

Low-maintenance, long-lasting HYDRANGEAS



Find out which panicle varieties are so amazing,
you'll never want to plant a bigleaf kind again

BY RICHARD HAWKE

THERE IS NO DENYING the wow factor of the panicle hydrangea, especially when it's in bloom. The flower trusses are in-your-face big, averaging 6 to 8 inches long, but they can be much bigger. Even better is that the robust blooms sit atop stout branches during the dog days of summer, when other shrubs have finished their show. Panicle hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* cvs., USDA Hardiness Zones 3–8) is a great old-fashioned shrub. I clearly remember having to duck under a huge canopy of blooms while delivering newspapers as a boy. I've seen a countless number of different panicle hydrangeas since my paper-route years—a testament to their reliability and popularity.

Panicle hydrangea is undergoing a renaissance of sorts, with a plethora of fresh cultivars making this vintage shrub relevant again. The influx of new cultivars in the 1990s, as well as the obvious similarity among some cultivars, fueled my interest in beginning a plant trial in 1999. Let's be honest: Comparing the flowers can be like staring at a Magic Eye stereogram and waiting for the hidden image to appear. How distinct are the plants, really? Are the new cultivars improvements over the old ones or just more of the same? I knew that, by planting the cultivars side by side, their similarities and differences would become clear—and, boy, did they ever.



'Big Ben'



Angel's Blush™



HOW WE TREATED THE HYDRANGEAS

Over the past 12 years, we've evaluated 25 cultivars of panicle hydrangea at the Chicago Botanic Garden (CBG). The initial trial included the traditional offerings of the day, such as 'Floribunda', 'Tardiva', and 'Unique', as well as some cultivars from Europe that eventually became available in the United States. In the last few years, we've kept the trial current by adding new introductions. We grew the plants in their preferred setting—moist, well-drained soil in full sun—although most would also tolerate partial shade. We rated them on ornamental qualities, cultural adaptability, winter hardiness, and disease and pest resistance. The goal is to determine, through scientific evaluation, which plants are superior. Shrubs, like panicle hydrangea, are evaluated for a minimum of six years in CBG's Zone 5b gardens.



'Dharuma'

TOP PERFORMERS

Because of its name, I expected **'Big Ben'** to have huge flowers, but they were fairly average compared with those of other cultivars. I was, however, over the moon when I saw the unexpected transformation of the blooms from creamy white to deep fuchsia. The color of the open, lacy panicles continued to get better with age, a rarity in the plant world.

Where **'Big Ben'** is a bit of a misnomer, **Angel's Blush™** ('Ruby') is a name that is spot-on. The deep red stems foreshadow what's in store for the color of the blossoms: The white florets blush pink come midsummer and then gradually darken to red by midfall.

'Dharuma' was the earliest hydrangea to bloom at the start of summer and is the smallest of the hydrangeas we grew, making it perfect for undersize gardens or containers. Held on beautiful red stems, the diminutive, lacy white flowers eventually age to deep pink. Because of its slow-growing, compact habit, this cultivar needs only a light pruning in spring to remove spent flowers.

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What you need to know about panicle hydrangeas

They are hardy

Panicle hydrangeas are considered the most cold hardy of the species. They are reliable shrubs or small trees that require minimal fuss for success. Their stout, reddish brown branches are upright to arching, sometimes becoming bowed under the weight of the large flowers. A height and width up to 15 feet is possible, but something closer to 6 or 8 feet tall and wide is more common. Due to their size, panicle hydrangeas are usually ruled out for small gardens; however, with judicious pruning or by choosing a small cultivar, such as ‘Dharuma’ or Quick Fire™, anyone can enjoy them.

