

Hydrangea Care Calendar

Alabama Hydrangea Society / Compiled by David Doggett / Updated 2021

Bigleaf or "French" or Blue/Pink Hydrangeas – <i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i> and <i>Hydrangea serrata</i> Mophead or lacecap blooms of blue, pink, or white appear in May on "old wood."	Examples: Nikko Blue, Penny Mac, Sister Theresa, Bluebird, Endless Summer, Merritt's Supreme, Fuji Waterfall, and Preziosa. Flower buds are set at the end of the previous year's growing season and too often are damaged by our fluctuating winter cold.
March – apply a slow-release fertilizer such as Osmocote for 4-month feeding.	Alternatively, apply light fertilizer in March, May, and June. ² "[Bigleaf hydrangeas] requires moderate to high nutrient levels." ¹
May – remove dead stems that show no sign of life	Don't be too quick to remove dead-looking stems. Some stems will just be late to leaf out.
May – propagation: softwood cuttings can be rooted.	From late April through July cuttings can be prepared for rooting. ¹
June – deadhead fading flowers of repeat bloomers to promote more new flowers this season.	Repeat bloomers include: Endless Summer series, Penny Mac, Mini Penny, David Ramsey, Oak Hill, Decatur Blue, Dear Dolores.
June – "Prune immediately after bloom." ³ Shorten stems by ¼ to ½. Cut 1/3 of oldest stems to the ground if old hydrangea requires rejuvenation.	Complete any pruning by mid to late July. "Next year's flower buds begin forming in August." ²

Oakleaf Hydrangeas – <i>Hydrangea quercifolia</i> White conical blooms appear in late May on "old wood."	Examples: Snowflake, Harmony, Snow Queen, Pee Wee, Alice. Flower buds are set at the end of the previous year's growing season. A plant native to the southeast.
April – apply a slow-release fertilizer such as Osmocote for 4-month feeding.	Alternatively, apply two light applications of fertilizer in April and June. ² Native plants like Oakleaf hyd. generally need less fertilizer.
July – complete pruning (rarely needed) by end of July.	"Prune right after bloom." ⁴ Pruning is rarely needed except to rejuvenate a large, mature plant. To rejuvenate, cut 1/3 of oldest stems to the ground each year for 3 years.
December (dormant season) – can propagate by dividing their rooted, lateral stems. ²	Take advantage of oakleaf hydrangea's colonizing habit to cut off and pot up self-rooted stems from mature shrubs.

Smooth Hydrangeas – <i>Hydrangea arborescens</i> White blooms appear in May/June on "new wood."	Examples: Annabelle, Incrediball, Hayes Starburst, Bella Anna. Blooms appear on new season's stem growth. A native plant.
Feb./March – prune old stems to 6-12" high. ²	Blooms on new growth. "Hard pruning produces bigger flowers." ⁴
March – one annual fertilizer application. ²	Follow suggested application rate. Apply as leaves emerge.
December (dormant season) – can propagate by dividing their rooted, lateral stems. ²	Take advantage of <i>Hydrangea arborescens'</i> colonizing habit to cut off and pot up self-rooted stems.

Panicle Hydrangeas – <i>Hydrangea paniculata</i> White blooms from July-October on "new wood."	Examples: Limelight, Little Lime, Tardiva, PeeGee, Firelight, Bobo. Blooms appear on tips of current season's stems.
Feb./March – annually prune back to about 18-24" tall.	Blooms on new growth which pruning stimulates. "Do not massacre the plant by reducing it to stubs." ¹ Create branching structure.
April – apply a slow-release fertilizer such as Osmocote for 4-month feeding.	Alternatively, apply two light applications of fertilizer in April and June. ²

Climbing Hydrangeas – <i>H. anomala petiolaris</i> , <i>Schizophragma</i> , and <i>Decumaria</i> species. White lacecap-like blooms in spring on "old wood."	Examples: Schizophragma Roseum, Moonlight
March – one annual fertilizer application with slow-release fertilizer. ²	These vines are very slow to get established and may take years before beginning to bloom for the first time. Patience is required!
June – selective pruning if necessary just after flowering to keep in bounds.	Typically this plant requires little or no pruning. Light pruning may help stimulate the vine into blooming.

