

The Wonderful Hydrangea



Hydrangea (hi-dran-gee-a) are mostly native to the eastern mountains of Japan and Korea. Two species are native to North America: Smooth Hydrangea with lacecap flowers; and Oakleaf with a paniced flower. Both get quite large. Most Asian Hydrangea are lacecaps. European breeders fell in love with the more showy mophead and the race was on for bigger and more colorful mopheads.

Types of Hydrangeas:

Arborescens (Smooth) Hydrangea: Most are mophead flowers and blossom on current year wood (stems generated the same year as flowering). The colors range from white to pink, no blue.

Macrophylla (Big leaf) Hydrangea: All are mophead or lacecap blossoms. These are the trickiest to prune. Most flowers on second year wood (stems generated the year before), however, re-bloomers blossom on both current and second year stems. The colors range from white to pink to blue. Aluminum uptake is what allows the blossoms to change from pink to blue. With enough aluminum the flower color can range to purple/blue. A hard winter can freeze out next year's blossoms

Paniculata (Panicle) Hydrangea: Blossoms are shaped like an ice cream cone. Blossoms on current year stems, so pruning in the spring is fine. Colors range from white to deep pink and the blossoms change color from beginning to end.

Quercifolia (Oakleaf) Hydrangea: A panicle flower. Blossoms are pink and white, foliage is shaped like an oakleaf, hence the name. Flowers buds are developed in late summer so prune after flowering, leaving some terminal shoots. A hard winter can freeze out next year's blossoms. This is a very nice looking shrub without flowers with foliage turning dark burgundy in the autumn and exfoliating bark for winter interest.

Climbing Hydrangea: A slow to establish vine that needs heavy duty support as it develops. Blossoms on second year stems. A cream colored, slightly fragrant, lacecap flower. Flower is fragrant and a good pollinator. Beautiful exfoliating bark visible in the winter. Give it room to spread out.

Flower Shapes:

Mophead (snowball): Large round clusters of very small fertile flowers covered by the much larger petals. This inhibits pollination. These are the most popular.

Lacecap: Lacecap is flat topped, has a center of fertile flowers surrounded by petals, allowing for pollination. Not as showy but good for pollination

Panicle: Panicle flowers are large flowers that come to a point. Some of the panicle flowers can be 6-8" tall. Lots of new cultivars.

Pruning 101

Arborescens (Smooth) Hydrangea: *Blossoms on current year stems.* Cut back close to the ground in the fall. This plant will send up shoots so stay on top of removing them in the spring, if you don't want it to spread. Will blossom reliably from year to year regardless of the severity of winter. If not pruned heavily it will produce more abundant, but smaller flowers.

Macrophylla (Big leaf) Hydrangea: *Blooms on old wood.* Sets new flower buds in the fall when night temperature fall below 60F/16C. The flower buds must survive the winter if they are to mature into big beautiful flowers the following summer. We call this blooming on old wood. This can be a problem: a hard winter; an early fall freeze; a late spring freeze; or untimely pruning; will result in flower loss. The best time to prune is in early to mid-July. Prune any non-flowering stems in half, depending on the size of the plant. This helps to produce short stems which keeps the next crop of flower buds close to the ground where they can be more easily protected from winter damage. It is critical that you cease pruning and fertilizing by the beginning of August. This allows time for the new flower buds to form and harden off before winter. Also, cut back on regular watering by the end of August. This will slow down the growth, help to induce flower bud formation and make the plant less susceptible to winter injury.

Re-Blooming Macrophylla (Big leaf) Hydrangea: *Blossoms on new AND old wood.* Reblooming hydrangeas produce flowers on both old and new wood. That makes it tough to find a good time to prune them without sacrificing some flowers. They can be pruned the same way as hydrangeas that bloom on old wood, meaning only prune out a few (if any) dead branches in the spring once the plant starts to leaf out and you can deadhead after it's finished blooming.

Paniculata (Panicle) Hydrangea: *Blossoms on new wood.* Cut back close to the ground in the fall. New growth will come up in the spring covering what was cut back.

Quercifolia (Oakleaf) Hydrangea: *Blooms on old wood.* Sends new flower buds in the fall, so it needs to be pruned in the summer just after it is done flowering, typically mid-late July.

Winterizing

Mulch and Protect: In late fall, mulch the base of your plant with six to ten inches of bark or peat moss. This protects the buds on short stems but more important is protects the crown. Apply the mulch after the onset of cold weather but before the temperature falls below the teens. This mulch will be removed or spread out in the spring after the danger of frost has passed.

*We had a late winter cold spell in 2018 that knocked many Hydrangeas back to the ground. As a result, the old wood buds were killed, and blossoms lost. The plants looked great with big, dark green leaves because no energy was going into flowering. The re-bloomer varieties were able to set blossoms on current year wood but in the end, that year the big leaf hydrangeas had far fewer blossoms.