

LATE ARRIVALS

By Jonathan Wright



AFTER THE FLUSH of spring-blooming shrubs has passed, these dependable garden performers continue to please.

A stroll through most Delaware Valley gardens in late spring is undoubtedly delightful. Spring-flowering shrubs are prolific and the color they provide is hard to beat. So much so that I often feel a little guilty in the peak of spring when guests compliment me for the beautiful work I've done and how great the garden looks. When the weigela, kolkwitzia, fothergilla, deutzia, and itea are in their full glory, the garden is magnificent. Strong words, I know. I'm not being smug—the plants are truly the stars. When those early-blooming shrubs have finished blooming, most tend to recede into the background. If used effectively, they may lend some structure to the summer garden while we await their re-emergence and burst of bloom next year. As spring gives way to summer, the dominant color in the garden turns to green. It is at this time—as the weather heats up and summer kicks into gear—that we begin to appreciate those plants that dependably bloom and provide a hit of color to the summer garden. It seems every year I am more grateful for these dependable plants.

Year after year, when it comes to a reliable late season show, there are some shrubs that rarely disappoint. In

the gardens that I am responsible for, it is easy to determine these plants—they are the ones that never fail to attract attention and often incite a polite request for identification.

The hydrangeas are perhaps the most often asked about plants in the summer garden. The most common questions, of course, revolve around soil pH and what to do to obtain that spectacular shade of blue. To obtain that blue has always seemed far too much more like chemistry than gardening to me. Personally I like to see what plants do when left on their own. I say this even though seeing a showy specimen of a large mop-head form in that stunning blue or perfect pink always brings a smile to my face. Still, I struggle to use them in my own gardens. I find those near perfect, large flowers in shocking colors a bit too akin to florist crops and difficult

to blend into mixed plantings. I have found that even with those cultivars that boast enormous mop-heads in shocking colors, you get amazing results when you don't try to control the soil chemistry. I can honestly say I've never gone out and added aluminum sulfate (or any other chemical for that matter) to the soil in an attempt to alter flowering color of my hydrangeas. The result of this laissez-faire approach has yet to let me down. I've had plants with tremendous variation of color from head to head, branch to branch. It's not uncommon to have pink, lavender, greenish-white to purple, and shades of blue—all on the same plant. It may sound like a chaotic color scheme, but nature tends to blend colors fairly well and I've yet to see an established plant that didn't work. While newly planted specimens are settling in after transplanting, I have seen some jarring

color combinations but these calm down as plants adjust to the native soil. Many cultivars of *Hydrangea macrophylla* are selected for propensity towards a particular color such as pink, blue, or purple, so if you have an idea what range you'd like, it's best to choose accordingly.

Hydrangeas generally fall into two groups as



Hydrangea macrophylla 'Nachtigall' with *Hydrangea paniculata* before bloom

far as pruning is concerned; those that bloom on old wood and those that bloom on current season's growth.

A visit to any good garden center will show you just how popular the genus hydrangea is with plant breeders and gardeners alike. At one garden center lately, I looked up the nursery rows to count no less than 15 different cultivars of both hortensia (Mop-Head) and lacecap types being offered. Ubiquitous in gardens at the shore, these well known plants are adaptable. In addition to salt spray, they can tolerate a wide range of light and soil conditions.

Of the large-leaved type hydrangeas, my absolute favorite is *Hydrangea serrata* 'Preziosa'. Sometimes listed as a cultivar of *Hydrangea macrophylla* and other times as *H. serrata*, it is quite possibly a hybrid. Regardless of its parentage, the plant is a stunner with hortensia-type inflorescences of a smaller stature. The smaller foliage of *Hydrangea serrata* is less coarse than most *Hydrangea macrophylla* types and is beautifully tinged with burgundy. The same burgundy color is found on stems, a visible and helpful identifying characteristic.

Suffering far less stem dieback than many big-leaved hydrangeas, *H. s.* 'Preziosa' flowers reliably every year in USDA Zones 5–9. As with all big leaf hydrangeas, *H. s.* 'Preziosa' blooms on old wood. Prune in spring immediately after new growth emerges to remove any dead twigs. As flower buds are set in the leaf axils at the end of the previous season, only prune back as far as necessary to ensure maximum bloom. The flowers of *H. s.* 'Preziosa' often start pink to lavender with touches of white. As the flowers mature, the bracts then darken in color until they are a rich burgundy color that holds long into autumn. As flower color intensifies, so

does foliage coloration. The overall appearance of *H. s.* 'Preziosa' is much more delicate and blends beautifully into the garden. Mature plants generally form a 4'x4' mound.

Another favorite, *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Nachtigall' (also sold as *H. m.* 'Nightingale'), was grown unidentified for years until a visit from plantsman John Elsley, who quickly spotted this beautiful plant by its large stature, 6–7' tall with large flat, lace-capped flowers of a rich, iridescent blue. The color is relatively stable in many soil conditions. However, in very acidic soil, the flowers will appear a rich lavender color, still beautiful. Hardy in USDA Zones 6–9; although bloom is a little reduced following particularly harsh winters, the floral show is always enough to satisfy especially when paired with the plant's exceptionally large, glossy, dark green foliage. I have this plant both in full, hot sun as well as in bright shade and it thrives in both



Hydrangea paniculata 'Tardiva' cut to 2½' in March

locations. In shade, plants tend to be a bit taller and more open while full sun plants tend to be denser and top out around 4–4½' tall. Sun wilt can occur when serious heat is combined with drought; however, plants seem to recover quickly.

