

A Whole New World of Hydrangeas

Hydrangeas are all the rage in the gardening world. Plant breeders are hard at work bringing us new varieties; and we are eager to try their latest, greatest creations. Here's a sampling of hydrangeas now available at garden centers – some new; some tried and true.

Hydrangea arborescens

Probably the best known of all hydrangeas, **Annabelle** (*H. arborescens* 'Annabelle') begins blooming in late June and continues for up to two months boasting large, pure white flower heads – up to 10 inches in diameter. Its flowers are so large they sometimes cause its 3 to 5-foot branches to droop and staking may be necessary. Pruning the shrub back to the ground in late winter will help make stems stronger. Annabelle is easy to grow in average, well-drained soil in a partly shaded spot. It can handle more direct sunlight if given ample moisture.

Incrediball (*H. arborescens* 'Incrediball') is a new variety. Sometimes described as "Annabelle on steroids", it has even larger flowers than its older sister on thicker, stronger stems. Its basketball-sized blooms open a pale shade of green and then mature to pure white. It grows 4 to 5 feet tall and wide and has the same growing requirements as Annabelle.

I can't wait to add a **Bella Anna** (*H. arborescens* 'Bella Anna') to my landscape. Available in the spring of 2011, Bella Anna is a gorgeous magenta pink version of Annabelle. It promises to bloom from summer all the way into fall and to be as easy to grow as Annabelle.

Hydrangea macrophylla

For years, many have tried to grow Nikko Blue (*H. macrophylla* 'Nikko Blue') and most have been disappointed. The plant itself may be hardy enough to handle our freezing winter temperatures, but the flowers are not. Lush, dark green foliage emerges in spring but the plant doesn't bloom. The flower buds formed on last year's stems were damaged in winter.



Then came **Endless Summer** (*H. macrophylla* 'Endless Summer') - a breakthrough in the hydrangea world that blooms on old and new wood. Even if flower buds are damaged in winter, new flower buds form and begin blooming mid summer. If deadheaded, it will continue to set buds and bloom all summer long. In our alkaline soils, its flowers will be pink; in naturally acidic soils, the flowers will be blue. If your soil is not naturally acidic, you can still have blue flowers if you add Color Me Blue garden sulfur to the soil.

Blushing Bride (*H. macrophylla* ‘Blushing Bride’) is a white version of Endless Summer. It grows the same size as Endless Summer but bears pure white blooms that gradually and sweetly blush to soft pink as they mature.

Twist-n-Shout (*H. macrophylla* ‘Twist-n-Shout’) is another newcomer – a lacecap type with luxuriant, deep green foliage that frames its flat round flower heads. The flowers of lacecap hydrangeas are quite different than mophead varieties. Gorgeous sterile flowers surround a center of unimpressive fertile flowers creating a lacy effect. Like Endless Summer, add Color Me Blue garden sulfur for blue flowers, or just enjoy the rosy pink blooms you’ll see in our soils.

Endless Summer, Blushing Bride, and Twist-n-Shout all grow about 3 to 4 feet tall and wide and perform best with some protection from the hot afternoon sun.

Hydrangea paniculata

The unique soft green, cone-shaped blooms of **Limelight** (*H. paniculata* ‘Limelight’) hold their color until fall when they turn deep pink. It easily reaches 8 feet tall and sturdy stems proudly display its flowers. Plant Limelight in full sun or part shade.

Tardiva (*H. paniculata* ‘Tardiva’) blooms later than Limelight and its flowers are less dense. They emerge white and mature to a soft purplish-pink. Give Tardiva lots of room as it grows 10 to 12 feet tall and 8 to 10 feet wide.

To begin the hydrangea-blooming show sooner, choose **Quick Fire** (*H. paniculata* ‘Quick Fire’). It gives us the opportunity for hydrangea blooms earlier in the season. Loose, creamy white flower spikes quickly turn pink and then deep rosy pink in fall. Its red stems are an added bonus. Quick Fire grows 6 to 8 feet tall.

Vanilla Strawberry (*H. paniculata* ‘Vanilla Strawberry’) is a brand new variety. Enormous flowers, also held by red stems, emerge creamy white (vanilla), first change to pink, and then reddish (strawberry). Vanilla Strawberry continues to set buds throughout the season. As new blooms appear, the plant becomes multicolored. It grows 6 to 7 feet tall and stems begin very upright before gracefully arching later in the season.

Paniculata varieties adapt to most soils and tolerate drought better than other types. They don’t have to be pruned at all, but you can prune to shape them into neater plants if you are a control freak.

Hydrangea quercifolia

Hydrangea quercifolia, or oak leaf types, are best planted in light shade. They sport large pyramidal flowers for up to two months beginning in mid summer. Their foliage, shaped like oak leaves, is deep green throughout summer but turns attractive shades of purple, maroon and bronze in fall. Mature stems exfoliate in winter to reveal the rich brown bark

underneath. Prune oak leaf hydrangeas only as necessary to remove dead branches or, if you want to control their size, prune them right after flowering.



Alice generally grows up to 8 feet tall and wide (but can reach as large as 12 feet tall and wide). Its large, arching flowers begin white and then gradually fade to pink before it turns brown by summer's end. **Snow Queen** is a smaller version reaching up to 6 feet tall and wide. **Sikes Dwarf** is the perfect choice for small gardens topping out at 3 to 4 feet tall and wide.

If you haven't checked out hydrangeas lately, it's time to visit your favorite garden center. The hardest part will be deciding which ones to take home.

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