

Grandmother's Gift

By Julie Silva

Your landscape is always in a state of transition. The five-gallon red maple you planted twenty years ago becomes the shade producer for your entire yard. The once sunny, hot yard has become a shady paradise with landscape changes in the plants that will survive and flourish. Shady spots become a haven for an old time favorite with large, colorful flowers. Known as your grandmother's favorite, hydrangeas will fill a shady spot with mounds of color.



Many of our favorite plants today have been world travelers. Hydrangeas are native to southern and eastern Asia, and North and South America. Annabelle (*hydrangea arborescens*) was discovered in 1910 by Harriet Kirkpatrick while she was horseback riding along a wooded trail out in the countryside in Anna, Illinois. Harriet Kirkpatrick's family was drawn to Anna for the excellent clay soil needed to make the family pottery that had been famous from the 18th century to today. During Harriet's ride she came across a wild hydrangea with large, snowball blooms. Harriet took the wild hydrangea home, planted it in her yard, and then shared cuttings with her neighbors, family, and friends. J.C. McDaniel, a famous plantsman and horticulture professor, came across the hydrangea 20 miles from Anna about 50 years later after that first cutting. McDaniel took several years for investigation and nursery propagation of the wild hydrangea before he introduced it to the world. The wild hydrangea had traveled to a place of honor to be named after a young belle in Anna, Illinois. The Annabelle Hydrangea is a great addition to everyone's yard.

There are five varieties of hydrangeas that are easily available. Each has a unique quality in either the flower or the leaf form. First are the smooth hydrangeas (*hydrangea arborescens*) like the Annabelle. Annabelle is a white mop head with slightly floppy stems and flowers one foot across. Many of the other old time mop heads have smaller flowers and weaker stems. Newly developed varieties like Wesser Falls, Chestatee, and Bella Anna have deeper pink flowers with stronger stems.

Hydrangea Paniculata or paniced hydrangeas produce flowers that are in a cone shape up to one and one half feet long. The flowers start off white then age to pink. Commonly referred to as PeeGee hydrangeas these varieties may range from three feet to ten feet tall.

Oakleaf hydrangea (*H. Quercifolia*) has unique leaf forms and long clusters of white flowers that will age to pinkish purple. The leaves have good fall color turning bronze to crimson. There are compact varieties such as Munchkin and Ruby Slippers that will stay to three feet tall. The leaves are as amazing as the flowers.

Mountain hydrangeas (*H. Serrata*) originated in the mountainous areas on the islands in Japan. The flowers on mountain hydrangeas are unique and delicate. The plant is smaller along with the flowers and leaves. The flowers are referred to as lace caps and look as though the interior blooms are not matured yet. The mountain hydrangea is more cold hardy with a shorter blooming time.

Big leaf or garden hydrangeas (*H. macrophylla*, *H. hortensia*, *H. opuloides*, *H. ostska*) are also from Japan. The plants are symmetrical, rounded, and grow four to eight feet tall. The flowers are mopheads and lace caps in a variety of colors. These varieties bloom on old wood so plan a spot that will not get so cold that the plant dies back to the ground. Protect in colder weather by mounding soil, leaves, or compost over the base of the plant. In the spring the mounded materials will need to be removed to protect the plant from crown rot. These varieties you would prune after they bloom. One of the more sought after varieties is Endless Summer; it will bloom again during the year.

Propagation of hydrangeas is easy. Your cuttings should be obtained from the ends of the non-flowering shoots. The stem should have two or three pairs of leaves. Root your cuttings in sand in the shade. When roots develop move the cuttings to well-drained soil with organic material added. The best time of year for cuttings is from April to August.

Hydrangeas bloom best in partial shade from hot afternoon sun. Just as your grandmother's were, hydrangeas will be the focal point in your garden and may be dried for year-round enjoyment indoors. This old time favorite will become your favorite too.

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