

PRUNING HYDRANGEA BLOOMING ON OLD WOOD: H. ANAMOLA, H. ASPERA, H. MACROPHYLLA, H. SERRATA, H. QUERCIFOLIA

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Recommended Tools:



Bypass Pruner



Long-handled bypass pruner



Pruning saw



Safety goggles

Why Prune?

- **Deadhead** spent flowers.
- Allow light and air circulation into the center of the plant.
- Remove dead and unproductive canes.
- Control height, width, and shape.

Hydrangea Blooming on Old Wood

Old wood is brown and new wood is green.

The following hydrangea species set flowers on old wood, that is this year's blooms are on last year's canes. This includes:

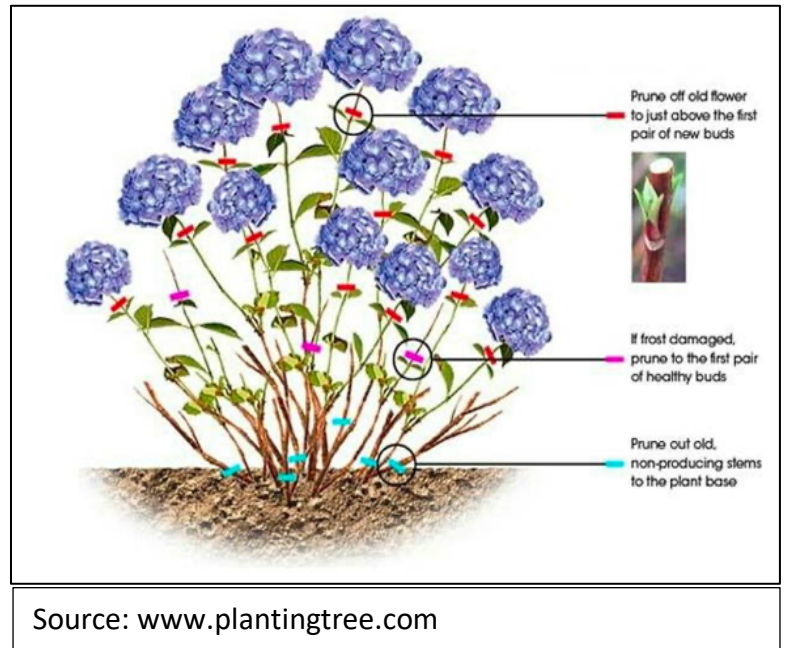
- H. anamolana (climbing) – hardy to Zone 4
- H. aspera (rough-leaved) – hardy to Zone 7
- H. macrophylla (big-leaf), hardy to Zone 5
- H. quercifolia (oak-leaf) – hardy to Zone 5
- H. serrata (mountain) – hardy to Zone 5

Generally, shrubs that bloom on old wood are pruned after flowering, E.g., lilacs. This does not apply to old wood hydrangea. Because they flower later in the growing season and set their buds for next year even later.

- At the end of the growing season, prune off the old flower to above the first pair of new lateral buds (see illustration above). This will not affect next year's blooms. A **terminal (or apical) bud** may then form at the end of the cane. You may, however, leave this bloom for winter interest, but run the risk of the cane breaking due to snow or ice build-up on the bloom.
- If possible, during the late winter, prune dead, diseased, damaged canes. This is the best time to remove non-producing or poorly producing canes as well, which are usually characterized by exfoliating bark.
- After the danger of frost has passed (usually mid-May in southern New England). prune the remaining branches taking care not to remove this year's buds. Avoid cutting off any new **basal growth** as these shoots that will produce next year's blooms.

Winter Damage on Blooms

Severe cold temperatures and **desiccating wind** may kill back growth on some old wood blooming varieties, resulting in fewer or no blooms. After improper pruning, this is the greatest reason for poorly blooming shrubs. The plant will need to develop new stems with blooms for the following year. However, cutting off a dead terminal bud down to a pair of healthy buds in the spring may result in those buds producing smaller blooms in the current season.



Wind desiccation occurs when shrubs are exposed to dry, cold sweeping winds, which is a common condition in coastal New England. Moisture from stems and buds is drawn out of the tissue, causing cells to break down. This results in marginal burn and tip **dieback**.

Pruning Old Wood Hydrangea

Deciding when to prune is based on the plant breaking **dormancy**. Hydrangea responds quickly to warm temperatures in late winter and early spring by breaking dormancy defined as producing new leaves. Unfortunately, these spells of warm weather are often followed by periods in which temperatures reach well below freezing.



Terminal Buds



Lateral Buds

So, the primary issue is waiting for the threat of frost to pass. Fortunately, hydrangea do not need to be pruned annually. However, removing dead, diseased, deformed, and older canes at the ground level every few years will result in a healthier plant with more vigorous blooms. To do this, it's best to use a long-handled bypass pruner and to wear safety goggles as the canes can be harmful to your eyes.

Often called **renewal pruning** or thinning, this is the ideal method for old wood plants. Remove up to one third to one half of the older canes. The younger stems are the most vigorous and eventually will produce the best flowers. Cut the old, leave the young. An added benefit is that the older ones tend to be in the middle of the plant, which opens the plant to light and airflow, meaning less disease and more vigorous growth. To reduce height, head back by cutting branches to a lateral bud. **Lateral buds** grow from a **node** along the side of a branch, as opposed to the tip of the branch (see image).

Pruning Rebloomers

Apical (or terminal) bud dominance refers to the ability of the plant to control its blooms at the tips of the stems. Reblooming hydrangea result when the terminal flower is pruned off; this results in the plant pushing hormones to the lower stem where other buds are triggered to bloom.

To encourage more blooms, prune off the terminal flower or a dead terminal bud if you have determined that the bud was frozen or otherwise damaged. This year's blooms will be smaller.

Glossary

- Apical/terminal bud – bud located at the end of the stem.
- Basal Growth – leaves, shoots, stems growing from the base of plant.
- Deadhead – removing spent blooms or seed head to promote new growth/reflowering.
- Desiccation – unprotected plant tissue subjected to drying cold wind for extended period.
- Dieback – progressive death of twigs, branches, shoots, or roots starting at the tip.
- Dormancy – period of arrested plant growth; new growth emerging sign of breaking.
- Lateral bud – buds found on the side of stems.
- Node – part of the stem where buds are located.

Sources

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