A World of Hydrangeas at the Arboretum

By Nita-Jo Rountree

From the swelling of their leaf buds heralding the arrival of spring to the opening of their impressive flower clusters in summer to the changing of their foliage colors in fall, hydrangeas have a long, varied season of interest and beauty. And here in the Pacific Northwest, we live in a hydrangea heaven! Dan Hinkley has encountered many species of hydrangea in the wild during his plant-hunting expeditions around the world, and he observes, "The climate of the Pacific Northwest offers gardeners the opportunity to grow nearly every species of *Hydrangea* that exists, from evergreen vines from the Southern Hemisphere, to small, tree-like species from Asia. With such a breadth of elegance and ornament from the raw species themselves, it seems hardly necessary to explore the cultivars of *H. serrata* and *H. macrophylla*, although with these, too, are found marvelous plants to make gardens shine from spring through fall."

Washington Park Arboretum showcases mature specimens of both classic and rare species seldom seen in American gardens. Below are profiles of some of the uncommon hydrangeas you can encounter by taking a stroll through Rhododendron Glen, just north of the new Pacific Connections Garden. Few of these shrubs can be found for sale in traditional garden centers. However, most of the plants are available for purchase at the Arboretum Foundation's Pat Calvert Greenhouse, thanks to the volunteers who run the greenhouse's propagation program.

OPPOSITE: *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Hamburg' blooming in the Arboretum in late June. (Photo by Nita-Jo Rountree)

LEFT TOP: The lacecap flowers of *Hydrangea heteromalla*. (Photo by Niall Dunne)

LEFT BELOW: The fuzzy-leaved *Hydrangea aspera* subsp. *sargentiana*. (Photo by Nita-Jo Rountree)

What's more, money from these sales helps sustain the Arboretum's collections! Whether you come to buy hydrangeas or just pay them a visit, you'll discover that these plants are a feast for the eyes and other senses.

Hydrangea aspera* subsp. *strigosa—Asperas are unique among hydrangeas because of their combination of scaly-looking, rounded flower buds; fuzzy, rabbit-ear-like, lance-shaped leaves (petting them is allowed); exfoliating bark; and wide, lacecap-type flower clusters (see "Lacecaps, Mopheads and Panicles"). The blue-purple fertile flowers in the center of each cluster are surrounded by large, sterile, white flowers. Most *H. aspera* bloom around July and August; however, this rare subspecies from Central China starts to flower in early November, when little else is blooming, and it continues until a hard freeze. The Arboretum's specimen was a donation from Dan Hinkley.

Hydrangea aspera* subsp. *sargentiana—Randall Hitchin, the Arboretum Foundation's resident plant guru, says that the fuzzy leaves on this plant are so big you could fit a velvet Elvis painting on one! Native to China, it was introduced to the West in 1908 by Ernest Wilson from a plant-collecting trip commissioned by the Arnold Arboretum. The subspecies name honors the then-director of the Arboretum, Charles Sprague Sargent. The plant's lacecap inflorescences are five to six inches in diameter and open around mid-July.

Hydrangea heteromalla—The Arboretum's mature, 20-foot-tall specimen of this shrub is a

Lacecaps, Mopheads and Panicles

A hydrangea "flower" is actually a cluster of flowers. Each cluster is typically made up of fertile flowers that are small and petal-less and sterile flowers that are surrounded by large, showy sepals. (It's thought that the sterile flowers act as visual cues to attract pollinating insects to the fertile flowers.) The flower clusters come in three general forms: lacecaps, mopheads and panicles. Lacecap inflorescences are relatively flat-topped clusters, or corymbs, and feature a central grouping of fertile flowers ringed by a disc of large sepals. Mopheads are solid, near-spherical domes of showy, sterile flowers, with a few fertile flowers in the center. Panicles are cone-shaped clusters of intermingling fertile and sterile flowers found on species such as *H. paniculata* and *H. quercifolia.*

TOP: The lilac lacecap flowers of *Hydrangea involucrata*. (Photo by Denis Prévôt, courtesy Wikipedia Commons)

BELOW: The showy white panicles of *Hydrangea paniculata*. (Photo by Nita-Jo Rountree)

sight to behold! The trunk of this giant measures approximately 16 inches in diameter. Wow! Native to China and the Himalayas, *Hydrangea heteromalla* is an early-blooming species, whose white lacecap flowers sometimes start to open by May. But they don't stay white. Randall Hitchin wrote about this in a recent issue of "GroundWork:" "As the flowers are pollinated, each 'petal' begins a progression of color shifts that continues through summer and into fall. By October, the long-lasting, ever-changing floral parade culminates in rich burgundy-stained flowers." Maximum flower production for this species is achieved in full sun.

