

Pruning Tips

General Hydrangea Care

If you plant hydrangeas in the summer, they need a lot more water in the beginning to establish the root system. Use a root stimulator to water in when you first plant your hydrangea.

Most varieties thrive in full sun to part shade, as long as they are planted in moist, rich soil.

Water deeply once a week, and maybe more, if the weather is particularly hot or dry. Hydrangeas have a reputation for being water hungry. Some types may wilt more than others during the heat of a summer afternoon. This is because their large leaves are giving off water faster than the roots of the plant can replace it. As soon as the sun goes down, they perk back up. Check the soil moisture level to a depth of 4-5". If it's moist, put off watering until it's dry. A 2" layer of a good, high-quality shredded bark mulch will help keep the soil moist and the plant roots cooler.

Hydrangea fertilization needs vary greatly, depending on your intended bloom color. Apply a slow-release, balanced fertilizer (like Start-n-Grow 18-6-12) early in the spring. Fertilizer for trees and shrubs (like Tree & Shrub Food 19-8-10) would also work well. We like to apply it in the early fall to promote root growth. If you prefer an organic choice, try Espoma Plant Tone (5-3-3).

Planting Hydrangeas

Planting your hydrangeas in early spring or in the fall is ideal. When you are planting a hydrangea remember that the blooms and stems must be protected from strong winds and the hot afternoon sun. Avoid planting in open areas where strong winds could break stems. Planting on the eastern side of a building ensures that, in the afternoon when the sun is at its hottest, your plants are in the shade.

Make sure your plant has good drainage. If the soil is too wet the roots might rot, and the plant will die. Incorporate a lot of organic matter, and an all-purpose slow-release fertilizer into the soil to give your hydrangea a strong start.

Established bigleaf, panicle and smooth hydrangea plants can often benefit from regular pruning. Removing about 1/3 of the oldest stems each year will result in a fuller, healthier plant. This type of pruning is easiest to do in winter, since the absence of leaves makes it easier to see and reach inside the plants. Please read the specific pruning instructions under the type of hydrangea you have.

Gardeners may also want to prune to control height or remove old flower heads. The best time for this type of pruning differs between species.

Hydrangeas Types

Bigleaf (*Hydrangea macrophylla*):

A Japanese native that produces large white, pink or blue flowers in early summer. The flower head (inflorescences) is composed of a combination of large, showy and small, inconspicuous flowers. In mophead cultivars many showy flowers are arranged on the outside of the rounded inflorescence. On the interior of the inflorescence a few small flowers are present, these are the flowers that produce seed. The varieties we carry are 'Bloomstruck' and 'Twist and Shout'.

Both varieties we carry flower on old wood and new wood. Stems of bigleaf hydrangea that have been damaged overwinter should be pruned out as soon as it is determined those stems are dead. Prune this plant shortly after flowering is complete to control height (if necessary). Watch for new growth at the base of the plant. If your plant has basal shoots that are 6 to 8 inches in length, but the upper parts of the stems are still bare, then the bare stems need to be removed. For bigleaf hydrangea plants that are subject to frequent weather-related dieback, other than removing the dead stems, you probably won't ever need to do any pruning – Mother Nature will do the work for you!

Panicle (*Hydrangea paniculata*):

This is the most cold hardy member of the genus. Native to Asia, it grows 10-15 feet tall. Many recent introductions include varieties that are only 3-4 feet tall as well as a number of varieties that grow 7-8' tall. Large creamy-white flowers, which are borne in 6" to 18" panicles, are produced in mid-summer. As flowers mature, they may turn pink. A number of varieties of panicle hydrangeas are sometimes pruned into a tree form and grown as a specimen plant. Panicle hydrangea is also suitable for use in a mixed border or as a deciduous hedge.

Panicle hydrangeas flower on current year's growth and can be pruned anytime from mid fall until early spring. The benefit here is that you can see the structure of the plant without the leaves in your way. If pruning in the spring, try to prune before leaves appear. Avoid pruning in early summer as you may remove some of the flower buds.

Smooth (*Hydrangea aborescens*):

This U.S. native is found in eastern U.S. from New York to Florida and west to Iowa and Louisiana. In cultivation, plants usually reach about 5 feet in height, with a similar spread. Flowering occurs in early to mid-summer. The most common cultivar, 'Annabelle', produces rounded flower heads that may reach up to a foot in diameter. At the peak of flowering, smooth hydrangea flowers are a pure white. As they age, they develop a pale green color. New introductions in recent years include pink flowered types ('Invincibelle Spirit', 'Incrediball Blush') as well as a red flowered variety ('Invincibelle Ruby').

Smooth hydrangeas flower on new wood and can actually be cut back at the end of the season to about 6-8" tall. Varieties such as 'Incrediball', 'Incrediball Blush', 'Invincibelle Spirit II' and 'Invincibelle Ruby' with their stout stems, can be left standing through the winter as the flower heads add winter interest to the garden. Cut the old stems back to about 6" tall in spring before new growth starts. Plants such as 'Annabelle' have been known to produce a second flush of flowers if pruned lightly after the first flowering in summer.

Preserving Hydrangea Flowers

Color and pH

Bigleaf hydrangeas are the only hydrangeas on which the gardener can manipulate the flower color. Flower color on bigleaf hydrangea is dependent on cultivar and aluminum availability. Aluminum is necessary to produce the blue pigment. Most garden soils have adequate aluminum, but the aluminum will not be available to the plant if the soil pH is high. For most bigleaf cultivars, blue flowers will be produced in acidic soil (pH 5.5 and lower), whereas neutral to alkaline soil (pH 6.5 and higher) will usually produce pink flowers. Between pH 5.5 and pH 6.5, the flowers will be purple or a mixture of blue and pink flowers will be found on the same plant. It is easier to turn a pink flower to blue than it is to turn a blue flower pink.

To change the color of a bigleaf hydrangea, it is necessary to change the soil pH. To raise the pH, add lime. One way of lowering the pH of the soil is to add aluminum sulfate. Adding an acidic organic matter (peat, pine bark) can also help lower soil pH. Exact amounts of lime or aluminum sulfate necessary to get the desired flower color will vary depending on current soil pH and the soil type.

New introductions of smooth hydrangeas allow for pink and red shades of hydrangea flowers in the garden without all the fuss of adjusting soil pH.



As the flowers age on the plant, they often turn attractive colors. Bigleaf may develop muted tones of blue, purple, rose, violet and green. Panicle hydrangeas develop pink and rose colors, while smooth hydrangea flowers turn pale green.

One of the easiest ways to preserve these flowers is to allow them to almost completely dry out. Do not collect them until the flowers have almost a papery feel. On a dry day with low humidity, cut the stems the length you need for making floral arrangements. Strip off all the leaves and then find a dry place indoors where the flowers can finish drying. Flowers can be hung upside down, or they can be placed in a vase with or without water. Be sure to keep individual flowers separated as they dry so that they retain their shape.

Hydrangeas



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