

Yard and Garden – 05-30-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

While recently viewing my neighbor's old standard, yet very beautiful, row of white flowering shrubs, I experienced a flashback. The shrubs reminded me of a play activity



my older brother Jim and I did as small boys living in Sutton, Nebraska. Our home was on the outskirts of town, and immediately to the west, separating our property from our neighbor's,

was a row of large pendulous, white-flowering shrubs, like those of my present day neighbor's. Although six-to-eight foot tall is not really large, they seemed huge through the eyes of a seven-year-old boy.

At that time, Jim and I were big fans of a Western hero called Straight Arrow. Straight Arrow was a Comanche orphan raised by whites, and in his adult life, he disguised himself as Steve Adams, owner of the Broken Bow cattle spread. When danger threatened innocent people or when evil doers plotted against justice, Steve Adams disappeared, and in his place emerged a mysterious Indian wearing the dress and war paint of a Comanche and taking up the cause of law and order throughout the West. We purchased Straight Arrow comic books; we collected Nabisco Shredded Wheat Straight Arrow cards; and we listened to Straight Arrow on the radio. We were devoted fans.

Every kid knew the Lone Ranger had bullets that were made of silver from his secret silver mine. Straight Arrow had a secret gold mine. Although he didn't mine gold, it was there, he kept *Fury*, his golden palomino, along with his Comanche weapons, attire, and war paint. When Steve Adams went after the bad guys, he'd surreptitiously enter his secret gold mine, don his Comanche garb, and emerge riding *Fury*, shouting, "Kan-e-wah."

Jim and I had our own secret cave. Although it wasn't lined with gold and it did not stable a golden palomino, it was where we stored our secret Indian paraphernalia. Actually, our cave was nothing more than we boys sitting hidden beneath the pendulous

boughs of this row of shrubs. Never did we let our older sister Jo in on the whereabouts of our secret hideaway, nor did we tell mom or dad.

Although seeing my neighbor's beautiful flowering shrubs took me back, I also stood in awe, admiring their beauty. The shrub I'm referring to is scientifically known as *Spiraea vanhouttei*, commonly called bridal-wreath spirea. I'm not sure how that name evolved, but I do see a resemblance to a bride's wreath of trailing, white flowers.

Generally, I've never been a big fan of spireas; however, when bridal-wreath is in bloom, it is breath-taking. Bridal-wreath shrubs are spring bloomers with numerous, tiny, white flowers. Capable of growing six-to-eight feet tall and ten-to-twelve feet in diameter, the bridal-wreath has a distinct fountain-like growth habit with rounded top and arching branches that curve to the ground. When in bloom it is completely covered with millions of petite white flowers. One glance at this magnificent specimen should convince most anyone that it's a perfect place for a kid's hideaway.



Bridal-wreath spirea has small, distinctive, blue-green leaves which turn a purplish-color in the fall. This shrub makes an excellent accent plant and is perfect for informal hedges or screens. It is capable of growing in part-sun to full-sun. Bridal-wreath produces more flowers when grown in full-sun. It adapts well to most soils and is hardy to Zone 3.

Earlier I stated bridal-wreath is an old standard. Interestingly, it had its origin in Belgium. A nurseryman, Louis Van Houtte, popularized the plant in the mid-1800's. The exact arrival of Vanhoutte spirea (bridal-wreath) to the United States is uncertain, but the 1888 Burpee catalog featured its availability and gave it high praise.

Today, bridal-wreath spirea remains on the fringes of popularity. Most retailers have a few plants for sale each spring; however, I won't be planting one soon. We're running out of room in our yard to plant most anything. In the meantime, I will continue to admire my neighbor's beautiful shrub. I'll dream of sneaking into my secret cave; emerging dressed like an Indian; and, like Straight Arrow, fighting crime and bringing justice to the Wild West.