

Mop Heads & Lace

High on hydrangea.

I made a bit of a blunder in my last column ("Garden Umbels," 5/23) by recommending purple fennel as a garden plant. I had just submitted my copy to *EW* when I spotted fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) on the Native Plant Society of Oregon's invasive species list. Having written a piece on invasive plants for *EW* in January, I should have known better, especially as I have seen common green fennel growing in lusty thickets along the bike path by the Willamette River. Purple fennel is just as productive of seed, and presumably just as dangerous.

While I was wiping the egg off my face and casting around for a non-controversial topic, *EW*'s editor forwarded a press release about hydrangeas. As it happens, these old-fashioned stand-bys were already on my mind. I'm helping a friend make a new shady garden, and hydrangeas are high on her list. The press release itself, from Spring Meadow Nursery in Grand Haven, Mich., is not very relevant to western Oregon gardeners because it promotes only species hardy enough for the bulk of American gardens with a con-



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tinental, rather than a maritime, climate. That rules out two important groups of hydrangea that we in the Northwest can grow very easily.

Some people will argue that the familiar bigleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) needs no promotion at all, being, if anything, over used in the Willamette Valley. But there are usually good reasons why popular plants are popular. Hydrangeas, like roses and rhododendrons, do so well here, and are such reliable producers of heaps of summer color, almost every gardener is likely to plant some, sooner or later. They are particularly valuable for their ability to grow and bloom in shade. Some people nonetheless plant them in sun, where they bloom heavily but need copious amounts of water to thrive.

Bigleaf hydrangea comes in two basic bloom styles. *Hortensias*, also known as mop heads, have large, rounded balls of sterile flowers with showy bracts in white, blue, pink or wine red. (As in flowering dogwood, the showy portions of the flower are bracts, not petals. That's why they last so long.) Lace cap hydrangeas have flattened heads in which showy, sterile flowers surround a central group of smaller, fertile flowers. Lace cap types have the advantage that the flower heads are lighter and less apt to yield to gravity.

Some varieties of both types have blue flowers in acid soil, pink in neutral or alkaline soil. Use aluminum sulfate to acidify the soil and ensure blue flowers. With the exception of a few compact varieties such as 'Pia,' *Hydrangea macrophylla* can grow to 6 by 8 feet when well-fed and watered. The plants seem over-large and coarse for small gardens, where I prefer to grow them, semi-starved, in pots. Hydrangeas make magnificent pot-

plants, blooming for years with no attention other than light pruning, regular water and moderate fertilization.

There is a second group of colorful hydrangeas that are naturally more petite. A species (or possibly a sub-species) named *Hydrangea serrata* has yielded a group of cultivars that can be maintained at 3 to 4 feet. *Serratas* favor refinement over drama. Some books scarcely mention them, but *serratas* are showing up more and more in nurseries. The first to become widely known was actually a *macrophylla-serrata* hybrid named 'Preziosa.' I think it was the popularity of this distinctive plant that brought other varieties to the attention of nursery people.

Serratas are a little less thirsty than *macrophyllas* and a little better adapted to sun. Most are lace caps, though 'Preziosa' has round heads of bloom that turn from chartreuse to pink and eventually rich red. The stems are almost black, making for a plant full of character. The color-progression is even more marked in 'Beni-Gaku,' which has white, pink and red florets all at the same time. In 'Grayswood' the outer flowers are white at maturity. In 'Bluebird' they are blue, but not the strong, hard blue of some hydrangeas when they grow in acid soil.

Many people cut hydrangeas to the ground each winter. The bush responds with strong, un-branched stems, each with one huge flower head on the top. I think this is an ugly way to go, and it doesn't seem to make the plant smaller, as you might expect. Pruning more lightly (in April, preferably) for shape and an even distribution of buds, removing about a third of the height, results in more moderate growth and more abundant but smaller flowers. **EW**

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