Hydrangea aspera is a plant that often is touted for gardens in

USDA Zones 7 and warmer. Clearly *Hydrangea aspera* has not been keeping up on its reading. It has been



Hydrangea aspera

reliably hardy in the garden I maintain, USDA Zone 6B, since 1992. Regardless, I think it best to keep this beauty slightly sheltered, especially from winter winds. If you site it properly, you will be rewarded with elegant, lace-capped flowers. The center, fertile flowers are a rich lavender surrounded by clean white infertile florets.

Foliage is equally handsome, long, and neatly organized, helping to show off its velvety texture. Perhaps the only negative attribute to *H. aspera* is that, in years when Japanese beetles are out in force, they often find their way to its flowers. However, as a bonus, in winter the bark of *H. aspera* rivals that of the oakleaf hydrangea in exfoliation and color.

The panicle hydrangeas are another favorite. Long-lived and hardy in USDA Zones 5–9, many old specimens are often grown to small tree stature in front of Victorian homes and in other long-standing landscapes. Pruning happens to be one of my all time favorite gardening tasks and the panicle hydrangeas lend themselves perfectly to being grown as cutback shrubs. I have found that established plants will reliably put out 4–5' of new growth and bloom every season. *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Tardiva' is an old favorite that has massive inflorescences. When cut back hard in late March, my plants reliably bloom in late August every year at a stunning height of 7–8'.

A pruning note: I usually choose a few stems to maintain as a structure topping these at 2–2½', removing all the previous season's growth back to this point every year. As with many plants that lend themselves to such treatment, the result of drastic cutting back creates strong, tall stems that

support extra large panicles of bright white flowers and an overall neat, upright habit. As the cone-shaped panicles of open-spaced flowers fade, they blush to pink, then to burgundy, and finally to tan persisting through the winter. The somewhat coarse texture created from these cutback *H. p.* 'Tardiva' goes beautifully with the fine, billowy foliage of *Amsonia hubrechtii*. *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Limelight' is another favorite for its unusual color trait—the flowers begin bright green and age to brilliant white. The cone-shaped flowers of *H. p.* 'Limelight' are densely packed and show up well, even from great distances.

Another show-stopping cutback shrub is *Lespedeza thunbergii*. This late-blooming bush clover boasts arching stems and delicate, trifoliate, blue-green foliage. When cut to the ground, literally within an inch of the ground, the plant will reach 6' tall by at least as wide by late season and then explodes into bloom with short racemes of pea-like flowers. There are white, magenta, and bicolor forms available. *L. t.* 'Gibraltar' is a shocking shade of magenta that often stops people in their tracks. In full sun the plant forms an arching shrub, and in flower, the branches arch down to the ground in a beautiful cascade. This cascading form can be exploited to stunning effect over walls and on hillsides or, as some gardeners have done, by training it up trellises or structures early in the season and then allowing it to fill out and cascade shortly before blooming begins in late August. *Lespedeza* is rock hardy in USDA Zones 4–8.

Indigofera amblyantha, another leguminous plant, is also generous with its floral display. Although a little difficult to find, it is well worth the search. It has delicate, small foliage and a neat upright habit. Flowers in a bright shade of pink are delicate and pea-like, borne on upright racemes. The unique trait of *I. amblyantha* is that the racemes of flowers continue to grow and elongate, producing new flowers continually throughout the summer

and into early autumn. Hardy in USDA Zones 6–9, *Indigofera amblyantha* prefers full sun but will thrive and still bloom well in light shade.

Another summer showstopper is the chaste tree. A perfect replacement for the popular, yet invasive buddleja, *Vitex agnus-castus* bears striking similarities in flower form and show. *Vitex* grows to small tree proportions in warmer zones but in USDA Zone 6B and colder it suffers from twig and stem dieback most winters. As *vitex* is late to emerge



Left to right: *Lespedeza thunbergii* 'Gibraltar', *Hydrangea aspera*, *Hydrangea* 'Nachtigall', and *Hydrangea serrata* 'Preziosa'

from winter dormancy, this leaves northern gardeners who attempt to grow it as a small tree with tedious pruning work in early summer to remove dead parts. Being completely root hardy, *vitex* works best in the Delaware Valley when grown as a cutback shrub. Plants can be cut within a few inches of the ground or back to a few structural stems that can be left at about 3'. Again, this type of leeway allows gardeners to be creative in their usage of the plant and gauge the scale appropriately. I have had great success cutting some plants back to 3" from the ground in April and by late July–early August, plants have reached nearly 5' of glorious bloom. Likewise, plants pruned back to 3' bloom beautifully at a height of 8'. Clever gardeners may plant *vitex*, or any other cutback shrub for that matter, at varying depths in their own borders. By cutting back to the ground plants in the front and pruning plants to the rear at a few feet tall, the resulting plants

will be staged beautifully with naturally appearing varied heights in full bloom. Cultivars of *vitex* are available that bloom in colors ranging from white to deep, dark purple and foliage color can vary from medium green to silver-blue. *V. agnus-castus* 'Silver Spire' boasts large inflorescences in a beautiful silver-purple cast with foliage that has a slight blue cast. The ghostly color is beautiful, particularly when given a rich, dark green backdrop, as the light flower color tends to get lost at a distance. For a stronger color that stands out at great distance, *V. agnus-castus* 'Mississippi Blues' is a knock-out in a rich purple-blue that can be appreciated at greater distances.

Hopefully one of these plants has piqued your interest or reminded you of a plant that you may have simply overlooked. Perhaps you will find one of these shrubs to be the perfect

plant to fill a tough spot or empty space and give you a splash of color through the heat in your summer garden. Just sit back and accept the compliments—let these plants do all the hard work.



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