

Hydrangea subsection *asperae* ✱ 21 August

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Maurice Foster addressing the group at White House Farm.

Members of the IDS met at White House Farm on a sunny, bright morning in August for a study day on *Hydrangea* subsection *asperae* (*aspera* and *involucrata*). The group were greeted on arrival by Maurice Foster and his daughter Clare, and also Jack Aldridge, assisting in the day. An extremely able group of garden volunteers also helped the day to go smoothly providing delicious meals and hot drinks out in the garden. Table and chairs had been laid out beneath the trees where introductions were made in the dappled August light.

The day started with an introduction by Maurice Foster on the species and allied plants considered to be closely related. He has grown and bred *H. aspera* for many years and has a great eye for a plant that would be attractive to gardeners. Maurice defined the main characteristic of the species; the extensive hairs, as indicated by the name *aspera*. They flower from June to November, so provide an extensive period of interest in the garden.

Maurice described the excellent diversity of morphological characteristics. The flowers are made up of small fertile florets produced in a range of colours, often contrasting and accompanying the sterile ray flowers which can persist for months and vary in colour as they mature. The ray flower stem lengths can differ considerably, the longer stems enabling the ray flowers to flutter in the wind, a characteristic Maurice clearly appreciates. There are variations in leaf



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colour, those with a strongly pigmented undersides to the leaf, or increasingly, with the whole young and then mature growth being strongly pigmented. This is becoming an advantageous quality to be enjoyed by gardeners who can grow these superb plants. Leaf size also varies through the species.

Although said to require a relatively high rainfall for good growth, it had been dry in recent weeks in this part of the country but it is interesting to note that these plants did not look as if they had suffered as a result. An exposed position in a garden where there is heavy late frost can cause more damage although it was noted that if cut to the ground by frost, growth will spring back and flowering will return to normal after two years. Maurice described the fragmented Ragstone rock which makes up the undersoil here (pH = 5.5 in the arboretum, but goes up in the main garden), and which forms the ridge on which the garden and arboretum are sited. Interestingly he also commented later in the day on the katabatic wind here, which particularly in spring drains the cold air down the garden from its position on top of the ridge. The garden is well protected by evergreen plants and other tall trees provide plenty of microclimate habitats for *Hydrangea aspera* and its allies.

The accepted classification at present for *H. aspera* is the division of the species into three subspecies: *H. aspera* subsp. *robusta*, *H. aspera* subsp. *sargentiana*, and *H. aspera* subsp. *strigosa*. There are various cultivars and forms which fall into no specific group, together with other named groups, the Kawakamii and Villosa Groups. The 1957 McClintock revision had divided *H. aspera* into four species but this had been revised in 2015. Maurice concluded that '...the whole taxonomy is a mess...'. Recent introductions have been made which has further clouded the situation and he feels that the best horticultural forms of *H. aspera* should be given cultivar names.



Left & above: *Hydrangea aspera* 'Rosemary Foster' by the house.
Opposite: *H. aspera* subsp. *strigosa* from wild-collected seed in western China, sent by Yannick de Smet, Ghent Botanical Garden.

Jack Aldridge then talked on other points of interest. He described several of the better-known species and cultivars and the introductions made in recent years pointing out the different morphological forms. *H. aspera* 'Velvet and Lace' was the cultivar name given to the original plant collected by Wilson and distributed by Hilliers. He pointed out that they were relatively easy to grow. Cultural work on the plants was discussed, including regeneration pruning by cutting back old stems to the base at the beginning of the growing season; the new growth then develops on which the plant will flower. Each flower corymb is capable of producing thousands of seeds from each flowerhead and the crosses made have produced some wonderful hybrids. The first of these to be named and released was *H. aspera* 'Hot Chocolate', followed by 'Rosemary Foster', which won a gold medal in a Belgian trade show. Consideration of *H. aspera* as a coloured foliage plant was also discussed. Various crosses have been made by Maurice for these characteristics and these were seen as we walked round the arboretum in the afternoon.

The group then set off round the garden in the late morning to see some of the plant species grown by Maurice and the many excellent crosses derived from them. The first plant to be seen was *H. aspera* 'Rosemary Foster' growing close to the house and in full flower, the fertile florets easily visible and a deep pure pink, surrounded by a good number of pink ray flowers. There followed a number of plants of interest. *H. aspera* 'Koki' was large and bold and has excellent leaf colour. It has been used as a parent of several good hybrids.

