

The Garden

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A vintage year

HIGHLIGHTS
FROM RHS
CHELSEA
FLOWER
SHOW 2016



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ARTICHOKES
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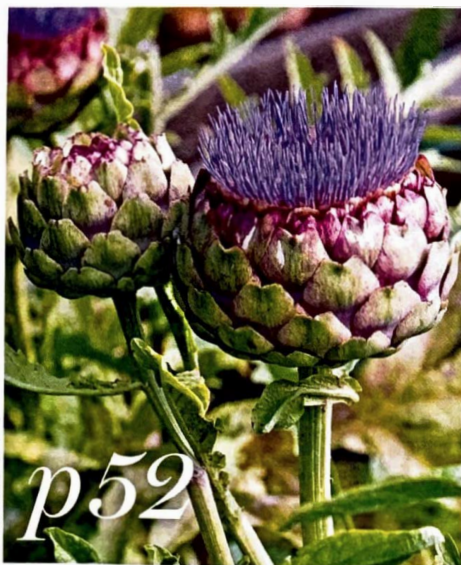
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Like a hover of butterflies

With their dainty heads of fluttering flowers in midsummer, and an airy yet

Author: Maurice Foster VMH, who gardens at White House Farm,

compact habit, selections of lovely *Hydrangea serrata* have much to offer >>

Kent, is an honorary member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee



PHOTO: TIM SANDALL



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S. J. C. MATTHEWS



GAP - PERNELLA BERGOMINI

The dainty pink stars of *Hydrangea serrata* 'Mikata Yae' (above) are effective against the blue pads of a large *Hosta*. Impressive *H. serrata* 'Tiara' (above right) was named and introduced by the author.

Although it is not as well known as late summer-flowering *Hydrangea macrophylla* (hortensia), the popularity of *Hydrangea serrata* is growing steadily year by year, as its qualities are better appreciated and new selections introduced. The number in RHS Plant Finder has more than doubled in the last 10 years; there are some 90 listed, while in the 2012 RHS review of Award of Garden Merit (AGM) plants, 13 cultivars earned AGMs, the highest encomium for garden plants.

Whether massed at the front of a border, the edge of a copse, as an informal hedge, lighting up the base of a wall, flanking a porch, or as a light, frothy foil to evergreens, they provide colour and charm for weeks. All are good for cutting as the stems are long lasting if kept short and cool.

Next to hortensias that grace many suburban gardens, *H. serrata* is slighter in stature, a branched shrub with narrower leaves and smaller flowers. It might be said to be more representative of Japanese taste: more nuanced, refined, elegant and chic. Most cultivars available are of

Japanese origin and there has been a significant inflow of arrivals to Europe over recent years.

Sturdy constitution

Although it looks delicate, *Hydrangea serrata* and its selections are tough, reliably hardy plants in most parts of the UK (see growing advice panel, right). It is a montane species and so has a shorter, later growing season than maritime *H. macrophylla*. This makes it less vulnerable in gardens to late frosts.

In the wild it is widespread in Japan, ranging from Hokkaido in the north to warmer hillsides of Kyushu in the south. It has a wide altitude range, from 70m (230ft) to 1,500m (4,920ft) in mountain forest and on open ridges. It also occurs on the island of Ulleung-do off the coast of South Korea. This variation in geography and habitat may explain why it is unusually variable in flower, habit, foliage and constitution.

Flower colour ranges from white, through pale and rich pink, rose-red to deep red to purple, with further variety in shades of blue on acid soils. Flowerheads are typically of 'lacecap' form with a disc of small fertile flowers ringed by conspicuous

Seen in full bloom, *Hydrangea serrata* 'Tiara' is a wonderful sight, thriving best in moist, light shade.



SHANE SUTTON/REUTERS

Hydrangea serrata

✦ **Overview:** deciduous, early summer-flowering shrubs.

✦ **Soil:** ideally open, fertile, well-drained neutral or acid soil; excessively chalky soils may induce chlorosis. Good drainage essential, and moisture at the root desirable through growing season.

✦ **Size:** some selections up to 2m (6½ft) but more often 1m (39in).

✦ **Garden position:** some sun is desirable for wood ripening and free flowering but, for best results, shade in the hottest part of the day is advisable or flowers will wilt.

growing advice

✦ **Water requirements:** keep watered during the growing season; plants should not dry right out.

