

Go Native!

Gardening with native plants on Lake George

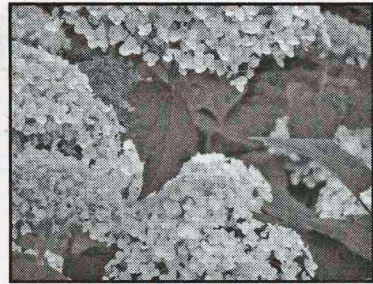
BY EMILY DEBOLT

July's Plant of the Month Smooth Hydrangea *Hydrangea arborescens*

Smooth hydrangea, also called wild hydrangea, is New York's only native hydrangea. Hydrangeas are popular landscape shrubs, but don't confuse our native hydrangea with the Asian bigleaf hydrangeas that can be turned pink or blue. Our native hydrangea has white blooms in early to mid summer, and is a nice ornamental shrub for the garden. The flower heads can be dried for arrangements as well. Oakleaf Hydrangea is sometimes thought to be native to our area, but it is actually native to Tennessee and south and only reliably hardy to zone 5. Smooth hydrangea is hardy in zones 4-9 and found over much of the East Coast along streams and woodlands in moist soils. It grows about 5 ft high and wider and prefers part sun to shade. Since it prefers moist soils, if we have a hot, dry summer and smooth hydrangea is planted in the sun, it might need supplemental watering. So plan to plant your hydrangea where it will get morning sun or dappled shade all day.

There are many available cultivars, or cultivated varieties, of smooth hydrangea. 'Annabelle' is the most well-known, but others include 'Grandiflora' and the newest arrival on the scene is 'Invincible Spirit', a pink selection. While very pretty, unfortunately these cultivars are no longer beneficial to our native pollinators. Smooth hydrangea has a number of fertile flowers that are not very showy, surrounded by a few larger, showier, flowers that are actually sterile - but are meant to draw the pollinators in to the nearby fertile flowers. To get the big mop head blooms for the cultivars, all of the flowers are showy - and so they are all also sterile. This means that pollinators are drawn in, and then have nothing to eat! If you like the look of the showier cultivars, consider mixing in some of the cultivars with the straight species - that do provide nectar - which makes a win-win for your landscape and our native pollinators.

In addition to being visited by native pollinators such as honeybees, Smooth hydrangea is host to



the hydrangea sphinx moth, a large sphinx moth with a 2-3 inch wingspan. The larvae of this moth only feed on smooth hydrangea, buttonbush, or water willow.

Hydrangeas are great planted about 3 feet apart en masse for a natural looking hedgerow or border. Since they flower on new growth, you can prune smooth hydrangea back to the ground in the fall each year to keep its size under control and to curtail its tendency to sucker and spread horizontally if you like. If you have the cultivar 'Annabelle' you might not want to prune it quite

as hard, so that it develops some stronger, woody stems to hold up the large mop head blooms. Both the straight species Smooth Hydrangea and 'Annabelle' are available at Fiddlehead Creek.

"Go Native" highlights a different native plant each month that can be used in the home garden and landscape. Written by Emily DeBolt, owner of Fiddlehead Creek Farm and Native Plant Nursery in Hartford, NY. For more info about gardening with native plants, Emily can be reached at Emily@fiddleheadcreek.com.



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