

Hydrangea Species Pruning Calendar: Old Wood vs New Wood Identification Chart

Companion Reference Sheet for: Hydrangea Pruning: Find the Blooming Wood Before Cutting
Save this PDF to your phone or print a copy for field reference. Verify local conditions and manufacturer specs before use.

Key Takeaways

- Bigleaf, mountain, oakleaf, and climbing hydrangeas usually form flower buds on old wood, so major cuts belong after flowering.
- Smooth and panicle hydrangeas flower on new wood, so shape them in late winter or early spring before new growth begins.
- Reblooming bigleaf and mountain hydrangeas can flower on old and current season growth. If you do not know the cultivar, prune conservatively.
- Wait for buds or new growth to clarify whether a bare winter stem is alive before removing it.
- Set a clear goal before pruning: remove damage, improve structure, or renew selected stems. Heavy cutting is not a reliable way to keep an oversized shrub small.
- Choose a sharp tool that suits the stem, and stop before removing more living growth than the plant needs.

Identify the hydrangea before choosing a pruning method

Hydrangea group	Bloom wood	Usual pruning window	What to remove
Bigleaf and mountain	Usually old wood; reblooming types can flower on both	Soon after flowering	Dead, damaged, or selected stems that need shaping
Oakleaf	Old wood	After flowering	Dead or damaged wood and selected stems that need shaping
Climbing	Old wood	After flowering	Dead or damaged growth and stems that need controlled shaping
Smooth	New wood	Late winter or early spring, before new growth begins	Dead stems and selected live stems for shaping or renewal
Panicle	New wood	Late winter or early spring, before new growth begins	Dead stems and selected canes for thinning or shaping

Check stems and buds before removing winter damage

Pruning goal	Suitable action	Measurement
Remove a stem tip while preserving the bud	Make a clean heading cut angled slightly away from a healthy bud	About 1/4 inch above the bud, as described by University of Minnesota Extension
Routine shaping	Thin selectively and retain the shrub's useful framework	Keep cuts limited to what the pruning goal requires
Renew a smooth hydrangea	Use a deliberate renewal cut to stimulate vigorous regrowth	UGA Extension Forsyth County gives a cutting height of 6 to 12 inches above ground
Thin a panicle hydrangea	Remove selected older or crowded canes at the base rather than shearing every stem to one height	Thin to five to 10 primary canes for larger flowers, according to Illinois Extension

Use a sharp tool that suits the stem

Tool type	Catalog listed cutting capacity	Appropriate stem use
gonicc bypass pruning shears	Up to 3/4 inch	Small, reachable stems within the stated capacity
Fiskars manual bypass loppers	Up to 1.5 inch branches	Thicker canes within the stated capacity

Follow this field checklist before and during each cut

This step by step checklist keeps the decision simple at the shrub. Work through each point before you remove a live stem.

- ☐ **Identify the hydrangea group.** Check the flower shape, leaf form, and whether the plant grows as a shrub or clinging vine.
- ☐ **Decide where its flowers form.** Classify it as an old wood, new wood, or reblooming type, and use the matching pruning window.
- ☐ **Inspect the whole shrub.** Look for dead, diseased, broken, rubbing, and crossing stems. Assess questionable winter stems and postpone uncertain cuts until buds or new growth clarify their condition.
- ☐ **Set a pruning goal.** Choose damaged growth removal, structural improvement, or limited renewal. Do not use heavy cutting as a routine fix for an oversized shrub.
- ☐ **Match the tool to the cane.** Use hand pruners for stems within their stated capacity. The Fiskars 28 inch Heavy Duty Tree Trimming Loppers, priced at \$19.97, have a stated capacity of up to 1.5 inch branches, so reserve them for thicker stems within that range.
- ☐ **Make the cut, then reassess.** Cut cleanly at the appropriate point, step back to check the shrub's shape, and stop before removing more living growth than the chosen method requires.

