

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 7-30-03 What's Up and Bremerton Patriot) , ©2005

Hydrangeas are a no-fail shrub for Northwest gardens. If this plant hasn't tempted you yet, you'll want to find the book "Hydrangeas a Gardeners' Guide" by Toni Lawson-Hall and Brian Rothera. Or visit the Bell Family website at www.hydrangeasplus.com. This nursery located in Aurora, Oregon, specializes in hydrangeas. Both the book and the website will walk novices and collectors through abundant pictorial, cultural and lyrical tips and information on growing, maintaining and collecting this all-purpose, ever-satisfying plant.

Flower colors include white, pink, blue and lilac. A few are actually called "red" but the color is more an intense pink. Some flowers begin in shades of green, turning to deep blue and then finishing up in a shade of maroon. Leaves can be quite large and are usually oval or elliptical with serrated edges. Oak-leaf hydrangeas sport oak shaped leaves that turn brilliant red, orange and yellow in the fall. Aspera leaves are nearly a foot long and eight to ten inches across with a furry velvet texture. A few varieties have leaves that are fairly narrow and not more than two or three inches long.

Flower types include pinate (cone shaped masses of blooms), mophead and lacecap. The Hydrangeas we see in nurseries and in our own gardens originated (depending on the variety) in Japan, East Asia, Mexico, Chile, Argentina and the Mediterranean and have been cultivated into even more varieties in France, Germany, England and the United States.

Hydrangeas thrive in our acidic, humus rich soils. Some will not appreciate full sun or a spot that gets hot afternoon heat and sun. Oakleaf hydrangeas can tolerate more sun than other varieties and will show more color in the fall if they receive at least six hours of sun a day. Some varieties like dappled shade or morning sun. All hydrangeas need regular watering in summer until the plant is established. You'll be able to find a Hydrangea to meet nearly any light requirement.

Hydrangea arborescens 'Annabelle' is the snowball Hydrangea we all remember from our mother or grandmother's gardens. The flowers look almost greenish when emerging turning to creamy white and the shrub is frost-hardy and tolerant of light shade but does fine in sun too. This shrub does best when allowed to grow in plenty of space. It will, however, tolerate pruning, but if you can, give it lots of room instead.

Hydrangea aspera has an open tree-like structure. The peeling bark trunk and branches give enticing interest as do the velvety soft leaves and chenille masses of emerging blossoms. The lace cap flowers start out being lavender mauve bead-like in the center and have edgings rimmed in sterile white or pink flowers. *H. aspera sargentiana* has white sterile flowers and *H. aspera* 'Villosa' has pink and lavender sterile flowers.

Try to find *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Ayesha' or a similar species. This cultivar has small clusters of flowers and each one is indented, cuplike. You'll find this Hydrangea in

shades of white, blue or pink. It's hard to describe the flowers but you'll know them when you see them. The flowers are scented and each cluster is somewhat stiff. Striking and tempting are the only words I can think of to give a flavor of this variety of Hydrangea.

For a red-pink variety try Hydrangea macrophylla 'Pia' or a similar cultivar. This shrub is quite small (no more than three feet tall) and sprawls delightfully. It's perfect for rockeries or even for growing in a container. The green leaves turn red/brown in the fall. Blooms dry wonderfully and are good in dried arrangements. The only caveat is that sometimes the plant ends up growing up into a big shrub.

Another favorite pink is Hydrangea serrata 'Preziosa.' Stems have interest as do the leaves and blooms. The blooms change from white to pink to red in one growing season. The stems are very dark green, almost black in certain light. It can stand full sun or will grow in shade too. It is aptly named because it will be precious in any garden.

Two variegated leaf forms are in cultivation now too. One variety has green leaves with a white edge and another is lime green with a yellow edge. You'll find these varieties under different names. Some breeders have also managed to produce Hydrangeas with yellow blooms. I know you'll discover your own favorite varieties while perusing your favorite local nursery. Hydrangeas are an easy care plant and every gardener should have at least one.

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