Panicle Varieties of Hydrangea

If you have always wanted to grow hydrangea in your garden, but could not provide a space that met the requirements of the big leaf varieties, then you should consider Hydrangea paniculata cultivars. They are low maintenance; need moist, well-drained soil; will tolerate full sun; impress with 6- to 8-inch-long flower trusses; and have a bloom period that extends beyond the big leaf varieties. Several varieties of these shrubs have been around for years, grown for their reliability and low maintenance. In the 1990s, hybridizers began to introduce new cultivars to the market. In 1999, Richard Hawke, Plant Evaluation Manager at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Illinois, undertook the task of evaluating the new introductions by planting newer cultivars side by side with older cultivars, and then using a checklist to record the differences. The September-October 2011 issue of Fine Gardening magazine describes Hawke’s findings and includes a list of sources. Here are some of the highlights of his study:

Before selecting a specific cultivar, keep in mind the following information. Panicle hydrangeas are considered the most cold-hardy of the species and can be grown with minimum care as reliable shrubs or small trees. A top height of up to 15 feet is possible, but a more common height of 6 to 8 feet can be expected. The common width is also about 6 to 8 feet. Branching is usually upright, but can be drooping with the weight of pendulous blooms. These gems don’t mind pruning since blooms appear on new growth, and may be reduced by half if pruned before the first leaves appear. Pruning is not necessary but it does create a plant with improved habit and performance. If pruning is not an issue, panicle hydrangeas can be included in small gardens, although they are more suitable for larger spaces. Also, some cultivars are more suitable to small spaces than others.

After pruning, new stems are generally strong enough to support the blooms, which contain a mix of fertile florets and sterile flowers. The sterile florets provide the show and typically change in color as they mature. The current trend is to breed for more intensity in the pink tones that are typical of the mature blossom. Blossoms can be classified as mop or lacy. If of the mop variety, the sterile flowers will cover the blossom head and the fertile flowers will be recessed inside the blossom. If of the lacy variety, the sterile flowers will be scattered along the blossom with the fertile flowers clearly visible. Oakleaf Hydrangea ‘Burgundy Lace’ is typical of the lacy variety and ‘Silver Dollar’ is typical of the mop head. Flowers remain on branches well into winter and turn a soft brown color. They can be left in place for added interest in the garden. In fact, a bit of frost or even snow can enhance the ornamental quality of the dried blossoms.

Soil quality should not be alkaline as this contributes to chlorosis (yellowing) of the foliage. Consistent water ensures better health, especially in hot and dry areas. Pests and disease are rarely problems even in urban environments. Mildew is rarely a problem, and deer do not find panicle as inviting as big leaf varieties. Most areas of the country will not consider these hydrangeas to be invasive, even though they are not native. The first cultivar from Japan was introduced in 1862 and was planted along the east coast of the United States. As ‘Grandiflora’ (AKA as Pee Gee Hydrangea) grew, it naturalized and gave rise to the suspicion it was invasive. There is no supporting evidence of invasiveness of other cultivars.

The evaluation process at Chicago Botanical Garden rated plants grown for a minimum of 6 years and determined ornamental qualities, cultural adaptability, winter hardiness, and disease and pest resistance. Top performers were determined to be ‘Big Ben’, a cultivar that produces lacy, creamy white flowers that morph to deep fuchsia and improve with age; Angel’s Blush ‘Ruby’, with blossoms of white florets on deep red stems that change to blush pink in midsummer and deep red by midfall; ‘Dharuma’, with a size suitable for small gardens and blooms preceding most other cultivars, which begin as lacy white flowers and age to deep pink; Quick Fire ‘Bulk’ with leaves that change to orange in cooler temperatures and vertical stems that can be mistaken for errant stems, but produce more of the white flowers that eventually change to a dusky rose; ‘Unique’, which has been around since the 1970s and has been parent to many of the new cultivars contributing the characteristics of early bloom, largest flowers and tallest varieties; Limelight ‘Zwijnenburg’, which epitomizes the abundance of mop chartreuse flowers that a cultivar with strong stems can support;
'Little Lamb’ which displays the smallest of creamy white flowers that change to pink in fall and resembles its big brother, Limelight.

Caption: ‘Little Lamb’ Hydrangea

Other varieties that were too new to receive a recommendation, but were nonetheless considered strong contenders included Vanilla Strawberry ‘Renhy’ named for the sequence of color in the flowers from white to pink to strawberry red; White Diamonds ‘HYPMADI’, remaining within a 4-foot height and sporting beside the dark green leaves lots of small white flowers; Pinky Winky ‘Dyppinky’ with lower flowers turning dark pink while the top flowers remained white and perched atop 6- to 8-foot tall spikes, resulting in special recognition from the Royal Horticultural Society with the Award of Merit; Little Lime ‘Jane’ a cousin of Limelight with habits that make it more suitable for smaller gardens and the same beauty and flower abundance typical of its cousin; Great Star ‘Le Vasterival’ from the gardens of Princess Greta Sturdza with star-shaped white florets dancing on 7-foot tall stems.

Several mail order sources offer some of the cultivars mentioned above:

- Klehm’s Song Sparrow Farm and Nursery in Avalon, WI, 800.553.3715, www.songsparrow.com
- White Flower Farm, Litchfield, CT, 800.503.9624, www.whiteflowerfarm.com

For a comprehensive research-based article on Chlorosis, see the article by James Schuster, Extension Educator, Horticulture, University of Illinois, at http://urbanext.illinois.edu/focus/chlorosis.cfm.


Susan Hooper, an Extension Master Gardener with Mecklenburg County, NC, since 2008, enjoys working in a garden free of chemicals, inhabited by birds and butterflies, and lush with a variety of fragrant and colorful plants. Her status as a nationally accredited Master Flower Show Judge has inspired her to notice the design possibilities inherent in plants at all stages of their existence. Training as a judge has instilled the design principles that give guidance in creating flower designs as well as garden designs.