

Hydrangeas: when to prune

Blooms on old wood:



Bigleaf hydrangeas (*Hydrangea macrophylla*, *Hydrangea serrata*)
Oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*)

Prune after the flowers start to fade in late summer

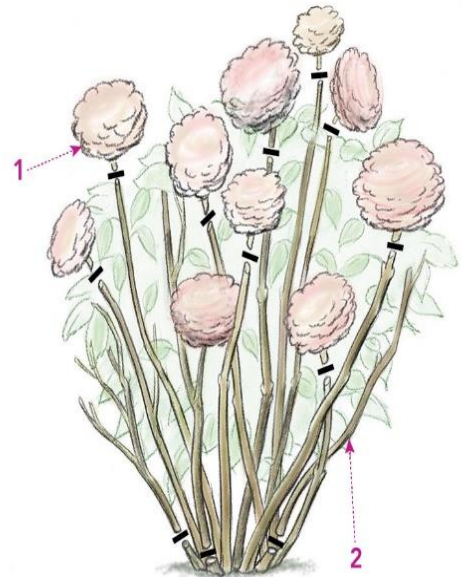
To determine if your hydrangea blooms on old wood, think about when it flowers. Shrubs with this characteristic generally begin blooming in early summer and peter out by midsummer, though sporadic blooms may appear afterward. These shrubs form next year's flower buds in late summer or early fall as the days get shorter and temperatures cool off. To reduce the risk of removing these buds, prune just as the flowers begin to fade. Often, the earlier you get it done after bloom, the quicker the shrub can recover, producing more and larger blooms next season.



To tidy up, remove old blooms

Gardeners who want to maintain a tidy appearance can snip off spent blooms just below the flower head and remove any wayward or straggly canes at the soil line.

Don't prune these hydrangeas to the ground in late fall. Doing so removes all of next year's flower buds.



To improve vigor, remove the oldest canes.

When a hydrangea gets old and woody, it can produce smaller blooms. Regular removal of a few of the oldest canes at the soil line can keep the shrub vigorous, producing large and abundant flowers. The same method can keep a shrub from getting too tall by targeting the tallest canes for removal.

Blooms on new wood:



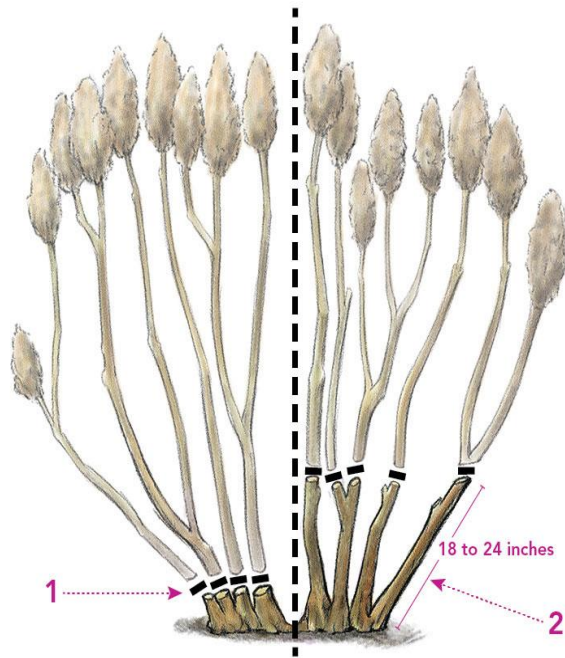
Panicle hydrangeas (*Hydrangea paniculata*)
Smooth hydrangeas (*Hydrangea arborescens*)

Cut back these shrubs in late winter before new growth begins

Because they need to grow and set buds the same year that they bloom, shrubs that flower on new wood generally start blossoming later than old-growth bloomers, beginning in midsummer and continuing until the first frost. These shrubs are forgiving if pruning is not done at a certain time as long as you avoid pruning when the flower buds are opening.

To get bigger flowers, cut them all the way back.

In late winter or early spring, these shrubs can be cut all the way back to the ground. Smooth hydrangeas will produce much larger blooms if pruning hard like this each year, but many gardeners opt for smaller blooms on sturdier stems.



To reduce flopping, leave framework of old growth.

Some hydrangeas' branches often fall over under the weight of their blooms, especially after overhead irrigation or after a good rain. One way to alleviate this flopping is to cut the stems to a height of 18 to 24 inches to provide a sturdy framework to support new growth.

