it is grown: blue if acid; pink if alkaline. Most Rockland County soils are acidic. If your soil is not and you would like blue blossoms, add sulfur or aluminum sulfate, based on a soil test. If pink blossoms are desired, add lime to the soil (based on a soil pH test). Soil modifications must be done well ahead of bloom time. There are also several white-flowered cultivars.

Pruning may be done at two different times. Most of these hydrangeas flower only on the end buds of upright or lateral shoots produced during late summer and fall of the previous season. Prune as soon as the flowers fade and strong shoots are developing from the lower parts of the stems and crown. Remove some of the weaker shoots at the base, including both old and new ones. Always try to keep several stems of old productive wood, with sufficient number of stout new stems that will flower the following season. Early-spring pruning (March), although acceptable, will result in sacrificing blooms for that growing season.

Pruning this species in fall is harmful. New growth, both vegetative and flowering, will not mature properly. These hydrangeas flower more abundantly in an open, sunny location, but this increases vulnerability to winter bud damage. Winter protection of the plant should be initiated in December to preserve buds for next year's flowering. Tie the shoots together and wrap with burlap. If left unprotected, delay spring pruning until the buds swell in order to determine which stems need to be removed, and then cut back to below the point of injury.

***Hydrangea serrata*—Bigleaf Lacecap Hydrangea**

The lacecap hydrangea is more delicate in appearance with slender stems, narrow leaves and smaller flowers. Lacecaps are beautiful in woodland gardens. This hydrangea rarely needs pruning.

***Hydrangea quercifolia*—Oakleaf Hydrangea**

The oakleaf hydrangea is distinctive with handsome foliage, excellent fall color, attractive flowers and interesting bark. It is ideally suited to a lightly shaded or protected location, and if grown in an exposed site, it is subject to some winter dieback. Prune back in early spring to remove dead wood. Cut back to below the point of injury at the base of a branch.

The following bloom on new wood:

Prune in late winter or early spring before breaking dormancy.

***Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Grandiflora’—Hills-of-Snow or Smooth Hydrangea**

Prune these hydrangeas to the ground each year in late winter or early spring because they flower abundantly on new growth, and are frequently killed back during winter. If a larger shrub is desired (three or more feet) or if the shrub is not killed back over the winter, prune less severely. To reduce flopping, cut back old growth stems to 18 to 24 inches to create a framework to support the new growth.

***Hydrangea paniculata* ‘Grandiflora’—Peegee or Panicle Hydrangea**

This is one of the most commonly planted hydrangeas because of its massive displays of large white flowers in mid- to late summer. The blooms gradually turn to pink and remain on the plant in a semi-dried condition long after the leaves have fallen. Pruning involves the removal of dead flowers, if unattractive, and annual corrective pruning of vigorous shoots. Thin or cut back the previous season’s growth in late winter or early spring, because flower clusters occur on newly developing branches. Without regular pruning, this hydrangea can rapidly become overgrown in the landscape. It may be developed into a single or multi-stemmed tree form.

Climbing Hydrangea

***Hydrangea anomala petiolaris*—Climbing Hydrangea**

Climbing hydrangea is a flowering woody vine that attaches itself by aerial roots to brick, masonry or wood. It blooms mid-summer. It requires little or no pruning. If certain shoots have grown out of bounds, reduce their length in summer. Frequently concern is expressed that climbing vines may cause irreparable damage to a tree: this is an unlikely occurrence from climbing hydrangea.

Drying Hydrangea Flowers

Hydrangea blossoms make attractive dried flowers. Drying is easy. The *Hydrangea paniculata* ‘Grandiflora’ (Peegee or Panicle Hydrangea) dries the most successfully. The flowers dry to light beige. Cut the flowers when they begin to turn pinkish and feel papery. Stand the stems in a tall container with a couple inches of water. Let the water evaporate and the flowers will dry upright.

Resources: [Hydrangea Types: How to Prune](#), by Richard Weir III, **Long Island Gardening**, Cornell Cooperative Extension-Suffolk County, March/April 1992.; [Pruning Hydrangeas](#) by Janet Carson, **Fine Gardening** May-June 2007, pg 51-53

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