

Why Doesn't My Blue Hydrangea Bloom?

Blue hydrangeas, be they lacecaps or mopheads, are either *Hydrangea macrophylla* or *Hydrangea serrata*, and these types form their flower buds the previous year. So, in August, the plant has produced the germ of the buds that will open into flowers the following summer. This is sometimes called "blooming on old wood."

In order to bloom well, those buds produced in August need to live through the fall, winter and spring. Here are the reasons that those buds may not make it to develop into flowers the following summer:

1. **Pruning.** If you cut these plants back at any time, they won't flower well. They should never be "neatened up" in the fall or spring, and the stems should never be cut to the ground unless you are sure they are dead. Since these shrubs replace their size in one summer, there is *no way to make them shorter*, and if you try there will be significantly fewer flowers the following summer. The only pruning that should be done on these plants is the removal of dead canes or dead tips of canes in late-May, when the leaves are about the size of a dime and you can clearly see what's living and what's dead.
2. **Cold Winter Temperatures.** If the temperatures in the winter drop below zero, this usually kills those tiny flower buds. The shrubs will grow back from the ground but they won't bloom. If the temperatures drop below 15° for long periods of time, it's likely to zap several of the buds, so there will be fewer flowers the next summer. No wrapping or other means of protection can help when the temperatures dip so low.
3. **Warm Early Winter/Cold Spring.** Some Hydrangeas start to break dormancy if the early winter temperatures are quite warm. Those swelling buds are more vulnerable to cold once the true winter weather arrives in January or February. This can reduce the number of flower buds that survive until spring. Similarly, if the buds swell in a warm period in March or early April, and then the weather turns cold again, that can kill flower buds. Cold, off-ocean winds can also zap buds in April, especially for shrubs in exposed areas.
4. **Deep shade.** Although these shrubs bloom well when grown in the dappled sunlight under trees, if grown in solid shade they often won't flower well.

To sum it up: Never cut them back (only remove dead canes), don't try and make them shorter, grow them in part-sun, and hope for a mild winter!