

Cape Cod Magazine

Martha's Vineyard & Nantucket

Heavenly Hydrangeas
Turning purple, blue, and red on Nantucket

Organic Gardening and honeybee keeping in Eastham

Behind the Scenes

At DIY Network's Falmouth backyard makeover

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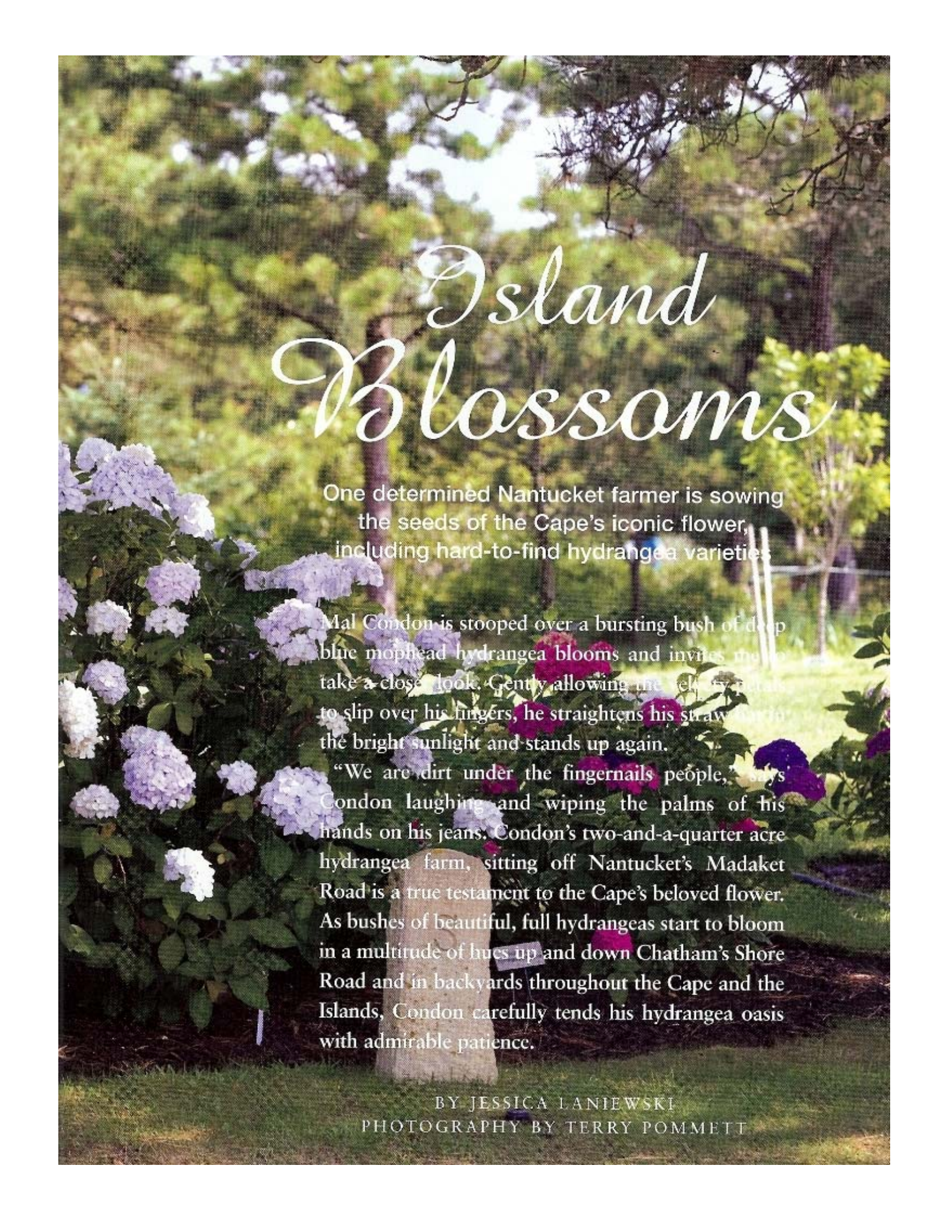
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Island Blossoms

One determined Nantucket farmer is sowing the seeds of the Cape's iconic flower, including hard-to-find hydrangea varieties.

Mal Condon is stooped over a bursting bush of deep blue mophead hydrangea blooms and invites me to take a close look. Gently allowing the velvety petals to slip over his fingers, he straightens his straw hat to the bright sunlight and stands up again.

"We are dirt under the fingernails people," says Condon laughing and wiping the palms of his hands on his jeans. Condon's two-and-a-quarter acre hydrangea farm, sitting off Nantucket's Madaket Road is a true testament to the Cape's beloved flower. As bushes of beautiful, full hydrangeas start to bloom in a multitude of hues up and down Chatham's Shore Road and in backyards throughout the Cape and the Islands, Condon carefully tends his hydrangea oasis with admirable patience.

