

Geretta Jensen of Manchester has a passion for hydrangeas. When she started her collection she “read somewhere that there were over 80 different kinds.” She says, “Now I know there are hundreds and hundreds. I thought maybe I could collect about twenty. Oh that’s impossible! But then when I started looking it was amazing.”

Geretta began her expansion of hydrangea collecting by studying a catalogue from the Bell Family in Aurora Oregon. Their website is www.hydrangeasplus.com. Now she can find the varieties she desires at our local nurseries. “I was trying to get up a nice big collection but as I got hooked on them I really wanted to keep collecting and collecting. I have I think 68 different varieties in my garden.”

For reference and research the most complete book she’s found is “Hydrangeas – A Gardeners’ Guide” by Toni Lawson-Hall and Brian Rothera (Timber Press \$34.95). “It’s always been really hard to find out information about hydrangeas. So when I heard about the book I immediately had to go get it,” she said. (So did I.)

It’s hard to choose only one species or a favorite. She said, “The regular lacecap (big leaves) is the original wild hydrangea and from that growers started cultivating the mopheads. ‘Annabel’ is an arborescens native to the United States, from the Appalachian Mountains. That’s why it’s so hardy and drought resistant. You can cut it down to the ground and it flowers on the new wood (rather than old wood). You can also cut ‘Penniculata’ to the ground (peegee hydrangeas), but they look really terrific in tree form so you probably won’t cut them down. ‘Grays Wood’ is a really cool lacecap. I got a little bush and it grew probably twelve inches this year in all directions.”

Geretta’s dream is to have a place full of mature hydrangeas for visitors to explore and enjoy. To see mature hydrangeas now she travels to Heronswood, Bainbridge Gardens and Valley Nursery. On a recent visit to Heronswood she shot a whole row of film. “The asperas were gigantic and I absolutely loved it. You could stand right underneath them,” she said. ‘Rocklon’ was her first aspera. It has peeling bark, fuzzy leaves, and flat lacecap heads.

Geretta says hop in your cars and head out to local nurseries right now. All the hydrangeas are changing color and are awesome. You’ll see amazing fall colors both in the flowers and in the leaves. Call Heronswood and make an appointment. Head to Valley Nursery or Bainbridge Gardens and don’t forget Rosedale’s (off Highway 16 on the right on the way to Gig Harbor, before Purdy take the Rosedale exit). Country Gardens on the Seabeck Highway also has great hydrangeas. Don’t forget this time of year most nurseries have half off sales. “Get two for one – that’s the best part,” she said.

Her garden is one-third of an acre. Some hydrangeas are still small. She said, “I try to put them in the best spot where they’ll fill out but they’ll end up being intertwined with a lot of plants. I look at them all as a big bouquet. Right now there’s so much color. Hydrangeas change through all the seasons. The blues change to green and the whites turn to pink. I have quite a few putting on new blooms now. One plant has tiny one-inch variegated leaves with wiry black stems. A brand new addition called ‘Lemon Zest’ has chartreuse leaves.” Jensen loves to combine hydrangeas with hardy fuchsias and hostas. And that’s what she’s starting to collect now.

I could write about Geretta for several weeks and not cover all of her talents. (She’s also a hypertufa artist.) If you want to meet her visit the Cross Sound District (of Garden Clubs) horticulture show on Monday November 19 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the West Side Improvement Club on National Avenue. She’s the featured morning speaker and will present a class on seed harvesting and saving and also how to propagate seeds that need to germinate during winter. You can also find her at the Longlake Garden Club meetings every third Wednesday

of the month at the Manchester Library at 10 a.m. She's also volunteering at Manchester Elementary helping to make a beautiful garden with the kids in the community.