Planting tips:

In Alabama, Hydrangeas (except panicle hyd.) generally prefer shading from hot mid-day and afternoon sun. October through March is the best time to plant shrubs in the south – the earlier the better to allow the plant several months to establish its root system.²

Bigleaf or "French" Hyd. – Dig hole 2' wider than container, or use a raised bed if soil drains poorly. Amend soil generously with organic matter. To promote blue Bigleaf Hyd. blooms, add peat moss to soil and mulch with pine straw to help make soil pH more acidic. To promote more pink or red Bigleaf Hyd. blooms, mix 2 cups of lime into the planting soil.

Oakleaf Hyd. – must have excellent drainage to thrive. They are very sensitive to wet feet.

Panicle Hyd. – Needs minimum 5-6 hours direct sun to bloom its best. With that much sun, it needs steady watering.

Fertilizer tips:

Use a general purpose fertilizer such as 12-4-8 or 16-4-8 or slow-release Osmocote Outdoor & Indoor 19-6-12. If you want blue Bigleaf Hyd. blooms, use a fertilizer low in phosphorus (indicated by the middle number) and where the nitrogen is in nitrate form rather than ammonium. A fertilizer designed for azaleas, camellias, and rhododendrons can help acidify the soil, if needed for blue blooms. For more pink Bigleaf Hyd. blooms, add dolomite lime twice a year and fertilize with a 10-10-10 formula or Osmocote Flower & Vegetable 14-14-14 slow release fertilizer. Michael Dirr writes, "Nothing is fertilized after August 1 in the Dirr garden."¹ This allows current season's growth time to harden off before cold weather.

Bloom color of bigleaf hydrangeas:

As shown above, fertilizers can affect the bloom color of the blue or pink *H. macrophylla*. The presence of trace amounts of aluminum in the soil react with bloom pigments to create a blue bloom. A more acid soil makes the aluminum more available for roots to take up. High phosphorus in the soil will bind aluminum and inhibit its intake by the shrub. To increase the chance of blue blooms, add aluminum sulfate which both adds aluminum and increases acidity. Dissolve 1 tbs. of aluminum sulfate per gallon of water and apply this around each shrub in January, February, and March. Although most bigleaf hydrangeas have variable flower colors depending on soil pH, some cultivars just won't change to blue, such as 'Todi,' 'Masja,' 'Pia,' and 'Alpengluhen' which all retain a red or pink color no matter how low the pH dips. To increase the likelihood of pink blooms, apply 1 cup of dolomite lime in the fall around each plant.

Hydrangea Propagation:

Softwood cuttings of hydrangeas can be rooted from late-April through July.¹ After pruning smooth and panicle hydrangeas in late February, 6" tip cuttings can be rooted as hardwood cuttings. Oakleaf and smooth hydrangeas naturally colonize and these offshoots can be divided and potted up. Oakleaf seeds can be collected in Oct.-Nov. and sown in March to grow your own seedling oakleaf hydrangeas.

Alabama Cooperative Extension System has a great online resource on the topic of Hydrangeas. Go to www.aces.edu then in the box saying "Search" type in the word "hydrangea" and click the Search button. Click on the article titled "Hydrangeas". This can be printed for future reference.

References:

- ¹ Michael A. Dirr, *Hydrangeas for American Gardens*, Timber Press, 2004.
- ² *Hydrangeas*, Alabama Cooperative Extension System publication ANR-1276, www.aces.edu, 2017.
- ³ *The Southern Living Garden Book*, edited by Steve Bender, 2nd edition.

The **Alabama Hydrangea Society** holds meetings at Aldridge Gardens (3530 Lorna Road, Hoover, AL) to learn about hydrangeas. They welcome visitors and new members to their meetings. Useful articles about the care and propagating of hydrangeas can be found on their web site: www.alabamahydrangeasociety.org.