Pruning doesn't affect bloom

Unlike bigleaf hydrangeas (*H. macrophylla* cvs., Zones 6–9), panicle hydrangeas

don't mind being pruned. I recommend cutting the plants back by about one-half of their height before the leaves emerge, typically in early spring—although this isn't necessary if you have room for a larger plant. We initially pruned due to space restrictions in the trial beds, but the improved habits and performance after pruning encouraged us to do it regularly. The chart below reflects the size of the hydrangeas with annual pruning. Panicle hydrangeas (unlike many bigleaf types) bloom on new wood, so pruning will not reduce flower production and may actually increase the size of the flowers. Contrary to some reports, annual pruning did not encourage long, weak stems that couldn't support the heavy flowers. With the exception of ‘Dolly’, all the cultivars were strong enough to hold up their blooms.

Flower type and size vary

The blooms of panicle hydrangeas are a mix of frothy, fertile florets and showy, sterile florets. The showy

‘Silver Dollar’

Panicle hydrangea trial results

RATING	NAME	HEIGHT	WIDTH	FLOWER PRODUCTION	FLOWER PERIOD
***	Angel's Blush™ ('Ruby')	6 feet	8½ feet	Excellent	Midsummer to midfall
****	'Big Ben'	6 feet	6½ feet	Excellent	Early summer to midfall
**	'Boskoop'	4½ feet	5 feet	Good	Midsummer to midfall
*	'Brussels Lace'	5 feet	6 feet	Good	Late spring to late summer
**	'Burgundy Lace'	5 feet	6 feet	Excellent	Midsummer to late fall
***	'Dharuma'	2½ feet	3 feet	Excellent	Midsummer to early fall
**	'Dolly'	5 feet	6 feet	Excellent	Early summer to midfall
**	'Floribunda'	4 feet	6 feet	Good	Midsummer to midfall
**	'Greenspire'	4 feet	6½ feet	Fair	Midsummer to midfall
***	'Kyushu'	4 feet	5 feet	Excellent	Midsummer to late fall
****	Limelight™ ('Zwijnenburg')	6 feet	8½ feet	Excellent	Midsummer to late fall
***	'Little Lamb'	4½ feet	4½ feet	Excellent	Early summer to midfall
**	'Mega Pearl'	6 feet	8½ feet	Excellent	Midsummer to late fall
***	'Phantom'	6½ feet	7½ feet	Excellent	Midsummer to late fall
**	Pink Diamond™ ('Interhydia')	4 feet	5 feet	Fair to good	Early summer to midfall
**	'Pink Lady'	5 feet	6 feet	Fair to good	Late summer to early fall
***	Quick Fire™ ('Bulk')	6 feet	5½ feet	Excellent	Early summer to midfall
***	'Silver Dollar'	5 feet	7½ feet	Excellent	Midsummer to late fall
**	'Tardiva'	5 feet	5½ feet	Good	Early summer to midfall
*	The Swan™ ('Barbara')	3½ feet	4 feet	Fair	Midsummer to late fall
***	'Unique'	6½ feet	8 feet	Good	Late summer to midfall
**	'Webb's'	4 feet	4½ feet	Good	Midsummer to midfall
**	'White Lace'	5 feet	6 feet	Fair	Early summer to late fall
***	'White Lady'	5½ feet	7½ feet	Good	Midsummer to late fall
**	'White Moth'	5 feet	6 feet	Fair	Early spring to late summer

KEY

- **** Excellent
- *** Good
- ** Fair
- * Poor

Rated on ornamental qualities, cultural adaptability, and pest resistance

florets, varying in size and quantity by cultivar, provide the long-lasting bloom show, which is enhanced by a metamorphosis from white to varying shades of pink. The trend in breeding, not surprisingly, has been to intensify the pink color of the aging blossoms. I use the terms “lacy” and “mop” to distinguish between the two flower types of panicle hydrangea. “Lacy” refers to an open panicle with showy florets interspersed among the fertile florets (photo, far right), whereas “mop” indicates an overabundance of showy florets with fertile florets hidden beneath (photo, facing page).

