

Collection Profile

The Kaufman Hydrangea Collection: Beauty, Education, & Marketing

Donald R. Buma

Norfolk Botanical Garden had its inception in 1938 with the specific goal of creating a garden that would draw tourists to the City of Norfolk. Viewing extensive displays of azaleas was to be the “lure.” The marketing plan was successful and for many decades the garden was known throughout the region as the Azalea Garden. Businesses, the main thoroughfare, local churches, and the neighborhood school are all named for this former city park.

Today, Norfolk Botanical Garden is an effective public/private partnership between the City of Norfolk, which owns the property, and the Norfolk Botanical Garden Society, which is responsible for all administration and management of the property. This partnership resulted from the desire of city officials to develop a botanical garden

that would meet both the expectations and the needs of residents and the visiting public while limiting the increase of the City’s long term monetary obligation by broadening the base of financial support to include private funding. Privatization took place in the early 1990s and Norfolk Botanical Garden has continued to improve in appearance and educational impact as well as collection diversity.

Azaleas remain the signature plant of the garden. However, several other woody plant collections are well represented. In addition to a North American Plant Collections Consortium recognized Camellia collection, there is a deciduous holly collection, a crape myrtle collection, and a display of over 3,000 hybrid tea roses. Most recently a collection of hydrangeas has been added.

This collection was made possible by George and Linda Kaufman, local philanthropists who have not only made significant contributions to the positive cultural quality of the Norfolk community but are very accomplished gardeners in their own right. They have wonderfully landscaped grounds with finely manicured gardens and have grown and collected hydrangeas for many years.

Hydrangeas are currently experiencing a pronounced rise in popularity. It is curious why these very decorative and easy to grow plants have not received greater attention in the past. Toni Lawson-Hall and Brian Rothera in their 1995 book *Hydrangeas A Gardener’s Guide* explain that, “One of the reasons why so little is known about the (hydrangea) is that very little has been written about it in English.” And the bulk of this information, they continue, is for specialists with “little for the ordinary gardener to use except brief sentences in major reference works.”

Therefore, one of the reasons for adding the hydrangea to our collections at Norfolk was the opportunity to educate and increase public awareness about these plants. Norfolk Botanical Garden is located in Zone 8 where most species and cultivars of hydrangeas can be grown to mature size without that much concern of winter tip dieback and flower bud loss. Displaying the wide range and diversity of hydrangeas in a labeled collection will enable visitors, and in particular regional residents, to become more aware of the hydrangea, its versatility, and its attractiveness.



A view of the Norfolk Botanical Garden in the spring with the NATO Observation Tower in the background.



Pictured at the top is the Japanese Garden at the Norfolk Botanical Garden. At the bottom is the Renaissance Court Fountain.

When complete, the collection will cover an area of approximately 3 acres. Currently it contains 278 taxa within approximately three-quarters of an acre. The collection is divided into 11 separate display areas: 1) native species and cultivars; 2) plants with interesting foliage and flowers; 3) blue flowering macrophylla cultivars; 4) pink flowering macrophylla cultivars; 5) white flowering macrophylla cultivars; 6) dwarf varieties; 7) serrata cultivars; 8) other species; and, 9) close relatives of the hydrangea.

The remaining two areas are an alkaline demonstration bed and an acid demonstration bed. Each respectively displays pink and blue flowering macrophylla cultivars. The pH of the soil in each bed will be adjusted so that the "blue" hydrangeas will display pink blooms and the "pink" hydrangeas will display blue blooms. These two beds offer visitors the opportunity to observe the dramatic effects that soil pH has on these plants.

Several of the more interesting cultivars in this collection include:

Hydrangea arborescens var. *radiata* 'Silver Flash,' which has white leaf undersides that sparkle in the shade; *H. macrophylla nigra*, with black stems; *H. macrophylla* 'Yellow Leaf', *H. petiolaris variegata*, a variegated climbing hydrangea; and *Schizophragma hydrangeoides* 'Roseum'.

The Kaufman Hydrangea Collection will serve as a living catalogue of hydrangeas. From an educational standpoint, the collection will promote hydrangea identification through visual recognition, a real need because as Hill and Rothera pointed out, specifically in regard to the identification of hydrangeas, "Without a reference to good color photographs today's gardener is lost." It is hoped that this collection will serve to rectify that situation.

The other reason for the creation of the hydrangea collection was quite pragmatic and harkens back to the 1930s creation of the original Azalea Garden as a tourist attraction. That reason is marketing, plain and simple. Hydrangeas are wonderful plants that provide extensive bloom during the summer season. Because the bulk of the Norfolk Botanical Garden's visitation occurs during the

two months of spring azalea bloom, the hydrangea collection was started with the intent of increasing visitation during the summer "off-season," when the azaleas are not in bloom. Developing a collection for marketing purposes may not resonate with all plantsmen and curators; however, it is becoming increasingly realistic and pragmatic.

The Kaufman Hydrangea Collection enhances both the natural beauty of the garden as well as its inherent educational

value. We would like to thank reviewer Kunso Kim for his time and consideration in enabling Norfolk Botanical Garden to have this collection registered with the North American Plant Collections Consortium.

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