

# Pruning Hydrangea

By Carol Barany

It pays to keep your eyes open when you're out in the garden.

In 1983, Vern Black of Minnesota's Bailey Nurseries noticed a *Hydrangea macrophylla* in a neighbor's yard that bloomed its head off every single summer. This type of hydrangea is the shrub we all recognize because of its big pink or blue mophead flowers that are produced on "old" wood, or wood from the previous season. In his frigid Zone 4 neighborhood, Black knew that the flower buds on *H. macrophylla* were killed regularly each winter. While the plants survived, the growth that emerged from the roots in the spring was "new" wood, and the plant couldn't produce blooms on those stems until next season.

The plant he discovered never missed. Unlike any other *H. macrophylla*, it bloomed on both old **and** new wood.

While visiting Black's nursery in 1998, renowned horticulturalist Dr. Michael Dirr recognized this unique hydrangea's market potential. Flying home to Georgia with cuttings of the extraordinary plant, Dirr wrote the name 'Endless Summer' in his notebook, and the rest is history. After more work, the 'Endless Summer' brand was launched in the spring of 2004, and that was just the beginning.

In 2014 alone, 83 new hydrangea varieties were introduced, and it's estimated that over 1,000 cultivars exist worldwide. With so many hydrangeas, I often hear gardeners wondering how to prune them. The answer, one I give all the time, is: "Well.....it all depends."

You've got to know exactly what type of hydrangea you're growing to know how to prune it.

Many of the best looking macrophyllas aren't pruned much at all. Remove deadwood and crossing or rubbing canes each spring. When these hydrangeas get old and woody, blooms are often smaller. Regular removal of a few of the oldest canes at the soil line each spring can revitalize the plant to produce larger and more abundant flowers in the future.

Leaving the faded blooms adds winter interest and may offer some insulation to next season's buds. Deadhead them before the new growth starts in the spring. If you're growing macrophylla hydrangeas that bloom exclusively on "old" wood, be careful. They formed next year's bud blooms in August and September. If you cut too far down on the stem, you won't have any flowers this year.

'Annabelle', and all her incarnations, including 'Incrediball' and 'Invincibelle Spirit', are cultivars of *Hydrangea arborescens*, and feature spreading, thicket-like growth. I have a long row of 'Annabelle', started from 4 suckers I pulled from my mother-in-law's plant 20 years ago. She got her start of 'Annabelle' (first discovered blooming in 1910 in

Anna, Illinois by another observant gardener) from a woman who babysat my husband when he was a boy. My treasured heirlooms are hardy to Zone 3 and bloom on new wood. I leave them un-pruned for winter because I'm likely to use the faded flowers in wreaths and arrangements. In late winter or early spring, this hydrangea can stand up to a buzz-cut to the ground with a metal-bladed power trimmer. It will re-grow to 4' by July, bedazzled again with big white blooms that fade to green and then buff.

A third type is the native species, *Hydrangea paniculata*, very winter hardy and long-blooming on new wood. Sometimes referred to as the 'Pee Gee' or smooth hydrangea, you've seen the huge cone-shaped flowerheads of 'Limelight', 'Quick Fire', 'Pinky Winky', and many others in gardens all over Yakima. Simply remove deadwood, crossing or rubbing canes, and the old flowerheads each spring. Once established, determine how tall you want this hydrangea to be and prune accordingly. If cut it to the ground in late winter or early spring, it will re-grow and bloom on 3'-4' stems. Left unpruned, some cultivars could be blooming atop 6'-7' stems.

*H. quercifolia*, the oak-leaf hydrangea, is a resilient North American native with lobed leaves that resemble those of the red oak, topped with flower heads of creamy white. It's worth growing for its fall foliage alone, which is brilliant red and burgundy. Because it flowers on "old" wood, if you must prune it at all, do it just after the final flowers start to fade to pink in the fall. Wait too long and you might remove the wood that produces flowers next year. This type can get huge, and if you try to make it smaller with pruning, you'll risk accidentally removing the flower buds. Plant one of the dwarf versions instead.

If you lost the plant tag, a good video to help you identify what type of hydrangea you have and the proper time to prune it can be found at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HunAJRIa-QU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HunAJRIa-QU).