✦ **Hardiness:** most are fully hardy to around H6 (-20 to -15°C / -4 to 5°F).

✦ **Maintenance:** provide an annual mulch of garden compost to help maintain soil moisture. Thin old wood from base to encourage new growth.

✦ **Propagation:** half-ripe cuttings in summer or by layering.

✦ **Pests and diseases:** mostly problem free, save occasional aphids or, if in excessively dry shade, mildew.

ray flowers, like hovering butterflies. However, there are many variations, with double and mophead flowers. Most flower from June onwards, blooms changing colour as they mature, and many are still effective in the garden later in the year.

Foliage complements flowers, the leaves usually more than twice as long as wide, often with reddish or purple tints that become more vivid as autumn progresses.

Siting of plants

Hydrangea serrata and its cultivars are tough and easygoing, tolerant of most soils but, as with other hydrangeas, acid soil conditions (below pH6.5) are needed for blue flowers. These result from available aluminium in the soil; calcium (which raises soil pH) reacts with aluminium, 'locking it up' and making it unavailable to the plant. It is good practice to 'go with the flow' and on alkaline soils to select the best pinks, reds and whites. Blue flowers are possible on neutral soils through treatment with aluminium sulphate or proprietary 'blueing agent'. Take care, however, as overdosing plants can cause significant, sometimes fatal, damage.

Siting of plants is important too. Woodland conditions are most effective, but local part shade in a smaller garden, from say a large *Philadelphus* or small tree, will do just as well. Such companions also offer shelter from cold winds and some frost protection.

Planting at the top of a sloping site helps to mitigate the effects of late-spring frosts. Even in a small garden slight undulations or slopes can create a pool of heavier cold air, forming a frost pocket. Plants are easily resited. With a compact root system they can be moved at any age with a good rootball.

With white flowers

Excellent white flowered cultivars of *Hydrangea serrata* include:

- ✦ 'Fuji-no-taki' with informal individual double blooms in small heads. These are lime-green in bud, shaded cream, then white, and fading to pale green. It exudes charm for months. Reaches 1m (39in). AGM
- ✦ 'Hakuchō' has three to five double ray flowers, with white fertile flowers in the centre. It needs shade and is not as robust as others. 75cm (30in)
- ✦ 'Shirofujii' produces ray

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The heads of *Hydrangea serrata* 'Grayswood' (above left) may be white, blue and pinkish red. Lovely *H. serrata* 'Beni-yama' (above) features purplish central fertile flowers and showy, outer ray flowers which gradually age to red.

flowers with a double row of florets continuously from June to the first frosts. Few shoots are without flower. Grows to just 50cm (20in). AGM

✦ 'Shirotae' is, though I have found fastidious, has repaid care with a mass of starry, double white flowers over a long season. In good light it is a mantle of lace. Reaches 60cm (24in).

✦ 'Shinonome' has conspicuously starry, single flowers scattered over a domed inflorescence. It is a plant of distinct character. 1m (39in).

Turning red

'Beni' means red in Japanese and describes a group of excellent garden selections of *Hydrangea serrata* that start with white ray flowers which then turn red or pink as they mature. These plants are of similar height, rarely exceeding 1m (39in):

- ✦ 'Beni-yama' is reliable and frequently seen, with lilac-purple or pink fertile flowers and white ray flowers which gradually turn to an effective bright red. AGM.
- ✦ 'Beni-gaku' is similar to the above, but has white fertile flowers and often three sharply pointed florets in the ray flowers instead of the usual four. It is not as robust or easy to grow

as 'Beni-yama', but the two are often confused in the trade.

- ✦ 'Beni-temari' is a delightful mophead form which mottles pink and eventually turns light red.
- ✦ 'Grayswood' is an outstanding. If atypical large plant, raised in the UK. Sometimes slow to start, but robust. It is one of the most showy cultivars. In a full season, plants are a medley of white, pink and red (and in acid soil, blue) fertile flowers. Ray florets are pointed, shapely and toothed. Reaches 2m (6½ft). AGM.
- ✦ 'Kurenai' is the most striking selection, becoming vivid blood-red. It is not a strong grower, but worth the effort as it is superb.

