

Ask a Master Gardener

May 17, 2016

Phyllis King, Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer

Pruning Hydrangeas

Q. My hydrangeas have grown so large that they are beginning to cover the walkway to my front door; when is the right time to prune them? Also, are there any hydrangeas that stay relatively small? Alison N.

A. Pruning is one of the most difficult, but most essential, tasks in maintaining your garden. For some of us, it is difficult because cutting a branch off any living plant seems wrong. However, as in your case, it has to be done, so it is critical to do it correctly. Your first step is to identify which type of hydrangea you have. Basically, you need to know whether your plants bloom on new or old wood. One variety that grows rather large is the Oakleaf Hydrangea, *Hydrangea quercifolia*, which is easily identified by the shape of the leaves. Another characteristic for this type is that the bark peels away from the stem near the ground, and the white blooms which start early summer are panicle shaped. If you do have the oak leaf variety, the shrubs will be forming flower buds in late summer or early fall as the temperature cools off and the days get shorter. Walter Reeves, on his gardening website (www.walterreeves.com) suggests that pruning needs to be done in June or July. The earlier it is done in June will give the plant more time to recover and form more buds for next year. If you get it done correctly this year, the chances are you will not need to prune for a couple of years; it is rare for hydrangeas to need pruning every year. Of course, you should remove dead or floppy branches and dead blooms at any time.

Another very popular type is the Bigleaf Hydrangea, *Hydrangea macrophylla*, which is traditional in most Georgia gardens. If your soil tends toward an acidic nature your blooms will be blue; if alkaline, blooms will be more pink. The Bigleaf is the most common hydrangea used in containers as gifts. However, if you plant the container plants outside, they will not keep that small size; generally they will average 3 feet tall by 3 feet wide even though it may require 2 or 3 years to reach that point. Like the Oakleaf, the Bigleaf Hydrangea blooms on old wood and will form those buds in fall or early winter. So, it is wise to remove any old woody branches as soon as the danger of frost is past; this will give your plant more air circulation and light. This would also be the time to remove any damaged leaves. To reduce the size of your shrub, if it is a Bigleaf, prune and reshape after blooming during most of July but **not** after the beginning of August. It is generally safe to remove up to 1/3 of the oldest stems, and it is always a good idea to deadhead any faded flowers. To keep the size manageable for your garden, this can be done every year.

From your brief description, the two that we have described are most likely to be your shrubs; however, it would be appropriate also to mention the Smooth Hydrangea, *Hydrangea arborescens*, as a possibility. The 'Annabelle' is a very popular variety; it has a white mophead bloom which develops on new wood. So, it can be pruned back to 6" – 12" around March 1st. One of the detractors of the 'Annabelle' is that it often droops, but some of the more recently developed choices stay upright.

You had asked about finding plants that stay in a smaller size range, and I found that there are many choices listed as Pee Wee Dwarf Hydrangeas. However, “dwarf” does not have a set standard size, so I would urge you to do diligent research. As with any plant, it is important to match the plant’s needs to the site’s conditions. As a general rule, the ideal site for most hydrangeas is morning sun and afternoon shade. The Oakleaf, however, can thrive in an understory situation beneath large shade trees. Some varieties can survive afternoon sun, but keep the watering can handy because those big leaves evaporate more water than the roots can supply when it is hot. That does not mean that hydrangeas do well in soggy areas; they do not. Good mulching with a natural product is helpful, especially for the first 3-5 years.

For additional details or more information, you can contact us for questions about any gardening issues; contact a Master Gardener volunteer at the UGA Cooperative Extension Carroll County Office at 900 Newnan Road, Carrollton at 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu. Or for any other details go to <http://www.ugaextension.com/carroll/anr/MasterGardenerPage.html>