

THE WELL-DRESSED GARDEN by Marty Ross

HYDRANGEAS: THIS IS THEIR SUMMER TO SHINE

Hydrangeas are easy to grow, bloom through a long season, and are stylish and up to date. They're dapper, colorful and adaptable, suitable for garden beds, flower-pots and that tricky spot right by the front door. They are the shrub of the moment, and this is their season.

Hydrangeas have always been popular plants, but they have frustrated gardeners. The most popular mop-head types, known for their balls of intense blue or pink flowers, are hardy enough, but coaxing them into bloom has long been notoriously difficult for gardeners in cold climates. A pretty blue-flowered hydrangea called Endless Summer changed all that. When Endless Summer was introduced, it instantly became the grand marshal in a parade of new hydrangeas of all kinds. Modern hybrids of steady old-fashioned hydrangeas are now fresher than a daisy.

Flowering shrubs are in great demand. Gardeners are looking for pretty, low-maintenance plants, and shrubs that bloom reliably and do not need pampering have instant appeal. Customers want shrubs that are large enough to make an impression but not so big that they block the windows, garden designers say, and hydrangeas fit where sprawling evergreens and thorny barberries are either too big or just too boring.

When Endless Summer hit the market, "it was the catalyst to relaunch hydrangeas as a popular plant," says Jonathan Pedersen, who works on new-plant development for Bailey Nurseries, which introduced 'Endless Summer.' In 2004, its first year on the market, "we sold over a million plants," he says. To put it in perspective, breeders are normally ecstatic when sales of an introduction reach 100,000. Now Endless Summer is the world's best-selling hydrangea: more than 18 million plants have been sold. Nearly 75 percent of customers



who bought one Endless Summer hydrangea later purchased another, Pedersen says.

The difference between Endless Summer and your great-grandmother's hydrangea is a unique characteristic: Endless Summer has winter-hardy flower buds, and it blooms on new buds produced every summer, too. Old-time mop-head hydrangeas needed a year to develop their buds, and the tender buds often didn't survive a tough winter. Now, instead of frequent disappointment, even gardeners in cold climates can enjoy hydrangeas with great big blue flowers all summer long.

Tim Wood, a hybridizer and product-development manager for the Proven Winners Color Choice line of flowering shrubs, is also sold on hydrangeas. Limelight, a late-blooming hydrangea with long, bottle-brush panicles of bloom, won high praise and a gold medal from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society when it was introduced. This year the company is introducing a smaller hybrid, Little Lime, which has "everything people love with Limelight, but in a smaller size," Wood says.

Smaller-scale shrubs have attracted a lot of attention, Wood says. They fit in a tidy space in the front yard, and their tailored proportions give even inexperienced gardeners great confidence. They're also beautiful in pots. Little Lime is especially hardy, and it grows in full sun to partial shade, so it's a good choice for a pot on a deck, for

example, where the sunlight can be too intense for mop-head hydrangeas, which prefer a good deal of shade.

Hybridizers are hot on the trail of more hydrangeas, and Bailey Nurseries has developed a whole Endless Summer line, all sold in blue pots. Blushing Bride has white blooms that mature to a soft pink, and Twist-n-Shout, introduced last year, has flat, pink or white lace-cap flowers on sturdy red stems. "It's an awesome plant," Pedersen says, "and one of the most overlooked aspects is its fall color -- it turns a nice red in fall and the blooms hang on even when you're getting that fall effect."

This year, the company is introducing Bella Anna, a pink-flowering hybrid of native smooth-leaf hydrangea. It is described as a color breakthrough, the first alternative to the popular hybrid Annabelle, known for its enormous white flowers in mid-summer. Invincibelle Spirit, another pink-flowering smooth hydrangea, is also being released this year by Proven Winners Color Choice. It may sound confusing to gardeners to have so many different hydrangeas, but the owners of Wilkerson Mill Gardens (www.hydrangea.com), a mail-order hydrangea specialist nursery outside Atlanta, say the competition will keep prices low and hydrangea enthusiasts happy. It's hard to go wrong.

"Sometimes people say, 'Oh, we have too many roses or too many daylilies,'" says Wood, "but we always need new plants, because we always need plants that are better." New hybrid hydrangeas bloom reliably in every climate over a long season, the sturdy stems bear more flowers than old-time hydrangeas, and their flowers hold up well even as they fade.

"When you have a good new plant like that -- there's always room for it," Wood says.