BY JESSICA LANIEWSKI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY POMMETT

The Hydrangea Farm is eye-opening, not just for its impressively tidy rows and efficiency, but notably for the array of colors bursting forth in every direction. Beyond the blue and purple hydrangeas dotting Cape yards, Condon grows 160 varieties of the flower and is continually searching for new ones to plant in the well-maintained beds on his farm. He tends to both mophead hydrangeas (more traditional in appearance) and lacecaps, which are less densely bunched and often found alongside trees and bushes.

"People can come and see the maturing plants. We have nametags like a botanical garden," says Condon, who hosts groups of hydrangea lovers, curious tourists, and excited neighbors every summer. As we wander through the freshly mulched property, a smiling couple pulls up on antique bicycles and starts to excitedly browse the neat rows of hydrangeas. For a garden enthusiast and even someone who just enjoys catching sight of the delicate petals of the hydrangea, Condon's farm is a giddy experience.



The "tough as nails"
Tokyo Delight.



Mal Condon tends to his hydrangeas in one of the Farm's greenhouses.

Nurturing Nature

Like most guests to Nantucket, Condon and his wife, Mary Kay, fell in love with the island after initially visiting with their family in 1967. After a few years of summering on Nantucket, the Condon's bought a cottage in Madaket. The gardener's love for hydrangeas blossomed on the island as he saw how much easier it was to grow macrophylla hydrangeas on Nantucket than at his primary residence in Western Massachusetts. The Condon's purchased the Stumble Inn on Orange Street in 1985 and spent fourteen fulfilling years as innkeepers for a great clientele. During this time, Condon started propagating hydrangeas throughout their property.

As they contemplated leaving innkeeping and Condon was retiring from his full-time position as an engineer, the pair purchased the land for the hydrangea farm in 1994. After clearing the land and building their home, Condon planted the first permanent hydrangea bed in September 1999. Now the gardener does everything from propagation to mature planting and landscape design to implementing hydrangea gardens.

Right: Mathilda Gutges.

Below: The soft petals of the Penny Mack.



He tends to seek out and grow unique varieties of the flower, such as Mathilda Gutges, a hydrangea that went out of commercial availability, but is being steadily brought back by Condon.

The Condon's determination to grow unique varieties is made even more impressive by the fact that Nantucket is the most northern east coast spot where you can grow hydrangea macrophyllas and the plants need to be hardy enough to withstand the Farm's windy Zone 7 New England weather. The island's sandy soil drains well but needs extra nutrients so Condon and his helpers, including his daughter Carol, who comes up from the Bahamas in the



Above Top: The big, bright blooms of the popular Dixie Pom Pom.
Above: Mal Condon leads a group on a tour of the Farm.

summer, produce their own compost and soil mixes for the hydrangeas, whether they are grown in containers for retail or planted in the Farm's extensive garden.

"You don't give up on a plant when it doesn't do well," says Condon picking up a handful of the rich soil and letting it fall through his fingers. "You just find it another site." He admits plant selection and site are pivotal in nurturing hydrangeas, especially in an environment where the wind and winters are strong. Condon points to the pitch pines on the property, a savior in letting in only some filtered light and protecting the flowers from strong winds.

Waving at a white-petal panicalata, the well-known hydrangea bush, Condon opines that home gardeners shouldn't be hesitant of transplanting their flowers around their yard. Condon and his staff regularly study their hydrangeas in various locations on the Farm as well as their plant's sun tolerance.

Condon uses greenhouses at either end of the season. In spring, he can push plant growth ahead of the cool weather outside and in the fall the extended warmth inside helps to develop the root systems of his late season cuttings. It is a safe bet though that many of Condon's hydrangeas are carried off and



The petals of the President Doumer hydrangea.

safely planted in yards before the end of summer. Throughout the season, Condon gives tours of the Farm to garden clubs and a smiling member or two has been spotted on the ferry clutching a potted hydrangea. He also gives nearly a dozen talks to garden clubs and plant societies throughout the year.

Unique Varieties

The Farm is noteworthy not just for the quantity of hydrangeas and their various hues, but also for the distinctive flowerbeds Condon carefully creates. He admits he readily contours the land, as he isn't a fan of flat, straight lines, but the effect is natural in appearance. Large hydrangea beds and a few young trees surround the main house in a pleasing manner. Condon has carved out "rooms" among the twenty-three flowerbeds. Throughout the Farm, a potting table or two is laid out among the pines and hydrangea bushes for quickly transplanting a plant or freshly mulching a small pot.

