

# There's more to hydrangeas than I'd thought

**Shelagh Newman**

Had you asked me what my feelings were for hydrangeas seventeen years ago, when I first started working as a volunteer gardener at Holehird Gardens in Windermere, my response would probably have been less than complimentary.

The name *Hydrangea* would have conjured up a vision of a pale pink or blue mophead shrub spilling over the red brick walls of a seaside boarding house. Floriferous, yes; reliable, perhaps; certainly useful as late-summer colour. But exciting must-have plants – never. In fact, my own 2-acre garden contained just one – and that had been planted by the previous owners.

My perceptions were changed, however, when I was looking for cutting material for shrub propagation and I came across a most attractive plant, with which I was totally unfamiliar, growing in a holding bed at Holehird. I was wondering what it could possibly be when I was approached by Toni Lawson-Hall, who was then Holder of the National Collection. She told me that the plant was *Hydrangea serrata* 'Beni-gaku' (fig. 1), and my interest was awakened. Perhaps there was more to hydrangeas than I had thought! Shortly afterwards I joined Toni to help with the care of the almost 300 plants in the Collection, and in 2003 I took over sole custodianship.



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Hydrangeas at Holehird

Fig. 1 *H. s.* 'Beni-gaku'Fig. 2 *H. m.* 'All Summer Beauty'Fig. 3 *H. m.* 'Parzival'Fig. 4 *H. m.* 'Altona'

I realise now what enormous variation there is in the genus *Hydrangea*, and how underrated and undervalued are many of the more unusual varieties. Many are little known and rarely grown, an omission I would love to rectify.

So why has the hydrangea not been espoused with the same enthusiasm as other genera? Why are there no appreciation societies? I suspect that one of the main reasons is the widespread perception of the hydrangea: it is considered to be either a rather indifferent mophead in the garden, or a colourful house plant. Few of the more interesting species and cultivars appear to have impinged on the public imagination.

The most frequent questions that I get asked relate to change of colour; but the only ones which change colour are the macrophyllas and serratas. White-flowered plants and some red ones will retain their colour regardless of soil. Blue- and purple-flowered plants will only occur on acid soils in the presence of available aluminium. And those awkward plants which show both blue and pink flowers? Probably the underlying soil is acid but the plant may be close to a wall or driveway where the lime from the mortar or limestone chippings is leached out by the rain, changing the balance of pH of the soil.

The most well-known hydrangea cultivars, both lacecap and mophead forms, come from the species *macrophylla* which originate from the mild maritime regions of Japan, so it's not surprising that they do well in coastal areas of Britain but some cultivars struggle inland in cold winters. Not all varieties are memorable – some cultivars are certainly better than others. The most reliable are those which flower on the lateral buds, as well as the terminal bud which was formed the previous summer (and can be frost damaged in a bad winter).

A particularly reliable new, American-bred cultivar for cold areas, blue on acid soil, pink on alkaline, is ‘All Summer Beauty’ (fig. 2), which flowers from June to the first frosts. Endless Summer is a very similar plant. Other mopheads I’d recommend are ‘Parzival’ (fig. 3), ‘Altona’ (fig. 4), and the white-flowering ‘Madame Emile Mouillière’. As well as being good garden plants, ‘Alpenglühén’ and ‘Blue Bonnet’ (fig. 5) are also good for drying.

The newer, often very decorative varieties, bred in Europe for the pot-plant market, are often not suitable as garden plants in colder regions; they will survive, but they may not flower. However there’s a good range of attractive hardy lacecaps, called the Dutch Ladies Series, with white and pink picotee flowers and bronze leaves, of which ‘Sandra’ is a good example. A similarly good plant, but with a cheesy name, is ‘Love You Kiss’ (fig. 6). I wouldn’t recommend the Japanese Lady (or Frau) Series of picotee plants: the flowers scorch in the sun and rot in the wet – they’re not ladies who age gracefully!

