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THE PENNSYLVANIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY



A Hydrangea named 'Samantha'

By Patricia A. Taylor

This is a paean to 'Samantha', a unique, tough, absolutely beautiful, and totally neglected native hydrangea (*H. arborescens* ssp. *radiata*). Its common name, silver leaf hydrangea, comes from the distinctive white undercoating on the leaves. When a breeze flows through this shrub, a kinetic sculpture is created as the foliage shimmers back and forth.

'Samantha' is tough. Its native habitat is the Carolinas, and its hardiness range extends all the way to Zone 4. Once established, it rarely requires watering and never needs fertilizer. 'Samantha' blooms on new wood, so it doesn't suffer from winter dieback and can be cut to the ground in spring if you want to keep it small rather than letting it expand to 5 by 5 feet.

Last but not least, it is absolutely beautiful, with pink-blushed to white summer flowers that glow against dark green foliage. If not cut, the flowers dry to a warm tan by fall and hold their own through winter snows.

The scanty literature that exists on



Photos courtesy of Raintree Nursery

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Paul Cézanne, *Terracotta Pots and Flowers*, 1891-1892, BF235.

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'Samantha' advises growing it in full sun to partial shade. However, Hank Schannen of the retail and mail-order firm Rare Find Nursery, in Jackson, New Jersey, grows it in deep shade and loves how its flowers and coated leaves shine in a dark setting.

As to its near total neglect, that is indeed a puzzle. "I can't understand why it hasn't created more of a splash," Schannen says. "It's one of our favorites at the nursery." North Carolina's Brad Martin, owner of Southeastern Native Plant Nursery and one of the few wholesalers to offer 'Samantha', agrees. "It's just stunning," he says, "a great plant that needs nothing."

Here's how Spring Meadow Nursery, a large Midwestern wholesaler, described 'Samantha' in its 2006 catalog: "silver white, snowball flowers that look more like a *H. macrophylla* bloom. Very impressive and certain to be a big hit." Alas, 'Samantha' struck out, and by the time Spring Meadow published its 2009 catalog, 'Samantha' was not to be found.

I've been a 'Samantha' fan for six years now, ever since I bought two from the now defunct and sorely missed Roslyn Nurseries on Long Island. They grow in light, filtered shade in extremely poor soil. As a result, the stems are sturdier and the flowers a medium size. "Grow it in richer soil," South Carolina horticulturist Clarence Towe told me, "and you might find it weighted down a bit by its larger flowers." Towe not only introduced 'Samantha' to the trade but also named it. "There's quite a bit of breeding work going on to try and duplicate those beautiful leaves, but so far 'Samantha' has yet to have competition."

So there you have it: a unique, beautiful, adaptable, easy-care shrub. Plant it in your garden and you, too, may find yourself singing its praises. 🌿

Look for this plant at rarefindnursery.com, springmeadownursery.com, as well as Meadowbrook Farm (gotomeadowbrook.com).