"When they get in flower, they really sell themselves," says Condon pointing approvingly at a blue lacecap variety, one of over 350 hydrangeas planted on the property. The Farm is indeed a kaleidoscope of pinks, reds, blues and purples. The ever-reliable Nikko

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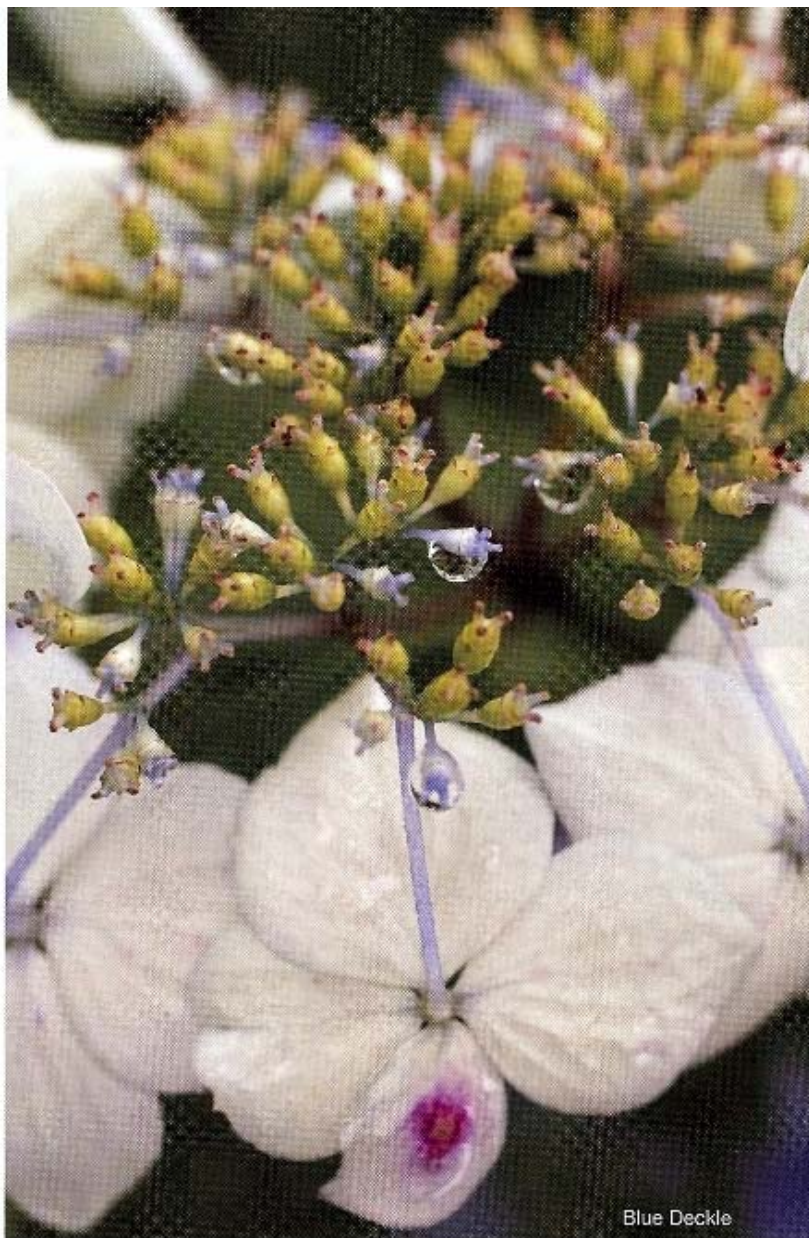
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President Doumer



Mathilda Guttes



Blue Deckle

hydrangea is a popular choice for flowerbeds and fresh cut bouquets as the variety has a blue hue in a wider range of soils. Slightly different in appearance, the “tough as nails” Tokyo Delight is a lacecap variety with large white florets encircling smaller clusters of pink and red florets. Masga, Director Kuhnert, Amethyst and Bresteinberg hydrangeas also do wonderfully on the Farm.

“I don’t like grass,” says Condon matter-of-factly. “I’d rather spend my money on flowers.” It is obvious the gardener has a special touch with his favorite flower, whether it is the blue-purple Dixie Pom Pom or the Ayesha, a very popular variety on the island. During the winter, the Condon’s travel to New Zealand, the “holy grail” for the hydrangea macrophylla species.

This summer will be another one full of growth for the Hydrangea Farm as Hydrangea Camp will be making

its debut. Starting in mid-June, the Camp includes hands on experience learning about everything related to hydrangeas as well as accommodations on the Farm. The Condon’s will also be starting internet plant sales this summer from the Farm’s website and offering the “Explorer Series,” hydrangeas exclusive to the Condon’s in the United States.

“I’ve been lucky enough to pursue a passion in retirement,” says Condon gently pushing his straw hat back on his head and smiling at the sun. “If you are going to do good work, you should choose something you love.” 🌸

Visit the Hydrangea Farm at 86 Madaket Road, Nantucket or online at www.hydrangeafarm.com for more information.