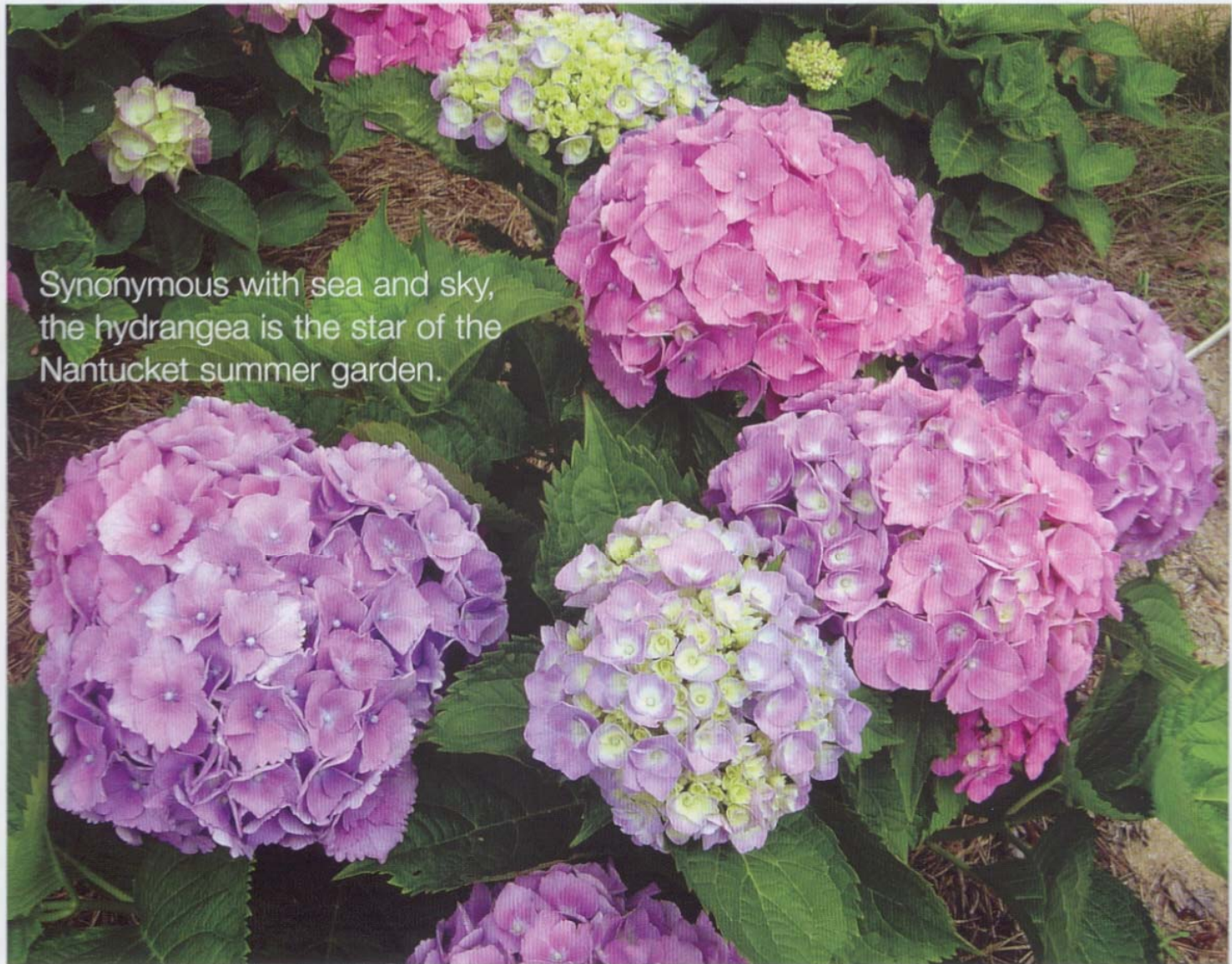


in the garden

# HYDRANGEA FEVER

BY LUCY APTHORP LESKE • PHOTOS BY MAL CONDON & JOAN HARRISON



Synonymous with sea and sky, the hydrangea is the star of the Nantucket summer garden.

Some hydrangeas like this Goliath are beautifully articulated.

**Mal Condon and Frank Dutra are addicts.** Behind some knotty pines off Madaket Road, this enterprising pair of regular guys is busy building an unusual business: propagating, growing, selling and shipping hydrangeas. At a time when Nantucket's agriculture industry – which once dominated the island's landscape – pales in comparison to the building boom and tourist economy, these two fellows are

indulging an addiction to, well, flowers, and trying to make a buck in the process.

Someone was bound to do it. While local nurseries have been selling hydrangeas to gardeners and landscapers on Nantucket since the early 20th century when they were first introduced to the landscape trade, few locals have ventured into the propagation business. To be fair, Sue Slosek at Moors End Farm on Polpis Road has been

propagating hydrangeas for years and offers an impressive array of plants as part of her family's nursery business. The late Nantucket nurseryman, Russell Pope, was among the first to offer hydrangeas for sale on Nantucket and was known for propagating plants in his greenhouses off Cliff Road.