Watch the pH—but don’t worry about deer

Our soils at the Chicago Botanic Garden tend to be alkaline, which I found may cause foliar chlorosis (photo, near right) in panicle hydrangeas, especially in hot, dry weather.



In warmer climates, consistent water will ensure healthier foliage and stronger flower production. Panicle hydrangeas are tolerant of urban conditions and are largely unbothered by pests and diseases. While the mildew resistance of some cultivars is often touted, we never observed powdery mildew on any of our plants. And although deer love bigleaf hydrangeas, they tend to be less interested in panicle types.

They have some winter interest

I’m not nutty about expounding on a plant’s winter character, but I don’t agree with naysayers who think panicle hydrangea has no winter interest. The faded tan flowers provide a bit of color and structural interest, especially when rimed with frost or covered in snow. Being a lazy gardener at heart, I prefer to leave them on until spring, when I’m cutting the branches back anyway. It’s fun when the crispy panicles snap off and roll through the garden like miniature tumbleweeds.



‘Burgundy Lace’

FLOWER COLOR	FLOWER TYPE	PANICLE LENGTH
White, dark pink to red	Lacy	10 inches
White, deep pink to magenta	Lacy	10 inches
White, pink	Lacy	11 inches
White, light green	Lacy	8 inches
White, deep pink	Lacy	10 inches
White, deep pink	Lacy	4 inches
White, tan	Lacy	10 inches
White, pink	Lacy	12 inches
Greenish white	Lacy	10 inches
White, light green	Lacy	10 inches
Greenish white, pink	Mop	9 inches
White, pink	Mop	7 inches
White, pink	Lacy	11 inches
White, deep pink	Mop	10 inches
White, deep pink	Lacy	8 inches
White	Lacy	12 inches
White, dusky rose	Lacy	4 inches
White, green and pink	Mop	10 inches
White, pink	Lacy	11 inches
White	Lacy	10 inches
White, pink	Lacy	13 inches
White, pink	Mop	11 inches
White	Lacy	11 inches
White, greenish	Lacy	9 inches
White, light green	Lacy	8 inches

IT’S NOT NATIVE, so is it invasive?

Drive along I-95 in Massachusetts and you might see some panicle hydrangeas by the roadside. They’re not native, so you might wonder if their presence indicates that this species is invasive in certain parts of the country. The answer is “Maybe.” ‘Grandiflora’ (also known as PeeGee hydrangea), the first cultivar introduced to the United States from Japan in 1862, was so overplanted it became naturalized in portions of the eastern United States and Canada. Although no other cultivar has shown itself to be as aggressive, the behavior of ‘Grandiflora’ has given the entire species a bad name.

[SOURCES]

The following mail-order plant sellers offer many of the panicle hydrangeas featured:

A Nursery Inside A Garden, Arlington, Tenn.; 888-617-7390; www.gardensoyvey.com

Klehm’s Song Sparrow Farm and Nursery, Avalon, Wis.; 800-553-3715; www.songsparrow.com

White Flower Farm, Litchfield, Conn.; 800-503-9624; www.whiteflowerfarm.com

TOP PERFORMERS

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'Unique'



Quick Fire™ ('Bulk') is aptly named for how rapidly the white flowers change to pink in midsummer, peaking at a dusky rose by late summer. Like 'Dharuma', which is one of its parents, Quick Fire™ boasts deep red stems and an early bloom time. While it has a compact habit, Quick Fire™ has vertical stems that occasionally shoot up arrow-straight in summer. The natural inclination is to prune back these errant stems, but resist the urge because they bear late-season flowers. Panicle hydrangeas typically have handsome, dark green leaves with no significant fall color, but the leaves of Quick Fire™ turn orange when cooler temperatures set in.

