

A resurgence of new cultivars is helping to restore the reputation of this Japanese hydrangea. MAURICE FOSTER, who grows most of them, compares the new with the old

THE JAPANESE NAME for *Hydrangea involucrata* is *tama-ajisai*. This translates as 'globe hydrangea', which, like the species name, is a reference to the large, spherical inflorescence bud wrapped in a whorl of bracts. This is a distinctive and defining feature, found only in *Hydrangea involucrata* and *H. longifolia* in the Asiatic section *Asperae*, and in section *Cornidia* – climbing evergreen species from Asia and South America.

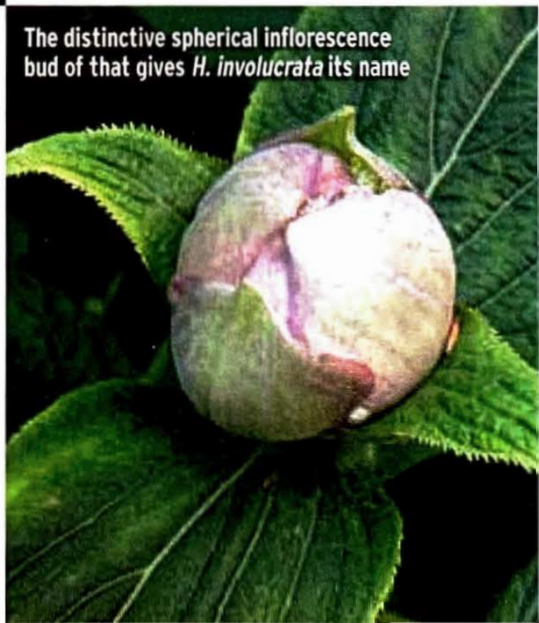
Hydrangea involucrata is a Japanese endemic, growing mostly in woodland and at relatively low

One of only two cultivars with an RHS AGM, *H. involucrata* 'Yohraku-tamu' has an attractive inflorescence that gains complexity as it ages

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Hydrangea involucrata and its cultivars

The distinctive spherical inflorescence bud of that gives *H. involucrata* its name



altitude, from around sea level to about 1,500m. A related species, *H. longifolia*, sometimes regarded as a subspecies, is found only in Taiwan.

Wild *H. involucrata* is usually a small, rather open deciduous shrub of about 1m high by as much across. However, significant variation in habit occurs, from small plants of less than 1m to shrubs that will reach as much as 4m. The ovate leaves vary in size, from 10 to as much as 25cm long, being about twice as long as wide. Both surfaces are covered with appressed hairs, as are many other parts of the plant – notably the shoots and pedicels. The fertile florets are typically a bright lavender blue, surrounded by 4 to 6 white or very pale lavender ray florets which form a pleasant contrast and invariably turn a shade of green as they mature. The typical species flowers from late July into August.

Hardiness

The species remains rare in cultivation, with a reputation for a lack of hardiness and a weak constitution. This was supported by commentators in the 20th century, such as Haworth-Booth (1950) who wrote that it is often seen at 60cm high or less 'owing to all growth above ground being winter killed'. Bean (1972) reported that it is often knocked back in winter, with the flowers borne on new shoots springing from the base.

This character of flowering on new shoots gives the species a significant advantage in frost-prone areas but has the disadvantage that it flowers only terminally. This means that it is not as showy or profuse in flower as, for example, *H. macrophylla* cultivars, which flower from axillary buds down the stem as well as terminal buds. However, some of the new, double-flowered *H. involucrata* selections can rival *H. macrophylla*.



Hydrangea involucrata 'Chichibu' is one of the best selections resembling the wild species.

Recent experience of hardiness has been rather better, perhaps due to some relatively mild winters, or possibly because certain plants in commerce were propagated from very limited stock. Certainly, more recent introductions have proved to be satisfactorily hardy, building up into spreading shrubs. Indeed, some cultivars even succeed in colder, continental gardens.

Cultivar introductions

In the 20th century cultivated plants were limited to the type species and a small, double-flowered cultivar introduced to the UK in 1906 as 'Hortensis'. In recent years, Japanese botanists and collectors have discovered a range of variants in the wild. Some have very attractive and distinctive double flowers, far removed from the typical species in flower and habit, and valuable additions to our garden flora. Yamamoto (2002) features about 15 different *H. involucrata* cultivars. A number of these have recently been introduced to Europe and are quickly becoming available.

