



# The Complete Hydrangea Guide

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*Every type, when and how to prune, feeding,  
troubleshooting, and how to make the blooms last*

SWEET BOMBDIGGITY FARMS · COUNTRY LIVING CONNOISSEUR

## Why One Guide Isn't Enough

Hydrangeas get treated like one plant with a few color options. They are not. There are six different species hiding under that one common name, and they each want different light, pruning, and feeding. This guide is organized by type on purpose, find the hydrangea you actually have, and everything you need is right there in one place.

## Old Wood vs. New Wood

This is the concept behind almost every pruning mistake, and it shapes feeding and winter care too. Some hydrangeas set next year's flower buds on the current season's growth, "new wood" bloomers, and you can prune them hard in late winter without losing a bloom. Others set buds the previous summer on stems that already exist, "old wood" bloomers, and pruning them in fall, winter, or early spring removes next year's flowers before they open. Every profile ahead tells you which category applies.

## Planting Basics

### WHEN

Early fall (six to eight weeks before your first frost) or early spring after the last frost. Fall planting gives roots a head start before summer heat; in cold-winter areas, spring planting is the safer bet.

### HOW

Dig a hole two to three times wider than the root ball, but no deeper. Hydrangeas have shallow roots and sit best level with, or just slightly above, the surrounding soil, never buried deeper, which invites crown rot. Backfill, water deeply to settle the soil, and add two to three inches of mulch around the base, kept a few inches off the stem itself.

### SPACING

Check the mature width on the plant tag. As a rule of thumb, three to six feet apart for most bigleaf and mountain types, six to ten feet for larger panicle and smooth varieties, and about seven feet along a support for climbing types.

### WATERING IN

Water deeply two to three times a week through the first growing season while roots establish. Once established, most types want about an inch of water a week, more during hot, dry stretches, less if rainfall covers it.

## Bigleaf Hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*)

*Also called mophead or lacecap, or French/florist hydrangea*

OLD WOOD BLOOMER

The classic rounded, ball-shaped blooms most people picture first, plus flatter lacecap versions with a ring of florets around the outer edge. The type that can actually change color based on soil pH.

### LIGHT

Morning sun, afternoon shade. Full shade means fewer blooms, full sun means scorched leaves and dramatic afternoon wilting.

### PRUNING: WHEN

Right after it finishes blooming in summer, never in fall, winter, or spring.

### PRUNING: HOW

Cut each spent flower stem back to the first strong, healthy bud pair below the old bloom head. To rejuvenate an older shrub, remove up to a third of the oldest, thickest stems at ground level to make room for new cane growth. Leave everything else alone, those buds are already set for next year.

### FEEDING

Main feeding in early spring as new growth starts. A light second feeding right after the bloom is done helps the plant recover and set strong buds for next year. Stop by midsummer.

### WINTER CARE

Buds ride out the winter fully exposed. In colder zones, mound mulch or shredded leaves 12 inches up around the base in late fall after the ground freezes, and remove it in spring once temperatures are reliably above freezing. A cage of chicken wire packed with leaves works too. Leave the dried flower heads on through winter, they help insulate the buds underneath.

CHANGING THE COLOR (BIGLEAF ONLY)

This trick only works on bigleaf hydrangeas, the other types stay whatever color they were bred to be regardless of soil. Color comes down to how much aluminum the plant can absorb, which depends on soil pH.

- **For blue blooms:** Acidic soil, pH 5.5 or lower. Work aluminum sulfate into the soil in early spring, or lean on natural acidifiers like coffee grounds and pine needle mulch over time.
- **For pink blooms:** Alkaline soil, pH 6.5 or higher. Add garden lime, or use wood ash and crushed eggshells to nudge pH up gradually.
- **White varieties** stay white no matter what you do to the soil.

DISEASE NOTES

The type most prone to powdery mildew, especially in humid, shaded spots. Veitchii stands out for resistance. Forever Pink and Ami Pasquier show good leaf spot tolerance.

