

Ask a Master Gardener

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Kitty Barr, Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer

Some Plants Just Will Not Behave

Q. Our old fashioned hydrangea we transplanted from my grandmother's house has a strange white leaf on it. Will this spread and is it a disease? Thank you. E.T. Miner

A. Your plant is exhibiting what is commonly called a "sport". My grandfather would comment on new clothes or if I had a new toy: "Now, you are a real sport model". That was in the early 1950s, but I'm giving away secrets and we are discussing another kind of sport model here.

Your grandmother's hydrangea does not have a disease so don't get out the sprayer or head off to the store. It is exhibiting a *lusus naturae*; commonly called a bud sport or just a sport. In medieval times a joke was sometimes referred to as a sport. These odd sports, or Jokes of Nature described any creature or specimen that could not be regularly classified. This unusual part of a plant, usually a woody kind, but it can be an herb, is one that shows morphological differences from the rest of the plant. Sports can exhibit a different leaf color, foliage shape, flower or even branch structure. In the example of your plant, it has "morphed" and created the white leaf you see.

By the end of the 17th century the concept and term "sport" disappeared and in its place began the modern scientific view that nature does not joke but follows strict rules. An example of such a rule would be that an acorn will always, always grow into an oak tree and out of a robin's tiny blue egg will not hatch a Komodo dragon.

Sports are very useful as a biological selector. A good example is the nectarine which developed from a bud sport of a peach. Thus we have the "fuzzy less" fruit with that dripping great taste. We can thank good old Mother Nature for that fortunate accident and not some horn-rimmed biologist. (Whenever I use that term I always see a serious horned owl with tortoise spectacles bent over a microscope.) Another yummy sport is the red Anjou pear, and the "Pink Lemonade" lemon - a sport of the "Eureka" lemon.

Grateful thanks go to all gardeners and farmers who are sharp-eyed enough to spy these mutants of nature. When you are enjoying a nectarine ponder this: if that first nectarine had gone into the trash bin, society would be without a whole fruit industry of growers, pickers, packers, drivers, sellers and, (drum roll.....), eaters.

Sports can be cloned which is why we have that aforementioned nectarine industry. Cloning means being derived by some process other than (hands over small children's ears) sexual reproduction. Biologists can take that morphed leaf or fruit and vegetatively propagate new plants from it. We now have such a varied and constantly

renewing market of hydrangeas, roses, trees, hostas, fruits, veggies; just about anything the gardener desires that it's easy to go broke trying to have one of everything new. In the gardening business there is always something new under the sun.

The hydrangea suppliers proudly gave us the Endless Summer varietal about 6 years ago. Now I notice there are Endless Summer this and Endless Summer that varieties. Soon we will have those new and improved lovely blue and pink blooms year round, even here in Zone 7B. It's the American way.

I have never seen a totally white hydrangea. Maybe they cannot thrive without chlorophyll. You know, the green stuff that plants use to make their food. Just a thought. They can sport a few white or variegated leaves, but an entirely white plant - I don't know. Give the biologists enough time.

Pictured is a white sport "branchlet" on a variegated lace cap hydrangea. It's hidden in deep shade on the rear of a grouping which makes a pretty glow in late evening. Also included is a picture of a sport on a Shi Shi camellia. This is a new deep pink camellia cultivar and grows 3' by 3' rather than the normal 8'-10' variety. So far, the Shi Shi is staying properly in its allotted space and, except for this leaflet, is keeping to its color assigned by Mother Nature.

Sometimes ivy will sport into an entirely new shape. Common medium sized leaves may have new growth of the narrow pointed English ivy look. Occasionally a plant which has been cloned can sport or revert to the original color, growth habit, or branching. Some plants will always revert to their original plant material. Impatiens come in many colors and can reseed over winter. They will revert to an original color from which they were cloned, usually a shade of red. As you peruse your garden space, be on the watch for sports as they are not that uncommon. A sport model may be in your future.

For more information please contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546 or at ccmg@uga.edu. You may visit the office at the Ag Center located at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.