H. aspera subsp. *robusta* collected by Maurice from a ditch in China was also growing in this part of the garden. *H. aspera* subsp. *strigosa* was noted in this area too. The group then walked down past the Dell where *H. involucrata* 'Handemari', *H. involucrata* 'Plena', *H. involucrata* 'Mihara Kokonoe' and



In the Dell, various species, and cultivars of *Hydrangea involucrata*. These are all notable for their ability to flower freely in deep shade. Inset: *H. involucrata* 'Hanabi'

H. involucrata 'Yohraku-tama' were seen and appreciated. Further on there were several seedlings bred by Maurice. One which especially caught the eye was a form of *H. aspera* raised from seed from Arunachal Pradesh. It has excellent bright red spring leaf colour, gentian blue fertile flowers, with white ray flowers in an informal tumble. It could possibly be considered a new species.

Lunch followed back in the main garden and the group then set off again to see the many species and cutivars in the arboretum. *H. aspera* 'Titania' with large 7 cm ray flowers was pointed out. It has been used by Maurice for several subsequent crosses. Two more seedlings from crosses he made (*H. aspera* 'Hot Chocolate' × *H. aspera* 'Gongshan's Sister') were also admired in this part of the arboretum. Many paths were walked here and two more seedlings of *H. aspera* 'Rosemary Foster' were seen and discussed. One had pink fertile florets while the other growing beside it had bright sky-blue fertile florets.

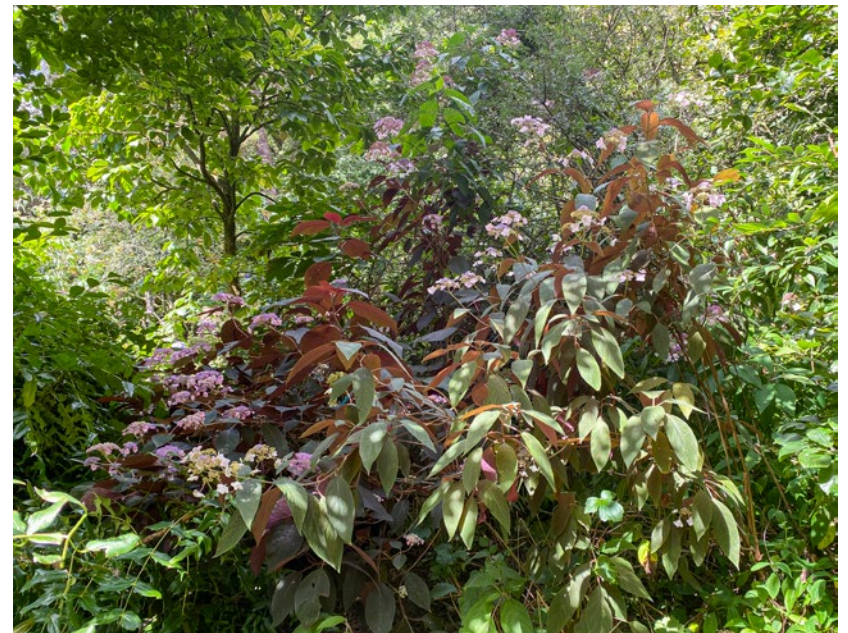
The day drew to a conclusion with tea and a general discussion back on the lawn led by Maurice's daughter Clare. *H. aspera* 'Rosemary Foster' was named plant of the day. Concluding comments collected together by Clare on *H. aspera* which had been noted by the group included the following:

- ◉ A definite need to grow more *H. aspera*.
- ◉ A diverse group with many often under-appreciated attributes.



Above: *H. aspera* subsp. *strigosa* 'Gongshan'.

Below: Three *H. aspera* 'Hot Chocolate' seedlings in the wood, bred by Maurice Foster.



- ◉ Patience in their cultivation.
- ◉ The adaptability of *H. aspera* to cope with a lack of water providing there is shade. Useful in a changing, drier climate.

The day was also considered a learning session in taxonomy.



Maurice Foster with three large-ray-flowered forms of his hybrids (two in his hands, one large plant to his right), *Aspera Walk*.

Light green is the ray flowers' autumn colour; they are white when fresh. This year many *asperas* flowered 3–4 weeks early.

The group all felt they had benefitted from this excellent study day and left for home with a better understanding of a great plant albeit with a slightly muddled classification at present which needs sorting out. It was also a day to appreciate one of our great plantsmen sharing his profound knowledge of a plant with excellent garden potential. Maurice Foster is able to recognise a plant of great merit and combines this with his deep insight to breed plants with the attractive characteristics he has identified.