

# Hydrangea Pruning

Alabama Hydrangea Society / Compiled by David Doggett / 2018

**Bigleaf Hydrangeas / French Hydrangeas** (*Hydrangea macrophylla*, *Hydrangea serrata*) e.g., Nikko Blue, Pia, Bluebird, Endless Summer, Merritt's Supreme, Sister Theresa, Fuji Waterfall, Lady In Red, All Summer Beauty, Blue Deckle

"Pruning is forever debated!"<sup>1</sup> There are several types of pruning one can do to a French Hydrangea – each serving a different purpose. Hydrangeas can get along just fine with no pruning, but some attention to pruning can help keep them better shaped, healthier, and producing more vigorous growth and more and larger blooms. Bigleaf hydrangea flower buds develop on old (mature) stems of the previous growing season and bloom in May of the following year. Understand that any removal of flower buds by pruning or damage to buds by cold temperatures is a loss of flowering. Remember: no pruning is better than wrong pruning!<sup>2</sup>

**Maintenance Pruning (Summer)** – Since French Hydrangeas bloom on old growth, the traditional, safe practice is to prune them in the summer as flowers begin to fade. By removing the top 1/3 to 1/2 of stems on an established plant (cutting to just above a pair of growth buds), you can maintain a well-branched shrub of moderate size. Research shows that *H. macrophylla* pruned in this manner produced about 20-25% more blooms the following season than unpruned hydrangeas.<sup>1</sup> New bud formation for the following year begins in late summer/fall, so summer pruning should be completed by the end of July.

**Dead-heading (Fall/Winter)** – The dried, spent lacecap and mophead blooms that remain on French Hydrangeas can look ratty. Dead-heading is the routine, cosmetic practice of trimming off these old blooms. Trim off just the dead bloom by cutting just above the uppermost pair of leaf/flower buds. By this method you are not removing any of next year's flower buds. Some gardeners like to leave the old mophead blooms on the stems until the following spring, thinking that they help insulate the stem tips from harsh winter winds.<sup>2,3</sup> Some gardeners like to crumple up the blue mophead blooms and leave them around the shrub to return aluminum back to the soil<sup>3</sup> (trace amounts of aluminum give Hydrangea blooms their blue color). Dead-heading can be done anytime beginning when the current year blooms begin to fade but, for appearance sake, should be completed before new blooms emerge the following spring.

**Repeat Bloomer dead-heading (Summer)**: It is recommended with repeat bloomers (Endless Summer series, Oak Hill, Penny Mac, Mini Penny, Decatur Blue, David Ramsey, etc.) that if you deadhead these blooms as soon as they begin to fade, it will promote more flowering later that same growing season – even into the fall.

**Spring tip-pruning** – A few authors suggest that a light pruning of stem tips in spring can enhance flower production on *H. macrophylla*. Caution: understand that removing any flower buds from the tip in spring will result in the loss of that flower in May. A plant's stem growth is determined by its terminal (apical) bud which produces a hormone called *auxin* which suppresses growth of lateral stems and buds. This phenomenon is known as *apical dominance*. The removal of the stem tip and its terminal bud on *H. macrophylla* may allow flower buds lower on the stem to be released from dormancy – resulting in greater blooming.

Dirr concludes, "Except for terminal flower-bud-only cultivars like 'Ayesha', it might make sense to tip prune the hydrangeas as the leaves emerge in spring. Many times the tips are dead and a general tidying-type pruning would serve two purposes: a more aesthetic plant and increased flowers."<sup>1</sup>

Bowman gets more specific, "These shrubs [*H. macrophylla*] should be pruned in spring, by making cuts above strong terminal buds and removing stems that extend beyond the buds. You should also remove skimpy stems, especially those without good terminal buds, by cutting them right to the ground."<sup>4</sup>

**Spring cleaning (dead stems)** – Winter cold can injure the stems of French Hydrangeas. Sometimes an entire stem dies. In other cases just the top portion of the stem may be killed while the lower portion will produce leaves. Don't be too quick to determine that a stem is dead. For a tidy appearance you will want to trim off the dead portion of these stems, but wait until May to be sure life won't return to the stem. Cut out the entire dead stem or cut just above the first live flower/leaf buds.