'Unique' is a giant—the tallest cultivar with the largest flower trusses. I think of this cultivar as a garden classic (which is not just a nice way of saying that it's old). It has been around since the 1970s, but that is because it has a solid reputation for vigor and reliability. 'Unique' is the progenitor of many modern cultivars, such as 'Brussels Lace', 'Burgundy Lace', 'Greenspire',

Pink Diamond™, and 'White Moth'; interestingly, in our trial, it outperformed all of these cultivars.

It was evident from the start that there was something special about **Limelight™** ('Zwijenburg'). The fresh chartreuse color and Rubenesque plumpness of its flower clusters set it apart. I am still in awe of its bodacious floral show and beyond impressed that its stems are strong enough to hold up the rotund blossoms. In the trial garden, the serendipitous floral juxtaposition of overstuffed Limelight™ with noble 'Big Ben' was brilliant. It's hard for me now to think of having one without the other nearby.

'Little Lamb' looks like the kid brother of Limelight™ but with creamy white flowers. Its plump panicles are jam-packed with the smallest florets of all, which are less than an inch wide. I'll fight the urge to compare the fluffy flowers to frolicking lambs, but the analogy is an honest one. Like Limelight™, its showy florets gradually turn pink by early fall.

Quick Fire™



Limelight™





'Little Lamb'

THE NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

I may be the director of the country's largest trial garden, but I am no different than any other gardener when it comes to new plants—I have to have them. And panicle hydrangeas are no exception. I planted several new cultivars in the trial garden last year, and the following are the ones that have shown the most promise. But I want to test them for a few more years before making any solid recommendations.

Desserts seem to be in vogue these days when naming plants. **Vanilla Strawberry™** ('Renhy') may conjure up scoops of ice cream, but the name aptly describes the sequence of colors as the plump flowers age from creamy white to light pink to strawberry red. The blooms top 6- to 7-foot-tall stems in late summer.

White Diamonds™ ('HYPMADI') is loaded with great features: sparkling white flowers; handsome, dark green leaves; a compact habit; and heat and drought tolerance. Developed by nurseryman Michael Dirr, White Diamonds™ tops out at 4 feet tall—the perfect gem for small gardens or containers.

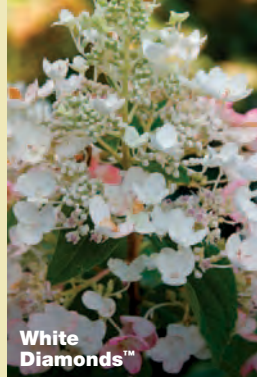
Pinky Winky™ ('Dvppinky') has a distinctive two-tone floral display, with flower heads that turn dark pink from the bottom up, accentuating the fresh white florets at the peaked tips. The red stems, 6 to 8 feet tall, are, thankfully, strong enough to keep the gigantic trusses pointing skyward. Pinky Winky™ also recently received the prestigious Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.

Simply put, **Little Lime™** ('Jane') is the miniversion of Limelight™: same fluffy, soft, lime green flowers but on a plant a third the size. How can it go wrong? Fat and sassy blooms blanket stout stems (only 3 to 5 feet tall) and fade to pink as summer winds down. I think Little Lime™ will be most welcome in small gardens where Limelight™ is just too big.

The mere mention of 4-inch-wide florets is enough to get my attention and is what sets **Great Star™** ('Le Vasterival') apart from the crowd. Touting king-size, star-shaped white florets, this hydrangea promises a stellar show on stems reaching 7 feet tall and wide. Great Star™ comes from Le Vasterival, the French garden of Princess Greta Sturdza—a bigger-than-life gardener.



Vanilla Strawberry™



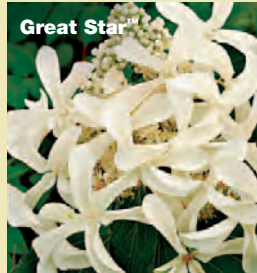
White Diamonds™



Pinky Winky™



Little Lime™



Great Star™

—Richard Hawke is the plant-evaluation manager at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Illinois.