In addition to these Japanese selections, new cultivars have originated in Europe, all essentially with the same general floral characters as the wild species. Those described below, in alphabetical order, are the ones most likely to be available to UK gardeners.

H. involucrata Blue Bunny ('Wim Rutten')

The late Wim Rutten of the Netherlands raised many fine hydrangeas, of which two *H. involucrata* cultivars have been named; this and 'Late Love'. I have no experience of Blue Bunny, but it appears to be close to the species, with perhaps a larger number of ray florets. It is promoted in the US on the basis that it flowers in sun or half shade, for a long season, on new wood, and will therefore perform even if cut by frost.

I do not know the origin of the name, but apart from the obligatory alliteration it may be that the white ray florets resemble a rabbit's tail. However, the resemblance may not be strong enough to cause you to reach for the shotgun! ➤

***H. involucrata* 'Chichibu'**

This recently named seedling is one of the best selections that resemble the wild species. It was found in the wild but raised by the Ghent University Botanical Garden.

Forming a neat, domed bush with dark green foliage, after 8 years it reaches 0.75m high by 1.5m across. It bears domed corymbs of flowers, densely packed with bright lavender blue fertile florets and ringed informally with 6–15 (18) white ray florets. These are 2–3cm across, with five lightly waved and fluted sepals. These eventually droop nicely, becoming bright green.

When happy it suckers gently without becoming invasive. It has survived some sharp spells of winter cold without damage and appears to be hardy. A very attractive selection, it can now be released for general planting.

***H. involucrata* 'Handemari'**

One of the 'mophead' cultivars, 'Handemari' was discovered by Kiyoshi Yamaguchi in Shizuoka prefecture in Japan.

In many respects it is similar to 'Sterilis', but differs in its looser



The loose, spherical inflorescence of *H. involucrata* 'Handemari'

inflorescence, with each ray floret faintly washed with pink and with many more mauve-pink fertile florets in evidence. It too rarely exceeds 1m in height by 1.5m across, starts to flower in mid July and goes on late into August, before fading to a quiet green.

***H. involucrata* 'Hortensis'**

The oldest of the double-flowered cultivars, this was described as a garden plant in Japan in 1867 but not introduced to the UK until 1906.

Opinions vary as to hardiness, with Bean (1973) finding it not completely hardy at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. However, I have grown it in Kent in a sheltered corner for more than 30 years without damage. Larger plants behind it force it to sprawl forward onto a brick path where it revels in the shelter, sun and warmth and flowers freely.

The curious inflorescences are a muddled mass of double-flowered florets in an untidy corymb, with the outer ones resembling tiny roses, 2–2.5cm across, fringing a loose agglomeration of more double florets of various sizes in the interior. The latter are halfway between fertile and ray florets, buff cream, enlarging to a clear rose pink and fading to a greenish cream suffused with pink. The individual florets open progressively over a long period with others fading prettily to create an effective display for many weeks from July onwards. Sunshine is needed to create this miscellany of colour. In deep shade the corymbs are less full and the florets are pure white, and in partial shade the colours are muted.

This rather tortured description belies the net effect, which is very



The double ray florets of *H. involucrata* 'Hortensis' resemble small roses

Jason Smalley / GAP Photos

attractive although on a relatively small scale, as growth is limited to about 0.5m high and 1m across. It is a plant that repays careful siting, both in terms of its cultivation and its effect.

H. involucrata 'Late Love'

The other Wim Rutten cultivar, 'Late Love' is now available in Europe. It is a compact plant, notable for its long flowering season, from July to October. It is a particularly healthy selection and said to be less susceptible to red spider mite under glass.

The flowers are typical of the species, with 6–8 shapely white ray florets in an even row, each 2.5–3cm across with 4 sepals. These fringe a relatively flat corymb of pale blue fertile florets.

H. involucrata 'Mihara-kokonoe'

Found on the Japanese island of Oshima, this cultivar is at its best in a mild climate, preferably with plenty of humidity. Like most of the double-flowered cultivars it is not easy to describe, as it changes colour week by week and each image and attempt at description are mere snapshots in time.



