

Some Uncommon Companions for the Hydrangea Garden

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Hydrangeas are a classic garden plant in all aspects. The popularity and availability among gardeners has only increased over the years. Various cultivars and species offer a tantalizing array of foliage, flowers, and form. Many new and exciting varieties have been recently introduced and the selection has become pleasantly overwhelming to the Hydrangea fancier.

Hydrangeas prefer a rich, organically enriched soil and regular water. Grouping plants according to cultural requirements makes gardening easier and much more rewarding. Design-wise, combining contrasting textures, complimentary colors, and proper spacing and placement makes an appealing landscape. Plants that fulfill these needs are termed "companion plants". Some of the best companion plants for hydrangeas are the numerous selections of deciduous and evergreen ferns. The fine textured fronds provide an interesting contrast to the broad foliage of the hydrangea. Keep in mind that soil and water requirements for ferns can vary widely. For example, the Holly Fern prefers alkaline conditions and could require the blooms of a blue hydrangea to turn pink.

The Tassel Fern (*Polystichum polyblepharum*) is a showstopper in the garden. The deep green foliage and shaggy stems are highly ornamental. The unfolding new growth known as crosiers, adds to the interest and beauty. Despite the intimidating name, this fern deserves wider use in southern gardens.

Siebold's Wood Fern (*Dryopteris sieboldii*) is one of my favorites. The broader texture of this evergreen fern appears tropical, however, this fern is well suited to zone 7, possibly zone 6. From my experience, this fern prefers to be planted on a decided slope or small rocky berm. The incline allows proper drainage and keeps the rhizomes from becoming washed over with soil and debris.

In Southern gardens, gingers can refer to two distinct plant groups. The native and Asian *Asarums* are ground hugging clumps of heart-shaped foliage that hover over the odd flowers that earn the descriptive name of little brown jug. My favorite is the Chinese Ginger (*Asarum splendens*) with the large glossy leaves sporting a mosaic of silvery variegation. Our native *Asarum arifolium* and *shuttlesworthii* perform well as a unique groundcover or low border.

The "other ginger" is the ginger lily. This variable family contains the common white butterfly ginger and the culinary ginger. Mioga Ginger (*Zingiber mioga*) is a hardy, clumping species from Japan that produces a mat of creamy blooms on the ground and not from the leafy stalks. Tough and durable, this species is visually enhanced with the introduction of a highly variegated form known as 'Dancing Crane'. Another ginger for shady gardens is *Alpinia japonica*. Evergreen even upon moderate frosts, this compact clumping species sports attractive foliage and interesting red and white flowers in small spikes.

Most gardeners think of Begonias as annuals or houseplants. From Asian woodlands come many species suited to outdoor culture in the Southeast. The pink flowered *Begonia pedatifida* is an exotic addition to the home landscape and is perfectly at home nestled among the Blue Hydrangeas. Mulch the crown to protect these fragile plants in more exposed or colder locations. The more common hardy begonia, *Begonia grandis*, is a great choice that is more commonly seen.

Not fragile or finicky, the cast-iron plants are a gardeners dream. Pest and disease free, *Aspidistra elatior* is frequently used in borders or masses. With the introduction of several dwarf species, these cast-iron plants make great accent plantings providing winter greenery and textural contrast. *Aspidistra lurida* is a superior species forming a more compact cluster of shiny leaves. *Aspidistra caespitosa* and *linearifolia* have distinctly narrow foliage, while variety 'China Moon' has small, rounded leaves cloaked in a starry pattern of variegated spots.

Mixing evergreens shrubs amongst the Hydrangeas provides winter substance to the landscape when Hydrangea stems are coarse and bare. I have been impressed with the performance of the plum yew (*Cephalotaxus fortunei*) in my shady hillside garden. This species is more upright and provides an excellent backdrop to a mass of various lacecap hydrangeas.

A close relative and a true Yew, the Chinese Yew (*Taxus chinensis*) is an excellent choice for a conifer that does not languish in our heat and humidity. The slow growing Chinese Yew can reach twenty feet or more over time. Yews are generally thought of as a plant for northern landscapes. Several *Taxus* species hail from Southeast Asia that exhibit heat tolerance, but the taxonomy seems to be a little muddled and confused. Try growing *Taxus mairei* and *Taxus sumatrana* if you enjoy the look conifers give to the shade garden.

An evergreen relative of Hydrangea, *Dichroa febrifuga* inhabits the foothills of the Himalayas. The airy blue flowers are followed by a showier display of brilliant blue berries. Similar in size and habit to the blue hydrangea, this plant makes an interesting garden addition. The common name, Evergreen Hydrangea, always sparks a reaction from any gardener. "An evergreen Hydrangea?"

Utilizing an array of companion plants can enhance the collector's garden by creating variety, interest, and year round color. The weekend gardeners or those new to gardening benefit from companion lists as a guideline for gardening success. Regardless of your gardening mode, companion planting always leads to success and satisfaction in the landscape.