Classic lacecaps

Some of the best simple lacecap selections of *Hydrangea serrata* are of UK seedling origin, notably those raised by Michael Haworth-Booth (1896–1986), who did so much in the 1950s to promote hydrangeas.

✦ 'Bluebird' is a widely grown selection, with a neat, slightly domed inflorescence, and mid-blue fertile flowers ringed by pale ray flowers with rounded, entire, separated florets. Reaches 1m (39in). AGM.



Pink or blue?

Soil acidity will alter the colour of *Hydrangea serrata* flowers. The popular selection 'Bluebird' in fact produces pink flowers on alkaline soil (top) but blue heads on acid soil (above).

- ✦ 'Diadem' is similar but a smaller plant and perhaps less free flowering. More than one clone circulates under this name. Reaches 75cm (30in). AGM.
- ✦ 'Miranda' is a beauty, my own touchstone for quality. It is butterfly-blue, the flowers nicely held above the foliage, and is particularly free flowering. Grows to 1m (39in). AGM.
- ✦ 'Tiara' is a sister seedling of 'Miranda'. I was given it, unnamed, by Michael Haworth-Booth and later introduced and named it. It is a more robust plant and in sun the foliage is tinted purple; leaves also colour well in autumn. Ray flowers are bright blue or pink, freely produced and effective over a long period. Grows to 1.5m (5ft) high. AGM.
- ✦ 'Tosa-no-akatsuki' is quite distinctive: a striking, changing, lively palette of green and red. Grows to 1m (39in) high and across, usually less.

Other selections

There is a good choice of double, bicoloured and mophead cultivars, ya means 'double' in Japanese.

✦ 'Kocho-no-mai' is, I believe, known as mother and baby flower in Japan. With a small pale mauve/pink ray flower nestled at the centre of a

larger one, it creates a pretty double effect. There are few fertile flowers. It grows to 75cm (30in).

- ✦ 'Mikata Yae' has appealing starry double, dark pink flowers which are reluctant to turn blue. Height: reaches less than 1m (39in).

- ✦ 'Miyama-yae-murasaki' is one of the best, making a fine spreading bush. When the conspicuous blue, double ray flowers fade to purple, smaller flowers open at the centre and spatter the whole inflorescence with fresh blue. Grows to 2m (6½ft) high and across. AGM.

There are also a few excellent selections with bicoloured flowers, individual blooms of two colours.

✦ 'Kiyosumi' is the most popular, a robust picotee with white flowers strikingly edged pink, or mauve blue in acid conditions. It reaches up to 1.5m (5ft). AGM.

✦ 'Niji' has matt pink flowers suffused blue at the centre, like a loose watercolour. Eventual height is less than 1m (39in).

Some selections of *Hydrangea serrata* are classed as mopheads, and at a glance they look rather like smaller, daintier versions of *H. macrophylla* – temari is the

Japanese term for mophead. Again, there are some excellent cultivars to choose from:

- ✦ 'Besshi-temari' is one of the best, incredibly free with its pink or pale blue heads followed with shapely, small flowerheads 75cm (30in).
- ✦ 'Maiko' has pale pink or mauve flowerheads, there is also a similar but more vigorous white selection, 'Shiro-maiko'. Both grow to just 50cm (20in).
- ✦ 'Yae-no-amacha' is a double-flowered, loose mophead, an easy, long-flowering plant. 1m (39in).

Even gardeners who dislike the solid, dome-shaped appearance of hortensias can be won over by the personality and charm of *Hydrangea serrata*. Variable in style, versatile in use, they are easy to grow, tolerant of a wide range of garden conditions and give pleasure for months – around midsummer few shrubs can compete. With plenty of choice now available to suit all tastes, they add colour and character to every garden.

More from the RHS Most plants mentioned in this article are listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2016*.

✦ RHS website: this month 'MyRHS' features 10 AGM hydrangeas: see p91.

Robust *H. serrata* 'Kiyosumi' (below) has bicoloured blooms. Wood-land (below left) makes an appropriate place to grow selections of *Hydrangea serrata* but they will also thrive in the shade and shelter of a large shrub or small tree.

The lacecaps of *Hydrangea serrata* 'Diadem' (below) are enlivened by scarlet-flowered climber *Tropaeolum speciosum*. Vibrant *H. serrata* 'Kurenai' flowers (below right) are among the reddest of any selection.