There are some particularly desirable lacecaps which were bred in Switzerland in the 1980s. Selected for the intensity of their sepal colour, they are referred to as the Teller series and were named, in German, after birds. Good examples are ‘Möwe’ (purple), ‘Rotschwanz’ (red) (fig. 7), ‘Blaumeise’ (fig. 8) (blue) and ‘Bläuling’ (pale blue). ‘Blaumeise’ in particular is a very robust plant for colder areas, and flowers reliably.

*H. macrophylla* cultivars require annual spring pruning to retain a good shape and keep the plant healthy. A good rule of thumb is to remove one third of the oldest wood down to the base each year in February/March. An old, leggy plant is best treated by cutting the whole



Fig. 5 *H. m.* ‘Blue Bonnet’



Fig. 6 *H. m.* ‘Love You Kiss’



Fig. 7 *H. m.* ‘Rotschwanz’



Fig. 8 *H. m.* ‘Blaumeise’

Fig. 9 *H. s.* 'Tiara'Fig. 10 *H. s.* 'Miranda'Fig. 11 *H. s.* 'Blue Deckle'Fig. 12 *H. s.* 'Grayswood'

down to the base, and sacrificing one year's flowers.

*Hydrangea serrata* occurs naturally in the wooded, mountainous areas of Japan where it grows in part shade – hence is more suitable for cooler areas. A dainty, deciduous shrub, it rarely exceeds 1.5m in height, carrying many corymbs of lacecap flowers with an inner ring of fertile flower, surrounded by an outer ring of sterile flowers with showy sepals.

Serratas tend to fall into three types. First, those which are blue on acid soil and pink on alkaline, such as 'Tiara' (fig. 9), 'Miranda' (fig. 10) and 'Blue Billow', perform best in partial shade to prevent the sun scorching the sepals. As an experiment, three years ago I planted 'Blue Deckle' (fig. 11) in deep shade under an old rhododendron; it has flowered consistently every year since, despite seeing no sun.

The second type, such as 'Grayswood' (fig. 12) and 'Beni-gaku' (which I had so admired) have sepals which open white and suffuse to a deep crimson. When the fertile flowers have been pollinated, the outer sepals will reverse to show a deep red underside (fig. 13). These plants benefit from a sunnier aspect. There is a third type of *serrata* which has white flowers which stay white. A particularly charming Japanese example is 'Shirotae' (fig. 14), which is covered by dainty double cream florets for much of the summer; at only 0.5m height and spread it is ideal for a small garden or front of a border. The Japanese have always loved *serratas* and they had selected and bred many cultivars well before the European plant hunters even reached Japan. As a result many bear Japanese names; increasingly they are being introduced to Europe and are well worth sourcing. *H. serrata* cultivars are trouble-free and, better still, require the minimum of pruning.

A plant which used to be classified as a *serrata* but has now been accepted as a cross with a *macrophylla* is *H. 'Preziosa'* (fig. 15), a mophead which starts cream and ages to deep crimson. Common in France, it also seems to do well on the east coast of Scotland, so it can probably tolerate drier conditions. It also dries very well for flower arrangers.

Also from Japan, *H. involucrata* is a small suckering species (to 0.5m), rarely seen in gardens; with lacecap flowers comprising white outer florets around violet fertile flowers and heart shaped green leaves, it elicits an “Is **that** a hydrangea?” response from visitors. Its cultivars, ‘Plena’ (fig. 16) (a double form) and ‘Hortensis’ (fig. 17) (with double coral-coloured florets) are particularly attractive. They flower profusely over a long period and are eminently suitable for planting in front of spring-flowering shrubs or in herbaceous borders. In colder districts they are happier in a sheltered position, but all have survived numerous Cumbrian winters!

Another species which would grace any herbaceous border or light up a dark place is *H. arborescens*, particularly the cultivar ‘Annabelle’ (fig. 18). A native of the southern United States, where it endures a continental climate of hot summers and cold winters, it is a suckering plant, but is not invasive here. The huge flower heads open lime green and age to cream; it has a long flowering season, from mid-summer to the first frosts. In areas of high rainfall, where the huge flowerheads can be weighed down, it is wise to keep pruning to a minimum, leaving some woody stems to support the heavy flowerheads and keep them free from marauding molluscs.

