

WEEKLY UPDATE - JUNE 12 - JUNE 18, 2015

“It was June, and the world smelled of roses. The sunshine
was like powdered gold over the grassy hillside.”

Maud Hart Lovelace, *Betsy-Tacy and Tib*, 1941

Hooray for Hydrangeas

“...and blazing summer arrives
summoning blizzards
of blue hydrangeas.”
Kokoro

Leisurely strolls with a portly chocolate lab in the cool early morning provide plenty of opportunities to peek into the neighbourhood gardens to see what's in bloom. Right now, it seems to be hydrangeas, particularly the big-leaf mopheads and lacecaps and some lovely oakleaf hydrangeas. The word 'hydrangea' comes from the Greek 'hydor' meaning 'water' and 'angos' meaning 'jar' or 'vessel'. Thus a literal translation would be 'waterbarrel.'

Hydrangeas can be either deciduous or evergreen; a wide variety of species is planted throughout VanDusen Garden, particularly in the Hydrangea Collection near the top of the Rhododendron Path. While there are many species of Hydrangea, one of the main ones is *Hydrangea macrophylla*, (of which there are over 600 cultivars), which includes both the mopheads and lacecaps, i.e. *H. macrophylla* 'normalis.' Both mopheads and lacecaps have identical leaf forms, but quite different blooms. The mophead blooms are like big pompoms whereas the lacecaps have flat, unshowy, albeit fertile, flowers in the center while the showy outer flowers are sterile. Lacecaps can be found in the Hydrangea Collection and in bed 139. The most common colours of blue, pink and purple depend on the ph of the soil. An acid soil (<6) produces blue and purple flowers while an alkaline soil (ph>6) produces pink flowers.

A species native to North America is *Hydrangea aborescens*, also known as Snowball or hills-of-snow. Like *H. macrophylla*, it has very large blooms. One well-known variety, 'Annabelle', which you can find blooming in bed 26B in the Magnolia section near the Visitor Center and in bed 55 by the grotto, opens green, turns white for two or three weeks and then turns green again, making it popular for dried flower arrangements.

Hydrangea paniculata (peegee or PG) exhibits a wide variety of characteristics. Its three leaves grow from a stem node forming a whorl and it is the only species that will form trees. Its blooms can be round or cone-shaped, full and heavy or light and sparse. Look for them in beds 61 and 61A by the Japanese maples

Hydrangea quercifolia or oakleaf hydrangea is also native to North America and has leaves similar to those of a red oak. If planted in a sunny location they will turn red, yellow, burgundy and bronze in the fall, making for a beautiful display and helping to provide four seasons of interest. All their blooms open white and may take on a corally-pink tinge as they age. 'Snow Giant' can be found blooming prolifically in bed 121B while other lovely varieties grow in bed 33A along the south eastern end of the Cypress Pond.

The leaves of *Hydrangea serrata* are used to make a herbal tea called ama-cha. April 8 is thought to be the Buddha's birthday in Japan and ama-cha is poured over his statue and served to those attending the ceremony because legend has it that nine dragons poured this same tea over him when he was born. Specimens of *H.serrata* f. *koreana*, or tea of heaven, can be found in beds 85 and 85A which are located along the path between the Meditation Garden and down towards the Cardiocrinum lily bed.

In the language of flowers, Hydrangea has ambivalent meanings. On the one hand, it signifies heartfelt emotions and a bouquet signifies "Thank you for your understanding." In contrast, the hydrangea flower, perhaps because of its showiness, can also suggest heartlessness, vanity and boastfulness.

In Asia, a gift of pink hydrangeas means "You are the beat of my heart", no doubt a reference to the size of the macrophylla bloom.

It is a common subject in flower art; perhaps the most famous example is a painting of a pale pink hydrangea by Pierre-Joseph Redoute (1759-1840), the celebrated flower painter. The picture was published in his renowned collection *Choix des Plus Belles Fleurs*.

Roses, roses, roses

Oh, my Luve's like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June...

Robert Burns, "A Red, Red, Rose", 1794

Perhaps clichéd but so sincere and appropriate in this glorious time of roses. Two red roses to look for right now are *Rosa* (Dublin Bay)='Macdub' in the Formal Rose Garden and the hybrid China rose *Rosa* 'Rivers' "George IV" in the Heritage Rose Garden.

Please send comments, suggestions, corrections etc. to pkbuchanan@shaw.ca

"In June, as many as a dozen species may burst their buds on a single day. No man can heed all of these anniversaries; no man can ignore all of them."

Aldo Leopold, "Prairie Birthday"