 **Panicle Hydrangea** (*Hydrangea paniculata*)

*The cone-shaped bloomers, like Limelight, Little Lime, and Dragon Baby*

NEW WOOD BLOOMER

The toughest, most forgiving hydrangeas out there, and the ones that tolerate full sun best. Blooms start out white or lime green and shift to pink or burgundy as the season goes.

LIGHT

Full sun to part sun, the most sun-tolerant hydrangea by far.

PRUNING: WHEN

Late winter to early spring, before new growth starts.

PRUNING: HOW

Since blooms form on this year's new growth, you can prune hard. Cut each branch back to two or three healthy buds from the main framework, or for a harder reset, take the whole plant down to about 12 to 18 inches from the ground. Remove any dead, weak, or crossing wood first.

FEEDING

Feed right after that hard prune in early spring, this fuels the whole season's growth and bloom. A light second feeding in early summer can help. Stop by midsummer.

WINTER CARE

Very little needed. Since blooms form fresh each spring, winter dieback doesn't cost you flowers. This is the most cold-hardy type in the whole family.

DISEASE NOTES

Generally the most disease-resistant type in the family. Limelight and Little Lime are reliable, Quick Fire blooms earliest, Dragon Baby packs that lime-to-pink shift into a smaller footprint.

## **Smooth Hydrangea** (*Hydrangea arborescens*)

*Snowball type, including Annabelle*

NEW WOOD BLOOMER

Big, soft, rounded white blooms, the ones that can get so heavy they flop over in a rainstorm. Native to the eastern United States and one of the easiest types to grow well.

### **LIGHT**

Part shade does best, though it tolerates more sun if the soil stays consistently moist.

### **PRUNING: WHEN**

Late winter to early spring, same timing as panicle.

### **PRUNING: HOW**

Cut all stems back hard to about a foot from the ground, or to a permanent low framework of stubs. It blooms entirely on new wood, so a hard cutback each year actually produces the strongest stems and biggest blooms.

### **FEEDING**

Feed in early spring right after cutting back. Stop by midsummer.

### **WINTER CARE**

Minimal, this is a cold-hardy, new-wood bloomer, so winter dieback doesn't threaten next year's flowers.

### **DISEASE NOTES**

Fairly disease-resistant, though leaf spot can appear in wet conditions. Annabelle is the classic. Incrediball and Invincibelle Spirit have sturdier stems that hold blooms up better in rain.

## **Oakleaf Hydrangea** (*Hydrangea quercifolia*)

*Named for its oak-shaped leaves*

OLD WOOD BLOOMER

Cone-shaped white blooms that age to dusty pink, oak-shaped leaves that turn scarlet and burgundy in fall, and peeling cinnamon bark that carries interest through winter.

### **LIGHT**

Part sun to part shade.

### **PRUNING: WHEN**

Right after blooming in summer, same rule as bigleaf.

### **PRUNING: HOW**

Deadhead spent flower heads back to the first set of healthy leaves. Thin out dead, crossing, or crowded stems at the base, but keep major cutting light, this one doesn't need or want a hard prune.

### **FEEDING**

A light feeding in early spring is usually enough. Overfeeding pushes leafy growth at the expense of the fall color it's known for.

### **WINTER CARE**

In zone 5 and similar borderline areas, plant in a sheltered spot and apply four to six inches of mulch in late fall. Avoid fall pruning, the dried flower heads help protect the buds underneath.

### **DISEASE NOTES**

The most disease-resistant hydrangea of the bunch. Alice is a favorite for size and fall color. Snow Queen and Ruby Slippers are reliable smaller options.

## Climbing Hydrangea (*Hydrangea anomala* subsp. *petiolaris*)

*A true vine, not a shrub*

OLD WOOD BLOOMER

Climbs walls, fences, and trees using aerial rootlets. Slow to establish, often taking a few years before its first bloom, but stunning once it takes off, covered in lacecap white blooms in early summer.

