

the proverbial question: “Why doesn’t my Hydrangea bloom?”

There are many branches to the Hydrangea family. Each has a unique makeup, acts differently, and commands its own handling for proper growth and bloom. Whenever there’s a flowering problem, it’s almost always because of improper siting or mis-timed pruning. It’s not complicated: it’s just a matter of matching up the type with its treatment routine. This guide should help you out.

General Siting Guidelines That Apply To All Hydranges

Hydrangeas like rich, moist soil. While they can’t live in water, they are big drinkers. On hot days, their fleshy leaves and stems call for lots of water. Site them where they’ll get irrigation. If your planting site has poor soil, enrich it with organic matter, and generous mulching is recommended to help preserve moisture. All will bloom in sun but too much sun stresses the foliage. Ideally, the site should get morning sun. Most cultivars of Hydrangea benefit from a touch of afternoon shade to relieve the heat stress posed to the foliage by the most intense heat and light of the day. At the opposite extreme, Hydrangeas will not bloom reliably in deep shade. If you’ve sited your plant in most or all day shade, wait till late winter then re-transplant it to a location that gets more light.

Pruning Guidelines For Specific Branches of the Hydrangea Family

NOTE: Pruning is one of the most abused gardening activities. We carry forth a practice from decades back when the popular plants were evergreens and the order of the day was a manicured, formal look. This has evolved into pruning for the sake of pruning. Around mid to late summer we whip out shears, clippers, chain saws and electric hedgers and go about turning our shrubs into balls, boxes, points and light bulbs. Pruning for the sake of pruning doesn’t address specific needs and almost always does more harm than good.

Hydrangea macrophylla (Hortenia or Mophead Hydrangea) - Typical cultivars: Nikko, Forever Pink, Sister Therese

They get their flower buds from last year’s wood (what we call “old wood”). Pruning should be done only when necessary, and they’ll suffer a lack of flowering if severely pruned. Once growth begins in spring and you can see parts that are not going to sprout, cut off those dead branch portions, then let them be!

Hydrangea “newly discovered” mopheads - Typical cultivars: Dooley, Penny Mac, Endless Summer
Recent discoveries have uncovered mophead cultivars that bloom on old wood and somewhat on new wood. These are less affected by an overzealous pruner because they are not depending strictly on the old wood to produce blooms. If needed, prune in winter then leave be if at all possible. Later on, if parts of stems do not sprout in spring, cut the branch back to the point where growth activity is taking place.

Hydrangea paniculata (Panicle Hydrangea) - Typical cultivars: Pee Gee, Tardiva, Limelight, Pink Diamond

These bloom on new wood. What does that tell us? That old wood isn’t important. These can be pruned back severely if done at the right time. Pruning fresh growth during summer will upset the maturity and caliper of the stem and disturb flower bud initiation, so the right timing for pruning is winter or pre-spring. Whack the devil out of it, but then lay off the pruning shears the rest of the season.

Hydrangea quercifolia (Oakleaf Hydrangea) - Typical cultivars: Snow Queen, Snowflake, Syke’s Dwarf

These bloom only from the old wood. They are best left untrimmed. If pruning is absolutely necessary I find removing entire stems in late winter works best. You can shape it up, but remember, any tip you cut off, you’re also cutting off a future flower.

Hydrangea arborescens (Smooth Hydrangea) - Typical cultivars: Annabelle, White Dome

Flowers arrive on new wood: old wood is not necessary for bloom. They can be severely shaped in winter or pre-spring, then leave them be until winter arrives again.

Hydrangea anomala (Climbing Hydrangea) - also includes the genus Schizophragma

These are slow-growing, woody vines that cling to structures via air roots. They bloom on old wood with wide, flat, lacecap type flowers. While pruning will eliminate flowering, mature plants are many-stemmed, so some shape-correction or runner-control won't wipe out all your blooms. Pruning is best done in the winter. Note: Schizophragmas, close cousins to climbing Hydrangeas, are similar vining types. They are handled the same as *Hydrangea anomala*.

Hydrangea serrata (Mountain Hydrangea) - Typical cultivars: Bluebird, Preziosa, Blue Wave

Most bloom on old wood. Cut off dead branches or branch portions in mid spring when it becomes obvious what won't sprout, then let them be to do their thing.