New Hydrangea!
Invincibelle™ SPIRIT
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Breaking the Color Barrier:
The Classic Annabelle
Hydrangea
Now Comes in Pink

Here in the mountains of western North Carolina, the smooth
hydrangea (Hydrangea arborescens) is relatively commonplace.
Hiking through forest coves, kayaking down mountain rivers, or visiting a
friend’s garden, it’s hard not to bump into this graceful native shrub.
Smooth hydrangea is actually found over much of eastern North America,
with an impressive range that extends along the east coast from Nova Scotia
to Florida and to the west from Kansas to Louisiana. With amazing fortitude,
it muscles through the heat and humidity of the Deep South and
shakes off the blistering cold of Minnesota winters. Most at home in
rich soils with some shade, it can generally tolerate full sun if provided with
ample moisture.

The flowers of most wild-type smooth hydrangeas are not particularly showy.
The inflorescence is technically a compound corymb that consists of hundreds of dirty-white,
fertile flowers that have insignificant sepals and petals. As described by
Dan Hinkley, noted plant explorer and horticulturist, “This cluster of
‘utility’ is surrounded by the advertising agency of sterile florets, or ray
flowers, that provide the stuff of ornament.” In most wild-type smooth
hydrangeas, the number of sterile florets per inflorescence ranges from
none to just a few. Sometimes, however, the genetic control for these
flassy florets gets a bit out of whack and excessive numbers of the sterile
flowers are produced at the expense of the fertile ones. Not a great repro-
ductive strategy, but it can make for a remarkable show. Plant folk often
refer to these genetic misfits, endearingly, as “mopheads.” Over the years,
quite a number of these mopheads have been found in the wild. The most
notable has been the cultivar ‘Annabelle’ which was discovered by
J.C. McDaniel, near Anna, Ohio, around 1975, and has become a pheno-
nomenally popular garden plant grown around the world.

The extensive range of smooth hydrangea and variation in foliage
traits has lead to the recognition of several subspecies and varieties, with
varying degrees of acceptance by taxonomists and horticulturists, including
Hydrangea arborescens subsp. radiata
which has a dense white pubescence on the bottom of the leaf and is found
only in North and South Carolina. Unfortunately, there is generally not
much variation in flower color of smooth hydrangea. Sepals typically
range from white to ivory, sometimes with a greenish hue. However, on rare
occasions, pink flowered forms have been found in the wild. These pink vari-
ants are treated as a botanical form, Hydrangea arborescens f. carnea,
with carnea describing the flower color as that of raw meat (so much for tasteful
marketing). To date, a handful of these pinks have been found and propagat-
ed. Don Jacobs of Eco Gardens in Decatur, Georgia discovered and
named ‘Eco Pink Puff.’ More recently, Richard Olsen, discovered another
pink form here in western North Carolina along the banks of the
Tanahala River and named it ‘Wesser falls’. Unfortunately, these pink flowered forms typi-
cally have no sterile florets and tend to look a bit like a
Japanese spirea in bloom.

When Richard Olsen was a graduate student here
at N.C. State University working on his Ph.D., he sug-
gested the potential for breeding a pink-flowered
‘Annabelle’ type hydrangea, i.e., a pink mophead.
Richard initiated some of the first crosses between
his ‘Wesser Falls’ and ‘Annabelle’. We grew out those
seedlings and found, with some disappointment, that
all of the progeny had white flowers and none of
them were mopheads. Clearly, both of these traits
were recessive and this project would require more
work. Discussions with the folks at Spring Meadow
Nursery ensued and they graciously offered to pro-
vide funding to further this project. Tom Randieh, Joel
Mowery, and Nathan Lynch, research specialists
here, all worked on the project. Following numerous
generations, back crosses, and a final F2 population
of over 1,500 plants, we selected one outstanding plant
that combined particularly nice form, foliage,
and exceptional pink, mophead inflorescences:
Invincibelle™ SPIRIT (Hydrangea arborescens
‘NCHA1’ PPAP). A breakthrough – the first ever pink,
mophead smooth hydrangea! Easy to propagate,
easy in production, and easy in the garden. An excep-
tional twist on a great native plant.

Invincibelle™ SPIRIT is now available to nurseries in
North Carolina. If you are interested in growing this
plant, there are a number of options. Spring Meadow
Nursery (800-635-8859) is coordinating the marketing
and licensing for this introduction and are providing
North Carolina growers with very favorable options.
If you would like to propagate and grow SPIRIT, the
minimum number of plants produced is reduced to just
500 units annually. If you would rather just purchase
liners, you can purchase a minimum order of just 4
trays (128 plants) directly from Spring Meadow as sup-
plies last. Alternatively, you can purchase liners from
other licensed propagators right here in North
Carolina. A portion of the royalties from this plant will
be donated to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation
and North Carolina State University to support contin-
ued research. If you have any questions or would like
an updated list of NC propagators, contact Tom
Randieh, tom.randieh@ncsu.edu, for more information.

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