Hydrangea involucrata var. *izuensis*
'Oshima' is one of the tallest cultivars

The inflorescence begins as a central mass of green buds ringed by 2–3cm white florets poised like small butterflies. These gradually fade to pale green when the central cluster explodes into a mass of double florets of different sizes, all a clean white that is washed with green. The effect is of a large, dense ball of subtle, cool colour.

It is a relatively frost-tender cultivar that comes into leaf late, and in Kent does not flower until late

September and into October. It needs a slow, warm autumn to flower well. In wet, cold weather the florets will not develop fully and will spoil. Also, the inflorescences are heavy and tend to hang, especially when wet.

If not cut by frost it can reach 1.5m in height. A potentially dramatic flowering plant, it can only be recommended for the mildest coastal areas where it will need plenty of hazy sun to perform well.

H. involucrata var. *izuensis* 'Oshima'

Also collected on Oshima, this cultivar was found by hydrangea expert Corinne Mallet. Species on the island, including this selection, can grow to 4m in height.

It has 6–8 white ray florets, each 2–3cm across with 4 sepals. The florets are slightly nodding on long pedicels, arranged around a corymb of typical lavender blue fertile florets.

It is vigorous and surprisingly hardy, being relatively late-flowering – in August. It is a useful plant in warm, moist, shady gardens where a substantial specimen with similar ➤



Late-flowering and rather tender, *H. involucrata* 'Mihara-kokonoe' develops a range of floret types

flowers to the species is desired.

Plants of *H. involucrata* from the benign climate of the Izu peninsula, Oshima and islands off the east coast of Japan have exceptional height, and thicker, more hairy leaves. They are recognized as *H. involucrata* var. *izuensis* and known colloquially as *rasetta-tama*. This cultivar can be assigned to this variety.

H. involucrata 'Plena'

This is a more recent introduction than 'Hortensis', and with an altogether tidier inflorescence. The name derives from the 6–12 (20) double ray florets, each of which has 7–8 sepals in two rows, the inner row pointing forward and with sepals that are about half the size of the outer ones. These are white, faintly washed with lavender and poised on relatively long, 2cm pedicels. They maintain an upright posture when mature so that they stand pert and proud of the pinkish lavender fertile florets. The plant grows to around 1.5m high and wide.

'Plena' makes no great impact of colour in the garden, but is very pretty at close quarters and ideal for the front of a border flanking a path. It will take a good deal of sun if supplied with some moisture at the roots.

H. involucrata 'Sterilis'

Known as 'Temari-tama' in Japan, this cultivar has been in cultivation in the UK for many years, but for reasons that are entirely obscure, it is seldom seen in gardens. Its ball-shaped inflorescences appear in the second half of July and on into August. These are soft green in bud, maturing to creamy white faintly flushed pink. The inflorescences are enlivened by a few mauve-pink fertile florets scattered randomly throughout and at the centre.

In size it rarely exceeds 1m high by 1.5m wide and is ideal for a small



The long pedicels on the ray florets of *H. involucrata* 'Plena' are distinctive

garden. Though its style could be described as a 'mophead', it has a feminine lightness, delicacy of flower and subtlety of colour that belies that description and is matched by few others of this type for charm. It is reliably hardy and easy to grow.

H. involucrata 'Toraku-tama'

Thought to be a sport of 'Mihara-kokonoe', this is a relative newcomer. It was described by Robert Mallet, of the celebrated Shamrock *Hydrangea* collection at Varengeville-sur-mer near Dieppe, France, as a magnificent variety. It received a Mérite de Courson in 2009 at the French flower show of that name.

Mallet describes it as a vigorous shrub to 1.5m high by 2m wide and flowering at the end of August, continuing to the frosts. Its large inflorescences of pure white fade into green, and it has soft foliage like that of *H. aspera*. Habit, size and leaf shape appear to be similar to 'Yohraku-tama'.

H. involucrata 'Viridescens'

Found by a Japanese nurseryman near Mount Fuji, curiously, this cultivar is known by the anglicised name of 'Green Tama' in Japan. Very distinctive with its vivid green

florets, it is particularly valued by flower arrangers.

The fertile florets are dull mauve in bud, opening into a mass of small lavender flowers with white calyces, in evidence after petal fall. These form an attractive contrast with the 6–8 (15) ray florets which are a consistent bright green with a tiny lavender flower at the centre. These are 1.5–2.5cm across with 4–5 (8) sepals.

