



PRETTY PENNY 'Penny Mac' hydrangeas (above) are the result of a chance mutation of *Hydrangea macrophylla*. Beautiful and blue, they re-bloom until the first frost.

repeat performance

Penny McHenry's 'Penny Mac' re-blooming hydrangeas sing the blues in the fall garden.

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

Even first-time visitors to Penny McHenry's home needn't bother looking for the house number. Instead, it's far easier to watch for the masses of blue hydrangeas that fill the front yard, spilling over onto the walkway and nearly obscuring the view of the house. Such outward-bound exuberance is not

unusual for McHenry, a former stage actress who freely admits, "I'm not moderate about anything—I get obsessed." What is unusual, at least for this time of year, is the sea of blue mopheads itself—hundreds of domed flowers the size of soup bowls, each one a bouquet in its own right, bending low on



GARDEN PIONEER When Penny McHenry (above) began gardening at the age of 50, she had no idea that she would make one of the hydrangea world's most exciting discoveries.

branches that struggle gracefully to manage such profusion. In the crisp fall air their aura of perky freshness belies the quiescence and latency of the autumn garden. By now, hydrangea blooms all over the South are spent, drying on the shrub, fading into muddy shades of slate and mauve—*so what's going on here?* If it's true that every plant has a story, the answer to that question may be one of the most compelling garden tales of all times. It's a tale of loss and renewal; of wondrous

serendipity; of something new under the sun after all.

Like McHenry herself, this hydrangea garden is an original. The perpetually blooming shrubs are known to the most savvy hydrangea aficionados as 'Penny Mac' hydrangeas. A chance mutation of *Hydrangea macrophylla*, 'Penny Mac' has the ability to set flower buds on new wood, meaning it can bloom over and over again until the first frost (usually November in McHenry's garden). In contrast, most other mophead

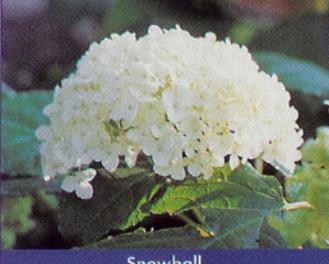
hydrangeas bloom only on the previous season's growth, so one flush of flowers in the spring is their limit. In the South, there's the added liability of early warm spells that can cause a hydrangea to break dormancy too soon—an ensuing freeze will be fatal to tender buds and there will be no blooms at all that year.

But 28 years ago, when McHenry started gardening, she knew nothing of plant habits or horticulture and couldn't tell you how or when a hydrangea could be expected to bloom. She'd come to gardening relatively late in life, shortly after her fiftieth birthday, when her beloved daughter, Deede Jane, was tragically killed. "It was the quiet I needed," she remembers of the days she spent puttering outdoors, seeking solace in her own backyard. In a sentimental act, she transferred a potted florist's hydrangea—a bereavement gift from a friend—into the ground. As she watched it grow and bloom from an upstairs window, she had no way to foresee the attention this little plant would someday receive, yet she found it deeply pleasing for a variety of reasons. Blue had always been her favorite color. And the sheer size of the hydrangea blooms appealed to her penchant for the dramatic. "I'm a show-off by nature and the mophead is very showy—you can't walk by without noticing it," McHenry says. She decided she wanted more of a good thing.

The hydrangea also proved easy to propagate, even for a novice like McHenry: Bend a supple branch to the ground, peg it in place, keep it watered until it roots. Cut it away from the original plant, plant it somewhere else, repeat, and soon you have a garden full of hydrangea bushes. At the time, McHenry was unaware of the fundamental principle of propagating plants by this technique, called *layering*—every newly rooted plantlet is a perfect clone of its parent, a genetic twin that will exhibit every characteristic of the original. Quite unconsciously, she was conserving the genetic material of what would turn out to be an exceptional hydrangea. She also began collecting

Hydrangeas

In addition to the 'Penny Mac' hydrangea, Penny McHenry grows many other types, including the four shown here.

TYPE OF HYDRANGEA	CULTIVARS	GARDENING NOTES
 <p>Mophead</p>	<p>Mophead hydrangea Cultivars of <i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i> include 'Penny Mac', 'Nikko Blue', 'Forever Pink' and 'Preziosa.' There are literally hundreds of cultivars on the market.</p>	<p>With many selections, color depends on soil pH—acidic soils bring out blue shades; more alkaline soils produce pink to lavender shades. Some have been bred to remain reliably one color.</p>
 <p>Lacecap</p>	<p>Lacecap hydrangea Cultivars of <i>H. macrophylla</i> include 'Lilacina', 'Blue Billow' and 'Veitchi.'</p>	<p>More delicate in appearance than their cousins, the mopheads. Their lacy appearance comes from a mixture of large sterile sepals and small fertile flowers. Colors range from white to blue to lilac.</p>
 <p>Oak-leaf</p>	<p>Oak-leaf hydrangea Cultivars of <i>H. quercifolia</i> include the double-flowered 'Snowflake' (pictured), and 'Alice.'</p>	<p>Flowers are white and are formed in cone-shaped panicles rather than round heads.</p>
 <p>Snowball</p>	<p>Snowball hydrangea The most popular cultivar of <i>H. arborescens</i> is 'Annabelle' (pictured). Others include 'Radiata' and 'Bounty.'</p>	<p>Native to the Southeast. Huge rounded domes of creamy white florets bloom on new wood so there is no danger of losing blooms to a late frost.</p>

other varieties—delicate lacecap hydrangeas, architectural oak-leaf types, the snowy-white 'Annabelle,' even the climbing *Hydrangea petiolaris* that's on her garage wall today.

During the mid-1980s, a visitor to McHenry's garden made the first observation that something extraordinary was going on here. It was late summer, and though the nursery-grown hydrangeas were spent, the blue mopheads were setting new flowers. "He told me he'd never seen a hydrangea bloom like that before," recalls McHenry. "And he's the one who named it 'Penny Mac.'" As

watershed moments go, this one was relatively benign—no plant patents were filed; the horticultural press was not called in. Instead, McHenry shared her hydrangeas with local gardeners and nursery owners; occasionally one of them propagated and sold a handful of them, but most of the gardening public remained completely unaware they could be cutting blue mopheads for fall flower arrangements.

McHenry's passion continued to grow by leaps and bounds, and in 1994 she founded the American Hydrangea Society, for which she gained much