

The 'Snowball' Bushes Blossom Into Hydrangeas

WHEN I WAS a kid, a lone hydrangea bush grew in the backyard of my home in Bridgeport, Conn. The gardens of my childhood were sparse, but I can still see the bush. The funny thing is that I never knew it by its right name.

Even though the flowers were blue, we called them snowballs. We also called hostas green and white leaves and I didn't know a hydrangea was a hydrangea and not a snowball bush until I grew up. I don't know if this knowledge represents a loss of innocence but it was one of the signal discoveries of my adulthood.

Now I've come a long way along the garden path. I have snowball bushes of my own. My yard is home to several varieties of the big-leaved shrub known botanically as *Hydrangea macrophylla*. I have hydrangeas with blue flowers and hydrangeas with rose-colored flowers and hydrangeas with white flowers. I don't even cut the blooms for bouquets because I love to watch them turn russet in autumn.

Along with the bushy beauties, I have a climbing hydrangea that moved slowly the first two years and is now growing by leaps and bounds up a locust tree near my koi pond. It's called *H. petiolaris* and its flat-topped clusters of creamy white flowers are set off by glossy green leaves. It's



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further enhanced by cinnamon-brown peeling bark. According to what I've read, it can reach as much as 80 feet but the thought is a little unsettling since the tree certainly isn't that big.

I also have *H. paniculata* Grandiflora, commonly called peegee hydrangea. Its pyramid-shaped clusters of white flowers bloom in mid- to late summer and turn pinkish mauve as the season progresses. They thrive in a patio border along with hostas and cream and rose-colored astilbes.

As you can tell, I love all my hydrangeas — they recall some of the yearnings of my childhood and they symbolize my satisfaction in where I am now. But there's no question about the hydrangea I love most of all.

Actually, the flowers of this paragon don't look anything like snowballs. They look like lacy caps fit to be worn by the sort of princesses who appear in storybooks. My favorite hydrangea of all is the lacecap hydrangea.

I know I've told you much of this before, but I think it's worth repeating because the lacecap's beauty makes me catch my breath each summer. My lacecaps are *H. macrophylla* Blue Wave. A graceful bed of these deciduous shrubs runs along the border outside our den windows and mingles with tall white phlox and lavender Russian sage and a stand of willowy Japanese anemones. Lacecaps also border the frontyard garden in the company of purple clematis and hot pink mandevilla. Pink and blue snowballs blossom nearby, but they seem to be handmaidens for my favorite hydrangea.

Like most hydrangeas, the lacecaps flower in early summer and linger into autumn, when they begin to fade. They'll reach their full glory by the end of this month with a flat center of purplish-blue blossoms that look like tiny berries embraced by a lacy ring of four-petaled sky-blue flowers.



Newsday Photo / Irene Virag



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Hydrangeas in full bloom: clockwise from top left, purplish-blue lacecap blossoms, creamy-white oakleaf clusters, blue mopheads (formally known as *Hydrangea macrophylla*) and pretty-in-pink lacecaps



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As it turns out, there are more than 500 cultivars of hydrangeas. The best known are big-leaf hydrangeas, which include both lacecaps and the ubiquitous mopheads — the snowballs of my youth — found in most gardens. Actually, the individual flowers are small but this is often overlooked because they come in clusters. As for color, well to a large extent that's up to you and your

soil. Especially when mopheads are involved. They change color according to the soil pH. Basically, acidic soil encourages blueness. Alkaline soil brings out pink. Add aluminum sulfate for blue blooms; go with lime for pink. But a word of caution — we're not talking Lady Clair here. Messing with your soil's pH could affect the health and happiness of neighboring

plants. Any soil adjustments should be made gradually over time.

Another thing to keep in mind is that big-leaf hydrangeas flower on the previous year's growth. So don't do any pruning until later in summer, after the shrub blooms. If you prune in early spring, you're cutting off potential flowerbuds. The point is that you shouldn't cut new shoots. And if you want to provide a nice environment for your macrophyllas, plant them in early fall or spring in well-drained soil. Light shade is best, but I know from experience that they can get along in full sun.

As heavenly as hydrangeas are in the garden and as much as I love watching them turn bronze in fall, I think I'll bring my mopheads into the kitchen this season. I'll hang them upside down to dry so I can use them for flower arrangements.

After all, snowballs should be just the thing for winter bouquets. ■

THE POTTING SHED

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The Pottery Trainer siphons excess water from potted plants, among other places.

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— Virag

Newsday Garden Book

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