***Hydrangea integrifolia*—**This evergreen, self-clinging climbing vine from Taiwan and the Philippines is a slow starter, but once it gets going, stand back! If left unchecked, the vine will ramble up to 40 feet high in part shade. It produces glossy, elongated leaves in pairs along hairy stems. In early summer, golf-ball-size globular buds open to reveal eight-inch-wide, delicate, white lacecaps. *Hydrangea integrifolia* grows to be heavy vine, so it needs strong support. It looks great in a woodland setting, climbing up a large evergreen tree and lighting up the understory.

***Hydrangea involucrata* 'Tama Azisai'**—This unique species from Japan and Taiwan, allied to *H. aspera*, grows only about three to four feet high and wide and has a sprawling habit. The uniqueness stems not from the small size but from the fact that, until they open, the plant's plump flower buds are completely enclosed by handsome, velvety bracts that look like eggs waiting to hatch. When the buds do "hatch," they reveal three- to five-inch-wide lacecap blooms, with fertile, lilac flowers surrounded by larger, sterile, white flowers. *Hydrangea involucrata* is another later bloomer, typically flowering from

A Note on Hydrangea Care and Color

Hydrangeas grow best in moist, well-draining, humus-rich soil. In hot climates, they benefit from some shade, but here in the Northwest, the plants flower best in sunnier locations. Just be sure to protect them from drying winds! Unless otherwise noted, all the hydrangeas profiled here bloom on old wood (last year's growth). So, if you prune off the outer-most bud, then that branch will not bloom until the following year. The flower color of the *H. macrophylla* species, with the exception of the white varieties, is dependent on the amount of aluminum that's available to the plants in the soil. Alkaline soils tie up aluminum, resulting in pink flowers. Readily available aluminum in acidic soil produces flower colors in shades of blue to lilac.

July to September. It has been known to bloom on both old (a year or more of growth) and new wood. The plant likes morning sun but benefits from afternoon shade and somewhat-protected conditions. The Arboretum's 'Tama Azisai' selection has been growing there for 43 years!

***Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Hamburg'**—Probably the most popular hydrangea species is the Japanese *H. macrophylla*, which has more than 500 cultivars. These cultivars are divided into two groups according to their flower types: "hortensias," or "mopheads," and "lacecaps." 'Hamburg' is a mophead with boldly serrated sepals, and it blooms for an unusually long time on old growth. The big, rounded flower clusters are pink in neutral to alkaline soil and blue in acidic soil. This cultivar holds its flower color well into fall. Growing five to six feet tall and wide, it prefers sun here in the Pacific Northwest.

***Hydrangea paniculata* 'Praecox'**—*Hydrangea paniculata* is a vigorous, medium-sized to large shrub native to China and Japan. It bears elliptical, dark-green foliage on cascading branches and dense, cone-shaped panicles of fragrant, creamy white, late-summer flowers. The cultivar 'Praecox' blooms earlier than the straight species and most other selections and has smaller, more globose, flower clusters. Most *H. paniculata* bloom on new growth and are often pruned to two buds above the ground in late winter, but 'Praecox' is an exception. According to Dr. Michael Dirr, in his book "Hydrangeas for American Gardens," this selection blooms on last season's growth and should not be pruned until after flowering. The original plant is still growing at the Arnold Arboretum and is more than 100 years old—a testament to its landscape adaptability. This hydrangea is best grown in full sun.

Nita-Jo Rountree is a Seattle-based garden designer, educator and speaker. A past president of the Northwest Horticultural Society, she now serves on its advisory board. She is also on the board of directors at the Bellevue Botanical Garden and a member of the steering committee for Heronswood.

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