



Hydrangeas for Summer and Beyond

Stefano Ciabo

Hydrangea border



Hydrangea 'Annabelle' in Peony Garden



For me, summer in the garden would not be the same without Hydrangeas, but on reflection it is not only the summer.

We tend to associate each season with a plant, Hellebores in winter, Daffodils in spring and Hydrangeas in summer. However, there are plants whose glory has the capacity to span more than one season, and of those plants, the Hydrangeas stand out.

The verdant green foliage in the surge of new life in spring, is followed by one of the most diverse and enduring blooms in summer, both in colour and flower shape. Then the leaves in autumn turning bronze, crimson or burgundy according to the species, and the striking architectural seed heads stand in cold winters. Not many plants stretch interest for so long and so differently, making Hydrangeas one of the most versatile genera planted around the Garden.

The name Hydrangea is derived from the Greek *hydros* (water) and *angos* (jar), and so means 'water vessel'. The name refers to the shape of the seed capsules, which resemble

a water jug. The genus boasts more than 70 species native to Asia and Americas, with the greatest diversities in mountains and woodlands of China, Korea, and Japan. It has been a year since I started the traineeship in the Garden and I remember the spectacular eye-catching blooms of the different species of Hydrangeas flowing around the Garden. It was an extremely warm welcome to my horticultural journey at The Inner Temple.

We host a large collection in the Garden, mass planted along the west side and dotted around the east section. Depending on the



Hydrangea quercifolia
autumn colour



Hydrangea 'Annabelle'
(bottom left), *H. aspera*
'*Villosa Group*' (centre) and *H*
paniculata (right corner)

soil and conditions, Hydrangeas do require some water during the growing season. After last summer's extreme heat, the team is evaluating water requirements across the Garden. That acknowledged, this summer has seen much more favourable conditions for the Hydrangeas. The evaluation work will continue and, for the moment, each species has its own distinct merit and characteristic. I would like to draw attention to some different varieties, all awarded an RHS Award of Garden Merit, and why I believe they are extremely useful.

Hydrangea quercifolia 'Snowqueen' is planted in the west border, 'quercifolia' named after the shape of its beautiful leaves- 'Oak (*Quercus*) leaf'. This produces dense, conical white flower heads that can reach up to 20cm in early summer. In the autumn, the foliage turns bronze and then purple to red, making this shrub one of the most attractive plants of this season. We also love, as flower arrangers do, the dried flower heads, which form part of our Christmas decorations on the main Garden gates.

Another stunning Hydrangea is the classy and romantic *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle', which produces enormous white spherical flower heads that contrast beautifully with the green foliage. The glowing white blooms are particularly effective in

shady areas; hence you can notice clusters in the Peony Garden.

According to the pruning technique, the abundance and shape of flowers can vary. It produces flowers on the new growth, and we prune in February. If pruned closer to ground level it will gift fewer flowers but they will be larger in size, often struggling to stand up, particularly after rain. Alternatively, a gentle pruning above healthy buds removing the previous year flower heads, will result in smaller flowers, larger in number and in a more upright habit.

A fascinating aspect of some Hydrangeas species is that the colour of the flower can vary according to the type of soil, blue in acidic or pink if grown in more alkaline soil. Regardless of the soil condition, species such as *Hydrangea paniculata* have the special ability to produce green flower panicles in early summer, gradually fading to cream before turning pink and burgundy towards the autumn.



Hydrangea aspera
'*Villosa Group*'

Finally, a special mention for *Hydrangea aspera* 'Villosa Group', one of the largest shrubs in the genus. These are characterised by their large, flattened flower head comprising tiny purple flowers surrounded by conspicuous lilac florets, appearing on arching stems. Beyond its aesthetic contribution, by monitoring the plant as part of our regular observation of wildlife and biodiversity in the Garden, we have noticed that this species attracts a great deal of pollinators. Honeybees, hoverflies, and butterflies can be found in abundance enjoying the bounty of this gorgeous plant. Moreover, we have been pleased and happily surprised to observe and record some pollinators on many other Hydrangea species, even in those we had previously thought to be sterile.

For their variety and aesthetic contributions, in addition to providing home for our precious and essential wildlife, currently Hydrangeas form a key element of the Garden stretching over the seasons.