Hydrangea Pruning - CCHS Website 2015

To prune hydrangeas effectively you must know your plant's species. The most common hydrangea species are *macrophylla, serrata, arborescens, paniculata, quercifolia* (the oakleafs), and *anomala* (the climbers). The reason species is so important to pruning is to know whether the plant flowers on new or old wood. 'New' wood is growth of the current season with flowers developing immediately from this new growth. *Arborescens* and *paniculatas* produce blooms entirely on new wood. 'Old' wood is growth from the previous growing season; flowers form in early summer from buds developed the previous autumn. Importantly, these buds must survive the winter before developing into flowers during the following late spring. Here in lies the critical difference in hydrangea pruning. *Macrophyllas, serratas, quercifolias,* and the *anomalas* all flower on old wood.

So we'll start with the easy species first - the *arborescens* and the *paniculatas* that flower on **new wood**. Both species are extremely cold hardy (zone 4) and will bloom reliably every year, providing of course, that they receive a reasonable annual pruning. Best pruning time is late fall - November and early December in our zones 6 & 7 in the Northeastern US. The *arborescens* ('Annabelle'- with its large white roundish mophead blooms is the most popular) can be pruned/cut right to the ground, but leaving a basic framework of 4 to 6 major stems, 12" to 15" tall does help to create a more stable structure for the new growth.

Paniculatas favor the same pruning season. This species is a very strong grower, and on some varieties, new stem growth can reach 3 to 5 feet in a single season. Pruning these plants is definitely a size containment effort. The long stems can be effectively cut back to retain just two or three nodes above the start of the new growth. This may seem severe but the plant's new growth will emerge from these nodes in vigorous fashion the following spring.

Now for the **old wood** species. Quercifolia and anomala - the native American oakleaf and the *anomala* sub-species *petiolaris* - require relatively little pruning. They are both hardy to zone 5 and are best treated as 'free growers' left largely to their own growth development. Pruning is mainly a containment exercise - keeping them within 'bounds' and removing occasional winter-kill tip sections from their stems. The *petiolaris* are the earliest species to bloom for us on Cape Cod - often by the second week of June. The large lacecap blooms are very open and lacey - quite lovely on a mature specimen, but unfortunately brief in duration. Best to prune this sub-species soon after the flowers have faded. Most flowers appear nearer the top of the plant, so try to leave as much of this region un-pruned as possible. Keep in mind, that this species is far preferred for its interesting overall texture and presence and distinctive leaf and stem network.

Quercifolias are best pruned in early spring - late April on the Cape. They are the last species to break bud for us and because of the generally minimal pruning required, they can be left to last. Fall pruning is sometime recommended but the foliage and antiqued blooms of this time of year - particularly if the plant enjoys afternoon shade - can be magnificent and much enjoyed undisturbed.

And now for the *macrophyllas* and *serratas*; pruning-wise they both require the same timing and technique. By a substantial margin, the *macs* are the most popular hydrangea and are widely planted in climatic zones from 6 to 9. But, the *macs* are the least cold-hardy of the species and often require some supplementary winter protection to insure bud survival over a long cold winter. The *serratas*, though typically more delicate in physical stature, are more cold hardy. Both species have similar flowers with their distinctive lacecap and mophead bloom forms. Mopheads are identified by their full, roundish heads of large petals; lacecaps have tiny fertile flowers in the center of the bloom with an outer border of larger sterile petals. They flower from early to late summer on the previous year's growth. July is the prime blooming month on the Cape and the visual delight can be quite spectacular. While these species will bloom satisfactorily with relatively little attention, regular pruning encourages new, vigorous growth that can produce a better display.

Here are some suggested techniques to employ for keeping your macrophyllas and serratas growing and flowering well.

Dead-heading Spent Flowers

- Dead or 'sun-burned' blooms can be removed just after flowering. This actually encourages successive blooming on selected varieties that possess this repeat blooming characteristic. This is part of a special case pruning called summer pinch-pruning whereby selective upper growth is pruned in July to improve plant form and increase blooming potential for the following year. And this technique can enhance late summer, early fall blooming on the best of the newer hybrids specifically developed as true repeat bloomers.

  For most *macrophyllas*, we believe dead-heading should only be a spring-time event; leaving the spent blooms on the plant over winter may well provide some frost protection for the tender growth buds below. Remove the dead flowerheads in April, cutting back to the first strong, healthy pair of buds lower down the stem.

Pruning Newly Planted Hydrangeas

- Newly planted macrophyllas and serratas - under 3 gallon container size - need little if any pruning the first year or two. At best you may remove spent blooms and possibly some winter-kill stem sections. Occasionally, a few errant stems will outgrow the plant's basic form and some modest stem reduction is appropriate. Your 'pruning time' may be better directed to providing physical winter protection during these early growth years.

Pruning Established Plants

- *Macrophylla* and *serrata* stems have a relatively short vital life, 4 to possibly 7 years of bloom producing capability. It is essential for long-term viability of the plant that these aging stems be removed to encourage the production of new, replacement growth that will be more floriferous. Older stems - with exfoliating (peeling) bark - can be cut back cleanly to the ground in late winter when it's easier to get inside the plant's base. While it is best to do this annually, it can be done at two or three year intervals
- Poor or neglected plants can be renovated by cutting off all the aging stems at the base, retaining only the last season's new growth. Sometime drastic pruning can be staggered over two or three years to reduce the size of the plant gradually. But this is major surgery, the required effort can be extensive, and likely a consideration only if the plant is a special variety or one having sentimental value. Although I am always sympathetic to 'saving' a plant, replacement can be a wiser choice in some instances. And remember too, you can take cuttings from the declining specimen and propagate a new plant.

Other Considerations

- Late spring frosts can be damaging as the tender unfurling leaves of new bud growth are especially susceptible. If frost damage does occur - and it will typically effect the uppermost tip buds, prune back damaged shoots to just above the first undamaged pair of buds on live, healthy wood. Flowering will be reduced but you may be pleasantly surprised by additional blooms developing off the lateral stems.
- Remove weak, straggly stems, particularly those that trail onto the ground. These low lying stems often develop roots but the plant consequently becomes too leggy at the base with excessive secondary growth that further complicates good pruning practices.

Lastly

- CCHS members participate in hands-on pruning workshops in the spring and autumn. It's a great opportunity to exchange knowledge and share some newly learned ways to improve hydrangea flowering performance. Join us!

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