

Hydrangea macrophylla
'Merveille Sanguine' has
large balls of flowers in
a sumptuous shade of
magenta-pink.

Beyond Blue

Maurice Foster's Kent garden is home to a vast collection of woody plants, but it's the colourful hydrangeas - many of his own breeding - that steal the show in summer

PHOTOGRAPHS **MARIANNE MAJERUS**



Left *H. macrophylla* 'Romance' has unusual double-layered flowers. **Below** Maurice Foster is fascinated by woody plants, growing and breeding *Hydrangea aspera* cultivars.

Maurice Foster knows the genus very well, although his heart is tugged in other directions, too. His 15-acre garden and arboretum on the bluff of a hill on the edge of the Kent Downs features a large collection of magnolias, rhododendrons and camellias, a great number of rare trees, plus huge numbers of hydrangeas. "I'm basically a tree man," he insists, which is a modest statement, considering that he is a long-standing member of the Royal Horticultural Society's Woody Plants Committee, and has been awarded the Society's Victoria Medal of Honour for his services to horticulture – its highest accolade.

But at this time of year, when many of the hydrangeas are in full pomp, they're the woody plants that have his attention – in particular, the species *Hydrangea aspera* and *H. serrata*, both of which he breeds from.

As with all plant breeding, it's a painstaking process, and there is a long wait to see the results. Maurice either leaves the flowers to be open pollinated, or does the job himself by placing pollen from one parent plant onto the stigmas of another's flowers. "Part of the problem is finding when the stigma is receptive to pollen," he notes. "I apply it when I think

it's receptive and viscid and, just to be sure, I leave the pollen in a bag that I put around the flower to protect it from visiting insects and cross-pollination, and give it a shake. Then I cross my fingers and hope that it's been successful."

If it works, the result could be two or three hundred seeds. "I've built a propagator in the cellar, with artificial heat and light, and I sow the seed between Christmas and New Year," says Maurice. In April, the seedlings are pricked out, then they're potted on in July. All being well, by the end of the



Enduringly popular, a hydrangea in full flower is a sight few gardeners can resist. From the blowsy pink and bright-blue balls of the mophead hydrangeas, so evocative of seaside gardens, to the wonderful climbing hydrangea, *H. anomala* subsp. *petiolaris*, oak-leaved types, and the delicate entrancing flowers of so many other species, there is sure to be a hydrangea that will win you over. Not least because they flower all summer, bring colour to shady spots and are almost pest-free.



year there will be good-sized plants ready to go into nursery beds. "The biggest problem is damping off, because hydrangea seed is very small and the seedlings are tiny," he explains.

After that, it's a matter of waiting until the new shrubs flower and their qualities can be assessed. "The time that takes can vary," he notes. "I've got some plants from my last cross that were sown in 2015 and went into the nursery beds in 2017. One or two will flower this year, but a lot depends on speed of growth and the degree of light they get."

Clearly, this is a labour of love, so it's fitting that one of Maurice's *H. aspera* cultivars is named 'Rosemary Foster' after his late wife. "It was her favourite; she loved the flowers and foliage in combination," he says. Foliage is one of the

Top row from left A deep-blue seedling of *Hydrangea serrata*; *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Athena'; *Hydrangea* 'Maurice Merveille'. **Bottom row from left** *Hydrangea* 'Flutter'; a seedling of *Hydrangea aspera* 'Hot Chocolate' and 'Rosemary Foster'; *Hydrangea involucrata* 'Yoraku Tama'.

characteristics Maurice has concentrated on with his breeding, working on *H. aspera* with dark-coloured leaves, often with reddish tones on their undersides, which are a fantastic foil for flowers in shades of pink, mauve and white. Another one of Maurice's introductions, which is now commercially available, is *H. aspera* 'Hot Chocolate', producing leaves that are burgundy underneath and tinged chocolate-brown on top, with flowerheads composed of fertile purple-blue flowers in the centre and shell-pink infertile florets dancing around the edge. Crosses between 'Hot Chocolate' and 'Rosemary Foster' have yielded more exciting plants, with intense colours and pretty flowers, but Maurice is careful which of his new varieties are officially registered. "I'm loathe to name something that's not likely to



Above *Hydrangea aspera* 'Rosemary Foster' is named for Maurice's late wife and has deeply coloured leaf undersides.

attract a wider audience," he says. "I think too many things are being named now and there's no requirement to justify how something

differs from what is already available. I think that should be an essential question, but I'm not sure whether it is being asked."

Instead, he gives his plants what he calls 'kennel' names, purely for his own reference, and prudently observes their performance in his garden. He's called one *H. paniculata* seedling 'Flutter' – "it's so different from other paniculatas, with florets on long pedicels that move in the wind when there's a breeze. It's so light and airy – I'm quite excited about it."

One of the jobs of the RHS Plant Committees is to assess plants for the Award of Garden Merit, which means Maurice has seen enough plants growing side-by-side in extensive trials to know what makes a good specimen. If he's excited about a hydrangea, there's a very good chance it will be something special. ■

GROWING ADVICE

Success with hydrangeas

These robust shrubs are easy to care for if given the conditions they enjoy

SHRUBS FOR SHADE

Hydrangeas are often thought of as woodland shrubs. They enjoy shade, but must have moisture at the roots. "To grow them optimally, you've got to give them a degree of shade," says Maurice. "The ideal is full overhead light with some shade during the hottest part of the day."

HARDINESS Not all hydrangeas are fully hardy – some mophead types, (*H. macrophylla*) for example, can be vulnerable to frost damage. If you garden in a colder part of the UK, consider varieties of *H. serrata* instead. "They're from montane woodland and rocky mountain outcrops,"

explains Maurice. "They have a shorter growing season so toughen up more quickly and aren't as vulnerable to early and late frosts." What's more, many *H. serrata* varieties flower early, some from late-May in Maurice's garden, and their leaves have excellent autumn colour, too, meaning they will look good right the way through to November.

PINK VS BLUE Maurice gardens on acidic soil (pH5.5-6), so blue-flowered hydrangeas stay blue. On neutral or alkaline soils they tend to flower in pink or purple, so conduct a soil test before planting hydrangeas or choosing a specific colour scheme.

PRUNING

PANICULATA hydrangeas can be made to flower at different times, depending on when and how hard you prune them. "If you want them to flower early, leave them alone other than taking off dead flowers," Maurice advises. "If you want them to flower later and produce huge flowers, prune back hard into old wood in early spring. Once they're established they're indestructible and you can hard prune every year, with a top-dressing of fertiliser to help them along."

ASPERA hydrangeas can be left to do their own

thing and develop a natural shape. "I hit them hard if they interfere too much with other plants, but otherwise the only pruning I tend to do is to remove the dead bits from previous flowerheads and thin them out. If you need to renew them you can prune quite hard from time to time."

MACROPHYLLA hydrangeas need thinning out regularly. "You get a lot of old wood, so take it out at the base and keep them flowering on as much newish wood as you can," Maurice advises, "but you only need to do that every few years."