

# Lacecaps

By R. W. SIDWELL

Two weeks ago I wrote of winter injury to shrubs. It is now appropriate to look at a group of plants that has suffered less than might have been expected. The hydrangeas are breaking and their first pairs of leaves are now (April 26) already half expanded.

The big mop-headed hydrangeas of the florist's shops and so common in the West Country are not my favourites. They are too heavy. My preference is for the wild types with their outer ring of large-sepal sterile flowers around a more or less flattened central area of fertile flowers. These are popularly known as "lacecaps".

The florist's hydrangeas are garden forms produced by many years of breeding and, as so often happened with plants from the Far East, the garden forms were introduced to Europe before the wild types from which they were derived. Thus we find that the garden forms were introduced from Japan at the end of the 18th century whereas the lacecaps mostly came almost a century later. Many modern varieties have, of course, been bred in Europe. This applies to lacecaps as well as the large headed types.

These hydrangeas are usually referred to the species *H. macrophylla* but it is possible that this so-called species is a hybrid, the origin of which is lost in the unfathomable depths of Eastern culture.

The effects of severe frost on hydrangeas of this group seem to be largely a matter of timing. Although the dormant buds appear to have little protection they seem to tolerate low winter temperatures. After growth has started and the flower buds are just beginning to show, they are sensitive to late frosts, just as is plum blossom.

Soil reaction is an important factor in determining flower colour in hydrangeas. On acid soils the sterile flowers will be blue, on limy soils pink; on bor-

der line soils, such as some of the Keuper Marls, muddy and purplish. White hydrangeas are not so affected. They are white always.

One of the first lacecaps to reach Britain was "Mariesu" introduced from Japan by Charles Maries in 1879. This is still one of the finest pink/blue hydrangeas and has given rise to other excellent varieties such as "Blue Ware".

Two very good whites are "Veitchu", also introduced by Maries, and "Lanarth White" of British origin. The central fertile flowers are pinkish blue.

A related species of hydrangea, and sometimes regarded as a sub-species of *H. macrophylla* is *H. serrata*. This is much less vigorous than the common types and often more stiffly upright in its growth. This species seems to be rather less hardy than the ordinary "macrophyllas" and winter killing is not uncommon. Nevertheless they are now breaking well from the lower half of the bushes.

Nomenclature in this group is a little confused and nurseries and large gardens do not agree as to the correct names. *H. serrata acuminata* is probably the same as one often sold as "Blue Bird". This is an exquisite pink/blue variety of great daintiness. "Rosalba" has its outer ring of flowers pure white at first, rapidly changing to rich carmine and finally to brownish red when the flowers are inverted. They remain effective over a long period.

According to some authorities "Grayswood" is of similar colour behaviour to "Rosalba" but the plant often sent out as "Grayswood" is decidedly pinkish with little colour change. The smallest and certainly the daintiest of the hydrangeas I know is *H. koreana* which is sometimes regarded as a form of *H. serrata*. This varies from pinkish

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*Hydrangea serrata* — "blue bird."

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lavender to pure blue according to soil and it is a real gem. Unfortunately this was a casualty with me in the 1976 summer and I have not replaced it yet.

There are, of course, many other hydrangea species with the outer ring of sterile flowers. Some of these make very large shrubs and are well suited for open woodland sites in large gardens. One of the best known is *H. villosa* with large, elliptic velvety leaves and mauve flowers. Coarser and with broader leaves, also densely velvety is *H. sargentiana*. These large leaves have a habit of collecting any passing detritus such as the shed particles of the fertile flowers and therefore look thoroughly untidy. The velvety surface prevents rain washing them clean.

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