It is a compact plant, usually about 1.5m tall and wide. Exceptionally tolerant of shade, it does not tend to be drawn up out of character under trees, and it flowers on every shoot even when not in direct sunlight. In good fertile soil the terminal inflorescences are sometimes supplemented by flowering shoots from the upper leaf axils, usually bearing fewer (4–5) ray florets in the corymbs. Its garden value is confirmed by its RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM).

H. involucrata 'Yohraku-tama'

The only other *H. involucrata* cultivar holding an AGM, this is a better choice than 'Viridescens' for making a significant impact in the garden. It was discovered on an Izu island.

It is softly colourful in a medley of pastel pinks, creams and greens,

changing colour week by week as the flowers mature into autumn. It begins to flower at the end of July and peaks around the end of August, while continuing to open a few fresh flowers well into October. The crowded ray florets are numerous, double, and with a central row of smaller tepals, creating a shapely little flower about 2.5–4cm across not unlike a tiny rose. These are heaped informally around a loose, central area of mauve-pink fertile florets. The individual ray florets gradually mature to green. At the same time a further row of pink sepals grows from the centre of the original ray florets, now green. This process continues over several weeks to form up to eight rows of further sepals along an extended pedicel, the ultimate row a clear pink. As autumn fades into winter, these form a loose ruff of pendant green, creating a unique effect.

'Yohraku-tama' is larger than most *H. involucrata* cultivars and makes a neat shrub fully clothed to the ground with foliage, some 2m



The bright green ray florets of *H. involucrata* 'Viridescens' contrast with the lavender fertile florets

high and 3m across. In a sheltered situation it is perfectly hardy and also happy in a relatively sunny, open though sheltered position. I have grown specimens in Kent in shade, half shade and sun for 10 years without damage, even in the testing winter of 2012–13. It is an unusual

and attractive *Hydrangea* that should be more widely planted.

Hydrangea longifolia

Closely related to *H. involucrata* but endemic to Taiwan, *H. longifolia* has the same conspicuous, spherical inflorescence bud. Most obviously it differs in its narrowly ovate to lanceolate leaves, deep green above with a greyish reverse. However, the distinctive 2-branched hairs of *H. longifolia* are the most reliable way of differentiating the two species (Wei & Bartholomew 2001).

Horticulturally, *H. longifolia* differs in not being fully hardy and it is slow to flower, opening usually in the second half of September into October, with the latest flower buds failing to develop. In a very mild winter and a favoured location it is semi-evergreen or even evergreen. It usually bears 3–4 white ray florets, nicely poised, with ovate to obovate sepals 2–2.5cm long, and deep pink fertile florets in a relatively small, loose corymb. It is an elegant plant, but likely to succeed in only the mildest gardens. ➤



A delicate 'mophead' cultivar, *H. involucrata* 'Sterilis' is not widely grown

The spherical inflorescence buds of *Hydrangea longifolia* suggest a close relationship to *H. involucrata*



Doug Smith

Cultivation

Optimum growing conditions for *H. involucrata* are the same as those for *H. aspera* – good overhead light, some shade during the hottest part of the day, and moisture available during the growing season. Frost pockets should be avoided and shelter from cold winds is essential.

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Some cultivars will thrive in almost full sun provided there is moisture at the roots, with tall, sheltering companion plants helping to maintain humidity. However, full sun throughout the day and wind exposure can lead to leaf burn. Flower colour in some double cultivars is influenced by light, with deep shade producing paler or white flowers compared to colourful pinks, buffs and greens in full light.

The leaves have dense, flattened hairs on both surfaces and will collect spent flowers and debris from taller companion plants. If not removed by gentle shaking, in wet weather these will cling, coagulate, and leave ugly brown patches on the foliage that can remain unsightly throughout the year.

No pruning is required, apart from removing dead wood and old flower heads in late winter in the interests of tidiness. As with most hydrangeas,

propagation is simple with half-ripe summer cuttings under polythene or mist rooting easily.

Conclusion

While still not widely planted, it is notable that two cultivars gained an AGM in 2013 – an encouraging recognition of garden value. There are now about 10 nurseries in the UK offering the species. Also, most double-flowered cultivars are available in the UK and Europe.

I hope I have demonstrated that these are highly distinctive hydrangeas in both form and colour. Thoughtfully sited to get the best out of them, they will add character and interest, as well as colour, to the late summer and early autumn garden.

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