*H. paniculata*, so named because of the long white or cream panicles which it bears from



Fig. 13 *H. s. 'Beni-gaku'*, outer sepals reversed after pollination.



Fig. 14 *H. s. 'Shirotae'*



Fig. 15 *H. 'Preziosa'*



Fig. 16 *H. i. 'Plena'*

Fig. 17 *H. i.* 'Hortensis'Fig. 18 *H. arborescens* 'Annabelle'Fig. 19 *H. p.* 'Limelight'Fig. 20 *H. p.* 'Pink Diamond'

July until October, occurs widely in the Far East in China, Taiwan and Japan. The panicles of many cultivars will age to pink and give good dried flowerheads. The species itself can grow to 5m and is quite garden worthy in its best forms. Some of the best cultivars available were bred by the de Belder family in Kalmthout, Belgium and a number have been awarded an AGM, including 'Kyushu', 'Unique', and 'Grandiflora'. Also worthy of space in the garden are 'Limelight' (fig. 19), Pink Diamond (fig. 20) and 'Burgundy Lace'. A spectacular recent cultivar, Vanille Fraise, shows the best pink colouration on ageing, but it has a rather lax habit, so it is perhaps not ideal for wet and windy areas. Paniculatas can be pruned quite hard early in the year: the harder they are pruned, the larger the panicle they will produce. In colder and wetter areas of the country they are very reliable, flowering on the current year's growth, which does not appear until the danger of frost has passed. In fact, the paniculatas would perform well in most conditions.

Another panicle-bearing plant is the American oak-leaf hydrangea, *H. quercifolia*. Originating in a continental climate of cold winters and hot summers, the species has flowered and performed well in Cumbria over the last few years. There is a bonus, too, as the leaves turn a lovely purple in autumn. The cultivars 'Harmony' and the double Snowflake (fig. 21), however, have not done so well in our wetter, cooler north – they flower only after a hot dry summer has ripened their wood, and their heavy panicles are weighed down in a wet year – so they are more suited to a southern climate.

*H. aspera* is perhaps my favourite species, if space allows. A large shrub, it has a wide geographical distribution from the Himalaya to

China, Taiwan and Indonesia. With its large corymbs of violet fertile flowers surrounded by lilac or white sterile flowers, it makes a spectacular plant for a country garden and really ought to be more widely grown. The species has produced some excellent cultivars. Notable amongst them is AGM *H. a.* ‘Macrophylla’ (fig. 22), its large velvety leaves up to 10cm long and the flowerheads up to 15cm across. Other particularly worthy cultivars include ‘Peter Chappell’ with cream fertile flowers surrounded by pale pink to white sterile flowers, ‘Mauvette’ (fig. 23), ‘Sam McDonald’ and Villosa Group.

The *H. aspera* species are trouble-free, requiring pruning only to reduce their size, and they flower reliably even after the first leaves have been damaged by a late frost. They are fully hardy and are ideal in light woodland where they are protected from damaging cold winds.

Hydrangeas suffer few cultural problems and require little attention, apart from *H. macrophylla*’s annual pruning. They are, like many shrubs, susceptible to honey fungus. *H. paniculata* and *H. quercifolia* varieties are subject to predation by deer and rabbits.

Hydrangeas will thrive in moist, humus-rich soils. In drier areas, a good layer of mulch around the plants in spring will help retain moisture in the soil and keep down competing weeds. An annual top dressing of Growmore or ammonium sulphate is all they require.

Hydrangeas are easy plants to propagate from cuttings too. Semi-ripe tip cuttings taken from May to August will root easily within 4 weeks in a 50:50 mix of multipurpose compost and either perlite or vermiculite.

I hope that I may have persuaded you, as the supermarket advert says, to ‘try something different’. With over 500 different varieties listed as available in the *Plant Finder*, you should be able to source something exciting! 🌿



Fig. 21 *H. q.* ‘Snowflake’



Fig. 22 *H. a.* ‘Macrophylla’



Fig. 23 *H. a.* ‘Mauvette’

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