However, none have invested as much time, energy, space and resources into hydrangeas on the scale of Mal and Frank.



Above: The "gang" at Hydrangea Farm, from left: Frank Dutra, Mary Kay Condon, Mal Condon. Next Page: Pine needles make an excellent mulch for hydrangeas.

Mal has been interested in hydrangeas for over 20 years and has virtually traveled the world to feed his addiction. When he retired from the paper-engineering business and moved to Nantucket with his wife, Mary Kay, 14 years ago, they bought and ran the Stumble Inn guesthouse where he propagated hydrangeas for fun and gave them away to his guests. After selling the inn in 1999, he converted to a full-time, large-scale operation on Madaket Road.

Today, at his Nantucket Hydrangea Farm Nursery, Mal and his partner Frank propagate over 300 varieties of hydrangeas in half a dozen greenhouses and grow over 175 different varieties in the ground. They market and sell the plants directly to local customers here on Nantucket as well as through their website, [www.nantuckethydrangea.com](http://www.nantuckethydrangea.com). Last year, Frank reports they sold over 1,000 plants over the Internet. He says the people most interested in their plants tend to be

collectors who want rare or special varieties.

Nantucket Hydrangea Farm focuses only on hydrangeas that grow in Nantucket's USDA zone 7B or below. As Frank explained, Nantucket lies in the same growing zone as Atlanta, but the island experiences more colder days each year. In horticultural terms, that means that Nantucket has a greater number of cold degree days, a factor that influences what hydrangea varieties do well here.

#### HYDRANGEA HORTICULTURE

A digression into hydrangea horticulture is worth doing here. The hydrangea genus is found all over the world, but primarily in the northern hemisphere's temperate zones. Several varieties are native to North America, including *Hydrangea quercifolia*, the oak leaf hydrangea, and *H. arborescens*, also called Hills-of-Snow. What's critical for Nantucket gardeners is that the hydrangea is

a sturdy plant that tolerates both acidic soil and salt. The hydrangea was custom-built for seaside gardens.

It is no wonder Nantucket is crawling with hydrangeas. The hydrangea has adapted to our climate so well it could be elevated to island mascot alongside the whale. The most commonly-planted species, *H. macrophylla*, originally native to Japan, has been cultivated, crossed and bred for over a century. Initially developed by French, German and Dutch horticulturists for the florist trade after it was discovered, *H. macrophylla* is now the largest, most diverse landscape species in the family with hundreds of varieties available in the trade, from the popular rounded mopheads to the flat, lacecap types.

#### HYDRANGEA PRODUCTION

At their nursery, tiny by horticulture industry standards but one of the most

## MAL CONDON'S HYDRANGEA GROWING TIPS:

- ✓ Mulch with two inches of pine needles
- ✓ Water half inch/week
- ✓ Feed once a year in mid-spring with slow-release Osmocote
- ✓ Prune in April. Cut all stems with exfoliating bark to the ground. Cut other stems back only to green wood.

*H. macrophylla* alone, many of them rare. Frank is in charge of the propagation and mail-order side of the business and says that hydrangeas are relatively simple to propagate from cuttings. He starts in late summer by taking semi-hardwood tip-cuttings from mother plants, inserting them in a special mix of bark, municipal compost and perlite, and then growing them inside a protected greenhouse for two years while the plants establish vigorous root systems. It is not until a plant is at least two years old that it is sold, shipped or planted outdoors. That's when Mal takes over.

Even though he and Frank only grow and sell hydrangeas that are hardy on Nantucket, the first winter or two outdoors can be tough on young plants. Mal recommends protection, particularly since no *H. macrophylla* variety is frost-hardy once the buds break dormancy. Even when dormant

horticulture at the University of Georgia and renowned hydrangea expert, showed in his book, "Hydrangeas for American Gardens" (Timber Press, 2004), popular Southern varieties like Amethyst and Pia aren't sturdy enough to survive in our climate long-term. Others will survive but will not produce consistent flowers year after year because of bud kill. So in winter, Mal surrounds young plants with cylinders of wire filled with pine needles for the first year or two.

Most *H. macrophylla* varieties typically produce flowers only from year-old wood, and, as Mal explained, many are apically dominant. This means that the bud at the tip of each branch is the only one that produces a flower each year. The rest of the buds down each branch produce only leaves. Consequently, if we have a cold winter or a late frost that kills the apical bud, hydrangeas will not produce flowers that season.



Recent advances in breeding have produced new cultivars for the trade that are not apically dominant, so branches produce flower buds up and down each stem. Many of these plants are also remontant, which means that they produce flowers from new wood as well as old. So even if all buds are winter-killed on the old wood, the new wood will still produce flowers that season. The most popular varieties with these traits on the market today are Endless Summer and All Summer Beauty. With these new varieties, gardeners can count on flowers year after year no matter what the winter weather.