### LIGHT

Part sun to full shade, one of the few hydrangeas that will actually flower in real shade.

### PRUNING: WHEN

Right after blooming, and only as needed to control size or shape.

### PRUNING: HOW

Trim errant or overgrown shoots back to a main framework branch. It doesn't need heavy pruning, mostly just keeping it in bounds.

### FEEDING

Light feeding in early spring is plenty. Established vines rarely need more than a yearly top-up of compost.

### WINTER CARE

Generally hardy and low-maintenance once established. Give it time before worrying about a lack of blooms, patience is truly the biggest factor with this one.

### DISEASE NOTES

Generally trouble-free.

## Mountain Hydrangea (*Hydrangea serrata*)

*A smaller, hardier cousin of bigleaf*

MOSTLY OLD WOOD BLOOMER

Closely related to bigleaf hydrangea but more compact and more cold-hardy, with daintier lacecap blooms.

### LIGHT

Morning sun, afternoon shade, same as bigleaf.

### PRUNING: WHEN

Right after blooming.

### PRUNING: HOW

Deadhead spent blooms back to a healthy bud pair, same as bigleaf. Thin about a third of the oldest canes at the base every couple of years to keep the plant renewing itself. Some reblooming varieties also flower on new wood, so a light spring shaping won't cost much if you have one of those.

### FEEDING

Same schedule as bigleaf, main feeding in early spring, light second feeding after bloom, nothing after midsummer.

### WINTER CARE

More cold-tolerant than standard bigleaf, but buds still form on old wood, so the same mulch protection helps in harsh winters.

### DISEASE NOTES

More resistant to leaf spot than standard bigleaf types. Bluebird and Miyama-yae-Murasaki handle more sun than most in this family.

## Common Pests & Problems

- **Aphids:** Small, soft-bodied insects clustering on new growth, curling or distorting leaves. Hose them off with a strong spray of water, or treat with insecticidal soap.
- **Japanese beetles:** Skeletonize leaves in mid to late summer. Hand-pick into soapy water in the early morning when they're sluggish, or use row covers during peak activity.
- **Spider mites:** Fine webbing and stippled, bronzed leaves, worse in hot, dry weather. Hose down foliage regularly and treat with insecticidal soap if it persists.
- **Slugs and snails:** Ragged holes in leaves, especially in damp, shaded spots. Hand-pick in the evening or use natural deterrents like crushed eggshells around the base.
- **Deer:** Will browse stems and buds, especially in winter and early spring, taking next year's flowers with them. Repellent sprays, fencing, or netting help in high-pressure areas.

## Why Isn't It Blooming?

The single most common hydrangea complaint. Here's the likely order of culprits to check.

### 1. Pruning at the wrong time

The most common cause by far. If you have an old wood bloomer and pruned in fall, winter, or spring, you removed next year's buds along with the old growth. The fix is simply pruning at the right time going forward, the plant itself is fine and will bloom again next season.

### 2. Winter or late frost damage

Old wood bloomers carry their buds through the whole winter exposed. A hard freeze, a late spring frost, or repeated freeze-thaw cycles can kill those buds before they ever open, even though the plant itself looks completely healthy. Add winter mulch protection next year, or consider a reblooming variety or a new-wood type like panicle or smooth if this keeps happening in your climate.

### 3. Not enough light

Too much shade is one of the most common reasons for lots of leaves and no flowers. Most types want at least four to six hours of sun, morning sun especially. Panicle types need close to full sun to bloom their best.

### 4. Too much nitrogen

A hydrangea that's huge, leafy, and dark green but bloomless is often getting too much nitrogen, frequently from nearby lawn fertilizer runoff. Skip the lawn feed near hydrangeas and stick to a balanced, bloom-supporting formula.

### 5. The plant is still young

Newly planted hydrangeas, especially bigleaf, can take two to three years to bloom reliably while they focus on root and foliage growth first. This is completely normal, be patient and keep up good care.

