

The Climbing Hydrangea

As you may have guessed from previous articles, I like plants! The problem with belonging to this group of chlorophyll enthusiasts is our profound inability to look at a plant and proclaim that it is not 'garden-worthy'. Regardless of a plant's given flaws, we 'chlorophylloholics' overlook these low points, and only focus on the points of praise. Interestingly, the plant group that most chlorophylloholics overlook is that nasty, twining and sprawling group called vines! They provoke comments that they are simply too much work, or they become invasive. But, even among this group of plants there is a gentleman – or shall we say a gentleplant: the Climbing Hydrangea Vine, *Hydrangea anomala* subsp. *petiolaris*. Its only major flaw is the cumbersome botanical name.

Climbing Hydrangea Vine is native to Japan, China and Korea and is among a select group of vines that climb by aerial root-like holdfasts. Most people associate vines with plants that twine around their support, and when grown up trees, often girdle (choke) their host plant to death. Climbing Hydrangea does not twine, but instead proceeds straight up the trunk or support via these root-like tendrils, leaving its host unharmed. In fact, I have seen this vine scampering up many a tree, brick and stone structures with ease. However, it will not climb up walls that are coated with cement; it seems the alkalinity of the cement harms the hairs, and prevents attachment. The Climbing Hydrangea Vine will ultimately reach heights of 50 to 75', but you must be warned – they are very slow to get started. The patient gardener is rewarded 3-4 years after planting by yearly growth rates of several feet instead of inches!

But clothing walls and tree trunks is only a portion of its charm. In late May and early June, the plant is covered with white, lace cap 'Hydrangea' flowers. The flowers persist for about 2 weeks, and are produced upon branchlets that project out from the trunk by one to two feet. These branchlets give the vine and the supporting structure a lot of shadow and three-dimensional detailing, which many other vines fail to produce.

During the summer, the foliage is clean and dark green. Although the leaves will wilt under stress, once established, the vine is very drought tolerant. During autumn, the center of the foliage often turns a very dramatic yellow, while the edges of the leaf often have a persistent green margin. For plant lovers, winter is also a season that is not without interest. The cinnamon colored bark on trunks older than four years develops a pronounced and attractive exfoliation, which runs vertically along the trunk.

As I have alluded, this is a plant with a variety of garden functions. They look right at home growing up the trunks of large trees in the shade. They are also at home growing up brick or wooden structures in the sun or the shade. If you decide to grow this on your house, make certain that you have ample room. On several occasions, it has wandered through open second story windows over the course of several days! It is also at home as a groundcover in sun or shade, or scampering up boulders and old stumps.

For those wishing to extend the flowering season, the Japanese Hydrangea Vine, *Schizophragma hydrangeoides* (not for those verbally challenged!) will be of interest.

Having similar cultural requirements, Schizophragma (yes, I do love that name) is a more open growing vine than its cousin but it blooms just after the former is finished, providing flower display through mid July!

As a final thought, this is a great Hydrangea for all those living with deer. Since the plant grows above the browse line, the flowers will not be eaten! Thus, all you hydrangea lovers take note. Here is another great way of bringing those great lacecap flowers into the garden, or for the fortunate, into the second story window!