

Pruning Hydrangeas: How and When to Prune Each Type

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When do you prune your hydrangea? It depends. If your hydrangea blooms on “old” wood, you can NOT cut back in the fall or you sacrificed next year’s flowers! See our handy chart on when to prune common types of hydrangea.

Chart: When to Prune Hydrangeas

Hydrangea Type	When to Prune	Where Flowers Appear
Mophead and Bigleaf (<i>H. macrophylla</i>)	After flowering (summer)	On old growth
Oakleaf (<i>H. quercifolia</i>)	After flowering (summer)	On old growth
Panicle (<i>H. paniculata</i>)	Late winter/early spring, before spring growth	On new growth

Smooth (<i>H. arborescens</i>)	Late winter/early spring, before spring growth	On new growth
Mountain (<i>H. serrata</i>)	After flowering (summer)	On old growth
Climbing (<i>H. anomala</i> subsp. <i>petiolaris</i>)	After flowering (summer)	On old growth

Photos and Tips by Hydrangea Variety

Both mophead and lacecap hydrangeas are considered **bigleaf** or **macrophylla hydrangeas**, so ***they can be pruned right after flowering*** by cutting back the flowering shoots to the next bud. If you have older plants that aren't blooming well, you can cut up to a third of the stems off at the base in late summer to encourage new growth.

Mophead and Bigleaf Hydrangeas (*Hydrangea macrophylla*)

There are hydrangea hybrids that grow on both old and new wood. My '**Endless Summer**' mophead hydrangea (hardy from zones 4 to 9) has the wonderful ability to ***bloom on both old and new wood***. Endless Summer hydrangeas thrive with sun in the morning and shade in the afternoon. You do not have to prune your Endless Summer Hydrangea since they bloom on both old and new growth but if you need to cut back, do so immediately after blooming. Remove only dead stems in the spring.

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'Endless Summer' in a good year.

My other blue hydrangea is a **lacecap-type**, called '**Let's Dance Starlight**', but instead of the huge, mophead-type of flower cluster that 'Endless Summer' has, the lacecap hydrangea bears a flat blossom made up of many small, fertile flowers surrounded by a few showy, sterile flowers. It is hardy from Zones 5 to 9 and ***blooms on both old and new wood***. As with Endless Summer, pruning is generally not needed, but it may be trimmed lightly after the first flowering.

Bottom-line: Mophead and Bigleaf hydrangeas should only be pruned just after the flowers have faded and no later.



Lacecap 'Let's Dance Starlight'

Panicle Hydrangeas (*H. paniculata*)

The hydrangeas grown most often in cooler climates are the **panicle-types**, since they are not only beautiful, but also very hardy, surviving Zone 3 winters with no problems. One of the oldest and most reliable favorites is '**Grandiflora**', also known as **Pee Gee hydrangea**. Native to China and Japan, it was the first Asian hydrangea cultivar introduced to the United States, in 1862. They were a big hit during the Victorian era. The flowers start out a creamy white and turn a rosy pink as they age. They can be dried and look lovely in a winter arrangement. Find out how to [dry these lovely hydrangeas here](#).

There are many panicle-types to choose from. I have one called '**Pinky Winky**' that has long, cone-shaped white and pink flowers, and also '**Vanilla Strawberry**', which has panicles that color from white at the tip to pink in the middle and red at the base. For something different, try '**Limelight**,' which has chartreuse flowers that gradually turn pink in autumn.

Bottom-line: Panicle-type hydrangeas should be *pruned in late winter or early spring*. While they could be pruned in fall, we highly advise waiting until late winter/early spring to reduce risk of injury.



Panicle-type hydrangea 'Vanilla Strawberry'

Smooth Hydrangeas (*H. arborescens*)

Smooth hydrangeas are North American natives, originally found growing wild in Pennsylvania. They tolerate light shade, begin to bloom in June, and continue to blossom until fall. Their white flowers are round and can reach 12 inches in diameter.



Smooth hydrangea 'Annabelle'

The popular cultivar '**Annabelle**' grows to be 3-5 feet tall and can be used to light up a shady path or as a mass planting at the edge of the woods. It is hardy to Zone 3.

Bottom-line: Smooth hydrangeas can be *pruned back to the ground in late winter or early spring*. While they could be pruned in fall, we highly advise waiting until late winter/early spring.

Oakleaf Hydrangeas (*H. quercifolia*)

Oak-leaf hydrangeas are another North American native, having been discovered in Georgia in 1773.



Oak-leaf hydrangea. Credit: Gerry Bishop/Shutterstock

Also called swamp snowball, it is hardy to zone 5 and though it prefers full sun, it can take some shade and still blossom well. It blooms a little later than the other hydrangeas, beginning in August. Its flowers are large panicles that start out white and turn dark pink as they age. The leaves, which are deeply lobed like an oak leaf, turn a rich maroon red in the fall.

Bottom-line: Oakleaf hydrangeas, which bloom on old wood, should only be pruned just after the flowers have faded and no later.

Learn More

Not sure which hydrangea you have? We can help. See our article on [Different Hydrangea Varieties](#) (with pictures!).

And enjoy our free complete [Guide to Hydrangeas](#) for all your planting, growing, and pruning questions!

[Pruning](#)

About The Author

Robin Sweetser



Robin has been a contributor to The Old Farmer's Almanac and the All-Seasons Garden Guide for many years. [Read More from Robin Sweetser](#)

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The image displays four covers of publications from The Old Farmer's Almanac. From left to right: 1. 'Gardening 2024' featuring a blue jay and yellow daffodils. 2. 'The Old Farmer's Almanac 2024' with a traditional almanac design. 3. 'Garden Guide 2023' showing various garden scenes. 4. 'Gardening for Everyone' with a collage of garden plants. Below the covers is a red button with the text 'Join The Gardening Club!'.

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