

For Hydrangeas, Love Always Wins Out

There was a backup on a recent garden tour at our place. A huddling was occurring, with sounds of "oohs" and "aahs" courtesy of out-of-town family members visiting from hot Midwest areas. I was caught off guard. What in the heck were they ogling over there? Of course: our "Niko Blue" hydrangea, in full bloom and sporting its gorgeous inflorescence of blue, lavender and green petals. What has become *de rigueur* in our Portland garden is a showstopper for the rest of the country, and it's easy to forget that.

Unless you're Madonna. A clip went viral early this month in which the pop legend had her microphone turned on, unbeknownst to her, during a news conference. An adoring fan gifted her with a giant hydrangea bloom, and while she graciously received it, she could clearly be heard uttering, "I loathe hydrangeas" as she tossed it under the table. Oh, Madge. Who knew you hated on the hydrangea?

I took to my Facebook page to see if I was the minority in my love for the hydrangea. A very unscientific poll of Sassy Gardener readers elicited vast support of the classic blooming shrub. My favorite comment came from reader Paula, who suggested, "Perhaps hydrangeas make her face swell up and look... ummn... 'altered.'" Touché, Paula, touché!



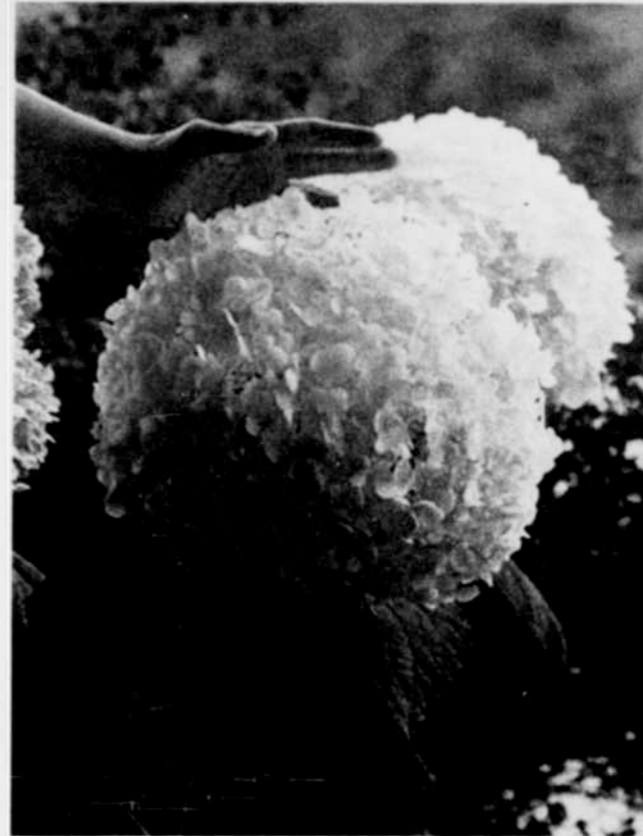
the sassy gardener
BY LEANN LOCHER

My future hydrangea purchase will indeed have giant balls, as it's called "Incrediball."

In my first Portland garden, surrounding an old farmhouse in the Sellwood neighborhood, a giant lacecap hydrangea stood guard in front. I always figured it as old as the house itself, so well established and so massive. I was immediately smitten and learned how to prune and care for it. It wasn't hard. On hot summer days it would tell me it needed water by wilting a bit in the late afternoon sun, only to eagerly perk up with deep occasional watering.

I've become so used to them now, I sometimes forget how wonderful a plant they really are. Our recent visitors helped me remember that, and got me keeping an eye out for possible hydrangea additions in the future.

If I could have more, I'd experiment with some of the new shrubs available at all large nurseries. "Incrediball" is exactly what you're imagining: gigantic round orbs for blooms. I'm a sucker for anything giant and this one has me written all over it. Plus, I'd be prone to note



my Incrediballs to visitors with every pass. Yes, *thank you very much*, I am crass.

Others I have my eye on include "Limelight" and "Pinky Winky," both offering colors a little unexpected when it comes to hydrangeas. Soft lime green blooms abound on "Limelight," and "Pinky Winky" sports two-tone white and pink

flowers. Both are paniculata hydrangeas and will stand more sun than other varieties. Also, their blooms are cone shaped rather than the more common ball-shaped hydrangeas.

Things to know...

How to get them blue: Hydrangea color is controlled by soil mineral content. To increase the availability of aluminum to your hydrangea, increase the acid in your soil. Look for acid compost and fertilizer with aluminum.

How to cut hydrangea flowers: If you've ever cut a big bouquet of hydrangeas only to have them go limp within an hour, I feel your pain. Here's the secret: Run their cut stems over a flame. This seals the stems and allows the flowers to retain their fullness.

When to plant them: Now is a great time to plant a new hydrangea. The roots will have time over the winter to get established, and come spring, be ready to support new growth. Hydrangeas will tolerate part sun here in Portland and do better when protected from late afternoon full summer sun. ☺

This is LEANN LOCHER's last Sassy Gardener of the season. She'll be back at the holidays with a gift guide, and with bells on come next March. Keep in touch via her home arts blog at lelonopo.com or on facebook at facebook.com/sassygardener.

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