

Looking Ahead to Summer

Perhaps if we ignore it, winter will leave quietly, letting us enjoy spring and plan for summer. New and newer hydrangeas are in all the catalogs and few shrubs offer greater year-round beauty.

Back when houses were high, their porches anchored to the ground by three feet of latticework hiding the awkward foundation, big fat shrubs were needed. Using billowy shrubs on today's ranch style homes will block light from the windows. More compact plants are required and hydrangea breeding has produced some delightful smaller shrubs.

The German hybrid series, 'Cityline', features plants one to three feet tall with mophead flowers in the pink to fuchsia range. We tend to expect the flower color in hydrangeas to reflect the soil pH, blue on acid soil and pink on alkaline. This preference used to be encouraged by sticking nails-for-rusting into the soil for blue flowers or spreading lime for pink ones and then waiting months, years! Now we can purchase some plants that are not pH responsive so that our favorite colors stay true. It is a good idea to read the tag carefully if you do have a strong preference.

In the 'Cityline series, 'Berlin' (pink) 'Paris' (red) and 'Venice' (fuchsia) are constant but 'Vienna', 'Mars', and 'Rio' will change with the pH.

Also smaller is *H. involucrata* 'Blue Bunny' with true blue lacecap flowers on a shrub that stops at four feet. Unaffected by pH this hydrangea blooms on new wood so can be cut back as you wish without affected the new season's flowering.

The 'Endless Summer' series of hybrids has proved especially well adapted to our area and this year there is a new member of the group. 'Twist-n-Shout' is said to be the first reblooming lacecap hydrangea. Mophead, that fat globe of color, is the image we carry in our memory when we encounter the word 'hydrangea' but the more delicate lacecap flower more easily shakes off summer showers. The lacecap flower is relatively flat with a fringe of open florets surrounding deeper colored bud-like centers. 'Twist-n-Shout' is responsive to soil pH, pink in alkaline and blue in acid, and it does well in partial shade and moist soil. It tops out at three to five feet.

Another smaller choice is the mophead 'Forever Pink', an early bloomer that starts in June and carries on until frost. This charmer also boasts shiny foliage. If you want a shrub to look up to, plant *H. paniculata* 'Limelight', six to eight feet with huge balls of lime-white flowers on their way to pink. Gardeners love *H. arborescens* 'Annabelle' for its compact growth of four to five feet and those huge fat balls of white but those flowers are heavy for their stems. New and improved was to be expected and now there is 'Incrediball' (sigh) with stronger stems and flowers to a foot wide with multiple florets. The bloom begins lime green maturing to

white. Another new one for 'Annabelle' devotees is H. Invincibelle Spirit' – the first pink 'Annabelle'!

When tall is needed try H.p. 'Pinky Winky' with cone shaped blooms that stay pink and white on red stems and stretch to eight feet to make a zinger of a ever-blooming hedge. Selected by Garden Gate magazine as one of the best new plants is H.p.'Renhy' Vanilla Strawberry. From French breeders, this is such an asset because each bloom remains for up to four weeks, the strong red stems keeping them upright where you can see them. The long bloom time means the vanilla to strawberry coloring continues to provide contrast. Can you possibly have just one hydrangea?

One shrub that is beloved during its short bloom period is Philadelphus, the mock orange whose white flowers have the fragrance of orange blossoms in late spring. The rest of the year this eight foot fellow just takes up space. However, one cultivar, the old, intensely fragrant 'Innocence' has interestingly variegated foliage and a newer Canadian introduction 'Snowbelle' is smaller, three to four feet, with double white flowers.

A Philadelphus microphyllus 'June Bride' is blessed with small leaves giving the plant a fine textured appearance that blends it beautifully into the landscape. Bright white fragrant flowers and exfoliating reddish bark add to its attraction. It can be found at www.highcountrygardens.com. Surely every garden has a quiet corner where the mock orange can grow until armloads of its flowering branches are needed for classroom festivities.