If, like me, you’re a frequent visitor to the Arboretum’s Rhododendron Glen, you know that there’s much to admire besides beautiful rhody species—even more so nowadays, with the ongoing restoration and replanting project. One of my favorite plants there is the climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea anomala* ssp. *petiolaris*) that winds up around a 20-foot-tall tree snag on the southeast slope of the Glen, just above that area’s dramatic rock work.

The plant has a somewhat bushy habit, with branches held out horizontally from the supporting vines, giving the foliage a tiered look. Its oval, serrated leaves look similar to those of the common French hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*). The plant blooms from late May to July, producing large, fragrant, domed clusters of tiny, fertile, creamy-white flowers ringed by showy, sterile, white flowers.

“It was planted in 1997, and grown from seed collected in the wild in South Korea by Dan Hinkley,” says UW Botanic Gardens Curator of Living Collections, Ray Larson. “Originally several seedlings were planted in this area of the Glen, but only this one remains. They are very slow-growing to start but after a few years can grow rapidly.”
This particular specimen has a wonderful, lush, full-bodied look—perhaps because the snag is limiting the vine’s upward mobility, but also since the snag is in a relatively open spot, the vine’s lateral growth is not that constrained.

An older, larger climbing hydrangea can be found nearby, on the eastern edge of the Glen, close to Arboretum Drive, growing on a living western red cedar among some other native conifers and camellias. It came to the Arboretum in 1964 as a seed from Kew Gardens, in England, and was planted out in 1974. It’s grown up to about 50 feet high, but it’s a little more of a “hidden treasure” compared to its companion specimen due to its woodsier, more enclosed location.

**Two Subspecies**

*Hydrangea anomala* ssp. *petiolaris* is a deciduous woody vine (liana) native to eastern Siberia, Japan, China and South Korea. It climbs up trees to access sunlight by twining around the trunks and branches, and attaching to them using short, adventitious aerial roots growing from the vine stem. (Mature vines have reddish-brown peeling bark, which adds allure to the plants in the winter months.)

It used to be considered its own species (and sometimes is still called *Hydrangea petiolaris*) but is now generally designated as a subspecies of *H. anomala*. The straight species, *H. anomala* ssp. *anomala*, is native to the Himalayas and China and mainly differs from its cousin in its leaf shape (more elliptical than *petiolaris*), smaller size (it matures to 30 or so feet tall, whereas *petiolaris* can grow to 50 feet or more), and smaller flower clusters (up to eight inches wide, versus 10 inches in *petiolaris*). The subspecies *petiolaris* combines slightly more ornamental features with more reliable winter hardiness (down to USDA Zone 4) so, not surprisingly, it’s the more popular of the two.
If you’d like to compare the subspecies, just pay a visit to the Arboretum in late spring. In addition to the two specimens of *petiolaris* in Rhody Glen, seven other specimens of climbing hydrangea can be found around the grounds, including two of the straight species. A specimen of *H. anomala* ssp. *anomala*—wild-collected by Dan Hinkley in Sichuan Province, China in 1996—can be found growing up a Douglas fir in the Woodland Garden, on the path directly north of Loderi Valley. Another one of Dan’s collections—this time from Guizhou Province, China in 2011—was recently planted on a wall along the Arboretum Loop Trail in the Future China Forest, facing the Seattle Japanese Garden. A new planting of ssp. *petiolaris* also grows nearby on the wall.

Shifting our attention to less-recent history, the Arboretum’s relationship to climbing hydrangea can be traced back almost to the very beginning. Two enormous specimens of subspecies *petiolaris* growing in the center of the Camellia Collection date all the way back to 1937 (just a year after the Olmsted Brothers design for the park was created). Both are growing on large Douglas firs and have climbed up to about 80 feet high. They came from the Morton Arboretum in Illinois and are still going strong. Another specimen from that same batch is growing on a Douglas fir on the northwest edge of the Winter Garden. However, a few years ago, it started dying back from the top.

“I suspect it was drought stress,” says Ray. “We cut the vine down so it could re-start its journey upwards.”

**Other Climbing Hydrangeas & Hydrangea Relatives**

The Arboretum is home to several other species of climbing hydrangea. These include three specimens of the lovely, evergreen *Hydrangea serratifolia*, growing on separate Douglas firs in the Chile Entry Garden. Native to Chile and Argentina, it grows up to 100 feet in its native range, bearing stout, elliptical leaves and white, late-summer flower clusters.

Ray says not to forget to mention our “our exceptionally nice *Hydrangea integrifolia*, especially the impressive one growing in the Magnolia Collection.” Another evergreen climber, this species is native to the Philippines and Taiwan and produces narrow, elliptical leaves and lacy, early-summer white flower clusters. This species is recommended by Great Plant Picks (greatplantpicks.org) for maritime Northwest gardens. The specimen at the northwest corner of the Magnolia Collection dates to 1970 and has climbed about 50 feet up its support tree, again another Doug fir.

Ray also recommends a visit to the Center for Urban Horticulture to see *Hydrangea seemannii*, another evergreen climber, this one native to cloud forests of the Sierra Madre Occidental in Mexico. There’s a lovely specimen growing on the trellis at the south side of Merrill Hall. It produces glossy, oval leaves and white, late-summer lacecap flowers.

The Arboretum is also home to several species and cultivars of *Schizophragma*, woody vines from Asia that are very closely related to *Hydrangea* (indeed, some taxonomists lump them together), and very similar in appearance. Ray has planted a number of exciting new specimens in Rhody Glen as part of the restoration project.

All these species have similar growing requirements: full sun to dappled shade in evenly moist, well-drained soil. They all eventually become large plants, too, so they need room to grow and a strong support system. “While all are slow to establish,” says Ray, “they often start to grow much more rapidly after the first five to six years, if in a good location with some summer water. The key is to be patient. They will reward soon enough!”

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