

Midsummer Flurries

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In the steamy greenness of the midsummer landscape, white flowers can add a cooling touch, sort of a visual equivalent to a scoop of vanilla ice cream. Several hydrangeas have just such a refreshing floral display, including oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) and its cultivars. This species is native to the southeastern United States, growing from North Carolina to northern Florida and west to Tennessee and Louisiana, but it also grows well in other regions. It is recommended for USDA Hardiness Zones 6 to 9 (average annual minimum temperature -10 to 0°F [23.3 to 17.8°C]) and may also survive in Zone 5 (average annual minimum temperature -20 to -10°F [28.9 to 23.3°C]).

Oakleaf hydrangea is a multi-stemmed shrub with a spreading, loosely mounding growth habit. It typically reaches 6 to 10 feet (1.8 to 3 meters) tall and spreads (by root suckers) to an equal or greater width. The stems have a rusty pubescence when young and later produce grayish tan outer bark that exfoliates to reveal rich reddish brown inner bark. The “oakleaf” in the plant’s common name is aptly descriptive, since the large (up to 10 inches [25.4 centimeters] long) leaves with 3 to 7 point-tipped lobes resemble those of red oak (*Quercus rubra*). The leaves are dark green with whitish undersides in summer and develop noteworthy fall color ranging from bronze to burgundy and scarlet.

The inflorescence of oakleaf hydrangea is a cone-shaped panicle, 6 to 12 inches (15.2 to 30.5 centimeters) long and borne at the stem tips. Like other hydrangea species, *Hydrangea quercifolia* has inflorescences that bear a combination of sterile and fertile florets. The small fertile florets are cream colored and fragrant while the much larger 4-sepaled sterile florets are pure white and held above the fertile florets. Oakleaf hydrangeas at the Arboretum typically start blooming in late June or early July. After weeks in the white phase, the sterile florets start to turn pink, darkening to purplish rose before eventually turning tan in the fall.

In the wild, oakleaf hydrangea often grows in the shade of overstory trees. While it is quite shade tolerant, it will also grow well in

full or part-day sun. Moist, well drained soil with ample organic matter is ideal, but oakleaf hydrangea is fairly adaptable to soil type and will tolerate some drought once established. A generous layer of organic mulch around the plant helps hold soil moisture.

The Arboretum collection holds four accessions of the species plus several cultivar accessions. Of the species accessions, three were wild collected from sites in North Carolina (accession 104-2007), Florida (1206-89), and Georgia (1396-85), the latter two by Arboretum staff during plant collecting expeditions to the Southeast.

In recent years panicle hydrangea (*H. paniculata*) has been the darling of the nursery industry, with a steady stream of new introductions hitting the market. Though oakleaf hydrangea lags behind in sheer numbers of cultivars, it can claim several well established cultivars as well as a number of newer introductions. ‘Snow Queen’ is perhaps the most widely grown, noted for a somewhat more compact form (though still at least 6 feet tall), abundant production of large, upright flower panicles, and better cold hardiness than the species. The Arboretum has three accessions (totaling nine individual plants) of ‘Snow Queen’, including five specimens (318-94-A through E) prominently displayed near the northeast corner of the Hunnewell Visitor Center (see photo on facing page). Another winter-themed cultivar is ‘Snowflake’, which bears long inflorescences with unique double florets. For sites with limited space, fortunately there are several smaller cultivars including ‘Pee Wee’ (3 to 4 feet [0.9 to 1.2 meters] tall), two specimens of which (accession 193-2005-A and C) grow in the Leventritt Shrub and Vine Garden. Two recent introductions from the United States National Arboretum, ‘Ruby Slippers’ and ‘Munchkin’, are in the same size range and look very promising. A single plant of ‘Ruby Slippers’ accessioned and planted last year didn’t make it through the brutal winter but we hope to try it again.

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