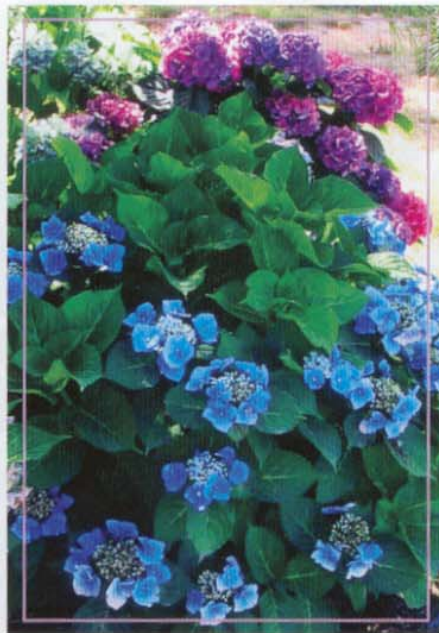
#### A HYDRANGEA FOR EVERY GARDEN

While Mal and Frank are quite knowledgeable and excited about the *H. macrophylla* business, they grow just as many cultivars from other species as well, including the climbing *H. anomala petiolaris*, *H. arborescens*, *H. aspera*, *H. involucrata*, the lacecap *H. serrata* and the oakleaf *H. quercifolia*. Most are hardier than *H. macrophylla* and flower more reliably and at slightly different times, extending the flowering season.

Mal's specialty is *H. paniculata*, which typically blooms last in the season, in August. At the moment, Nantucket Hydrangea Nursery offers 13 different varieties, from the familiar Grandiflora or peegee hydrangea to Pink Diamond, a lovely shrub with big, elongated white flower clusters that fade to pink and hold on the shrub well into the winter; Barbara, the very late-flowering Tardiva with delicate white cone-shaped flower clusters; and Greenspire with pale greenish-white flowers. In fact, Mal's description of Greenspire and its performance is one of several included in Dirr's book.

#### A STAR AMONG US

You see, Mal Condon is such a gifted and successful hydrangea buff that he is called upon regularly by horticulture societies and professional associations to give talks about his work. In 2005 he delivered a presentation on *H. paniculata* at the Center for Applied Nursery Research's Hydrangea Conference in Georgia. An avid collector, he travels



The mophead Masja looks over the shoulders of the lacecap Blaumeise.

### NEW VARIETIES FOR NON-STOP BLUE FLOWERS:

All Summer Beauty  
Decatur Blue  
Endless Summer  
Penny Mac  
David Ramsey  
Oakhill  
Blaumeise  
(Deep blue lacecap)

worldwide to view, catalog and collect information about hydrangea performance and new cultivars. His wife Mary Kay, while she admits she is nothing more than the official weeder and waterer for the business, has been an accomplice in all of his enterprises, including the occasional covert operation identifying and collecting hydrangea cuttings from unsuspecting homeowners.

Growing in their yard are several examples of hydrangeas that he has brought home with him. One of his favorites is

Penny Mac, named for the late Penny McHenry, founder of the American Hydrangea Society and friend of hydrangea enthusiasts everywhere.

Will Mal and Frank's enthusiasm for hydrangeas infect Nantucket gardeners? Marty McGowan, founder and owner of the 'Sconset Gardener, one of Nantucket's largest and most successful landscaping companies, said that plantsmen like Mal and Frank are an unusual breed. While one could ask, who needs another hydrangea variety when we already have hundreds, each distinguished by minute characteristics and nuances, in the world of plant collectors there is always room for one more. Marty admits, "I am always looking for the next great hydrangea. After all, it's synonymous with sea and sky. What better plant could there be for Nantucket?"

Enthusiasm like Mal and Frank's is infectious. But on the more practical side, if it weren't for people like them, we wouldn't have the new cultivars we have today. Marty has been planting Endless Summer since it was first introduced to the market. This year, he imported over 700 plants to Nantucket for his clients. He values the plant because it starts blooming heavily in July and then keeps on going until well past September.

Marty also adds other hydrangea varieties to his clients' gardens, including Pink Diamond, which he says pairs wonderfully with ornamental grasses and viburnums against a dark green hedge. In fact, he says that landscapes with hydrangea collections that have several different varieties of different sizes, shapes, bloom periods and colors can add real interest to a garden.

Marty explains that, with hydrangeas, "It's all about the show." Come July, the hydrangea is the star of Nantucket's gardens. Mal agrees. "What other plant has flowers that last as long?" It's his passion, it's Nantucket's icon, it's what Nantucket gardeners want in their garden. Perhaps, one day, a hydrangea will be named after Mal, Mary Kay or Frank, or maybe all three. If it is, you can bet that it will be spectacular. ●

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