**Rejuvenation Pruning (over time)** – Eventually after a number of years, your Hydrangea's main stems can become "old and exhausted."<sup>3</sup> You can cut to the ground in late winter about 1/3 of these gnarled old branches annually to thin the shrub letting in more light. New vigorous stems will replace these removed stems. This pruning method is for mature, well-established plants and will help control their size and help keep them in good shape and vigor.<sup>2</sup>

**Rejuvenation Pruning (severe)** – If a Hydrangea has become oversized for its site or has become severely damaged by weather, a more drastic method of pruning might be advised. Once the chance of frost is over, cut it back to half its size<sup>4</sup> cutting just above a pair of buds; this hard pruning will result in the loss of most or all blooms that season. A more radical approach would be to cut all stems to the ground.<sup>2</sup> You will sacrifice all blooms for that year, but new vigorous stem growth will result which should bloom the following year. Some thinning of these new shoots can be done to achieve a good framework of branches.<sup>2</sup> This radical rejuvenation pruning should only be done perhaps no more than once every ten years.

## **Oakleaf Hydrangeas** (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) e.g., Snowflake, Snow Queen, PeeWee, Little Honey, Sikes Dwarf

Oakleaf hydrangeas, like Bigleaf hydrangeas, bloom on previous year's stems, so any pruning needed should be done after blooming. These native hydrangeas tend to be large, coarse shrubs that are usually thought to need little if any pruning. Old, mature shrubs can be reinvigorated by removing up to 1/3 of the oldest branches to the ground annually in late winter (See rejuvenation pruning on other side). Lesser maintenance pruning should be done after flowers are spent.<sup>1</sup>

## **Smooth Hydrangeas** (*Hydrangea arborescens*) e.g., Annabelle, Incrediball, Hayes Starburst, White Dome, Bella Anna

These native hydrangeas bloom on new growth. A common recommendation is to prune these 6"-12" from the ground in late winter<sup>2,5</sup> (cutting just above a pair of leaf buds). The remaining short stem helps support the weight of the large bloom. Alternatively, Dirr writes, "If the stems are cut to the ground [in late winter], the new shoots produce larger inflorescences."<sup>1</sup>

## **Panicle Hydrangeas** (*Hydrangea paniculata*) e.g., Limelight, PeeGee, Tardiva, Little Lamb, Phantom, Pink Diamond

These hydrangeas bloom on "new wood" and can be pruned in late winter or early spring before leaves emerge. An annual pruning helps control the size of this large shrub and produces vigorous stems tipped with large flowers. After pruning, stems of up to 4' long grow by mid-summer and produce blooms on stem tips. Dirr's advice is "Do not massacre the plant by reducing it to stubs. Attempt to develop an architectural framework."<sup>1</sup> Bowman recommends a pruned height of between 2 to 3 ½ feet tall.<sup>4</sup> Panicle hydrangeas can be pruned into a standard if a tree-form shape is desired.

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### **Planting tips:**

In Alabama, Hydrangeas (except panicle hyd.) need protection 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 Bigleaf Hyd. blooms, mix lime into the planting soil.

Oakleaf Hyd. – must have excellent drainage to thrive. Best on elevated site or hillside. They are very sensitive to wet soil.

Panicle Hyd. – the least particular hydrangea regarding soil. It needs minimum half-day direct sun to bloom its best.

### **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 blue blooms are desired. 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.

### **All Hydrangeas:**

Propagation – softwood cuttings can be rooted from late-April through July.<sup>1</sup>

Fertilizing – "Nothing is fertilized after Aug. 1 in the Dirr garden."<sup>1</sup> Allows earlier growth time to harden off before freezes.

Mulch – Pine straw is a good mulch to use which can help acidify the soil as it breaks down over time.

**Alabama Cooperative Extension System** has two great publications on Hydrangeas. Go to [www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu) then click on "Publications and Services" tab, then click on "ACES Publications". Where it says "Search ACES Publications" type in the word "hydrangea" and click Search. *Hydrangeas* (bulletin ANR-1276) is a useful document describing the varieties of hydrangeas. *Diseases of Hydrangeas* (bulletin ANR-1212) describes how to diagnose and treat certain problems. Click on desired title and select High-Res or Low-Res PDF file to open.

### **References:**

<sup>1</sup> Michael A. Dirr, *Hydrangeas for American Gardens*, Timber Press, 2004. (Athens, GA)

<sup>2</sup> Toni Lawson-Hall and Brian Rothera, *Hydrangeas: A Gardener's Guide*, Timber Press, 1996. (England)

<sup>3</sup> Glyn Church, *Hydrangeas*, Firefly Books, 2001. (New Zealand)

<sup>4</sup> Daria Price Bowman, *Hydrangeas*, Friedman/Fairfax Publishers, 2001. (New Hope, PA)

<sup>5</sup> *Hydrangeas*, Alabama Cooperative Extension System publication ANR-1276, [www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu), 2010.