### 6. Deer or animal browsing

Deer will eat flower buds right off the stem, especially over winter, with no visible sign until bloom time comes and goes. If deer pressure is high in your area, this is worth ruling out even if the plant looks untouched by summer.

### 7. Wrong plant for your climate

Gift or florist hydrangeas, often bigleaf, are frequently forced into bloom in a greenhouse and simply aren't hardy enough for outdoor winters in colder zones. If a hydrangea has never once bloomed since planting, this is worth considering.

## Natural Feeding Toolbox

You don't need a bag of store-bought fertilizer to keep hydrangeas well fed. These are the natural options referenced throughout this guide, most of it is probably already in your kitchen.

- **Coffee grounds:** Mild nitrogen for lush foliage, mildly acidic, nudges soil pH down over time, useful for blue bigleaf blooms. Sprinkle thinly around the base, or steep in water a few days for a liquid feed.
- **Banana peels:** Rich in potassium for strong blooms. Chop and bury a few inches deep near the root zone, away from the crown, or steep for banana peel tea.
- **Eggshells:** Slow-release calcium that nudges pH up over time, useful for pink bigleaf blooms. Rinse, dry, crush fine, work into the soil. Once in early spring and again in midsummer is plenty.
- **Epsom salt:** Supplies magnesium, can deepen bloom color. Dissolve a tablespoon in a gallon of water, use to water the base once a month during the growing season.
- **Compost or aged manure:** A gentle, well-rounded feed and soil conditioner. Work into the soil in early spring, or use as a top mulch.
- **Wood ash:** Raises soil pH, another option for pushing bigleaf blooms toward pink. Use sparingly.

Stick to one or two at a time rather than layering them all on at once, and give a new feeding routine a few weeks to show results before adding more.

## Cutting for Fresh Arrangements

Cut in the early morning while stems are fully hydrated. Immediately recut each stem underwater at an angle, this keeps air from blocking water uptake. For extra insurance, split the last inch of the stem or dip the fresh cut in a bit of alum powder before arranging. If a bloom is already wilting, submerge the whole flower head in a bucket or bathtub of water for an hour before cutting the stem for the vase, it usually revives beautifully. Change the vase water every couple of days and recut the stems each time to keep blooms going as long as possible.

## Preserving the Blooms

Don't cut hydrangea blooms too early. Wait until the petals feel papery, almost like tissue paper, instead of soft and fresh. That's the sign they're ready to dry instead of wilt.

Cut in the morning, strip the leaves, and stand the stems in a vase with just an inch or two of water. Don't top it off as it evaporates, let it run out on its own. That slow dry locks in the color and shape instead of leaving you with a shriveled, faded bloom.

## Simple Propagation

Most hydrangeas root easily from softwood cuttings taken in early summer.

- Cut a 4 to 6 inch piece of new, flexible growth, no flower buds attached.
- Strip the lower leaves, leaving just a couple at the top.
- Dip the cut end in rooting hormone and set it in moist potting mix.
- Keep out of direct sun and consistently moist until new growth appears, usually 4 to 8 weeks.

 At a Glance

| Type                        | Light                        | Wood            | Prune When                 | Feed When                           |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Bigleaf (mophead/lacecap)   | Morning sun, afternoon shade | Old wood        | Right after blooming       | Early spring, light feed post-bloom |
| Panicle                     | Full sun to part sun         | New wood        | Late winter / early spring | Early spring after pruning          |
| Smooth (Annabelle/snowball) | Part shade                   | New wood        | Late winter / early spring | Early spring after pruning          |
| Oakleaf                     | Part sun to part shade       | Old wood        | Right after blooming       | Light feed, early spring            |
| Climbing                    | Part sun to full shade       | Old wood        | Right after blooming       | Light feed, early spring            |
| Mountain                    | Morning sun, afternoon shade | Mostly old wood | Right after blooming       | Early spring, light feed post-bloom |

*Six plants, one common name, six completely different rulebooks.  
Once you know which one is in your yard, everything else falls into place.*