

GARDENING WITH HOSTA IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Text and photos by Todd Boland, Research Horticulturist
Memorial University of Newfoundland Botanical Garden

While most perennials are usually grown in our gardens for their beautiful and colourful blooms, the foliage of some plants can also provide quite an interesting display. Among the most important foliage perennials are members of the genus *Hosta*. This group of perennials offers more than just a pretty leaf however; they provide a number of options not offered by other typical flowering perennials.

By far, the most notable feature of hosta is their attractive leaves. Although they are not evergreen, they do provide a bold display from late spring until fall. The lush foliage offers a tropical and often architectural look to a garden; few other perennials can boast this feature.

The most useful aspect of hosta is the wide diversity of the group. With literally hundreds of selections and hybrids, at least some are suitable for any garden setting.

The leaves can vary in colour from shades of green, yellow or blue and may be variously striped, streaked or edged with white or yellow. Plant size can range from miniature (with 3 cm leaves) to giants with almost 60 cm leaves. Leaf texture can vary from smooth, puckered, ribbed or leathery and may have a shiny or dull finish. Leaf shape may be circular, heart-shaped, oval, lance or strap-like.



Hosta montana 'Aureo-marginata' is a popular 'species' *Hosta*.

While most foliage plants are solely valued for their leaves, hostas offer the added advantage of exquisite, lily-like flowers. Although individual flowers are short-lived and only about 3-6 cm in size, a specimen plant in full bloom can provide an attractive focal point for the garden. Indeed, some hostas are hybridized for their flowers rather than their leaves. Such hybrids can produce sprays of 10 cm fragrant flowers. Unfortunately, flower colour is rather limited, being only available in white or shades of mauve-purple.

Cultivation

Not only are hostas a beautiful addition to any garden, they are also surprisingly easy to grow. Very few perennials can thrive as well in full sun as they do in shade; hostas are the exception. However, certain colour forms do better in sun than shade and vice versa. If a hosta has yellow or yellow variegated leaves, then provide them with high light levels to maintain the yellow colouring. Too much shade and the yellow will become chartreuse, which in itself, can be an attractive colour. The 'blue' leaved forms will tolerate the most shade and will bleach in full sun. Green leaved and white variegated forms can cross the borders from full sun to full shade.



A group of *Hosta* growing in a shaded bed.

In the wild, most hostas grow on damp forest floors. Therefore, for best results in your garden, you should try to replicate these conditions as closely as possible. They thrive in an organically-rich, moisture-retentive soil. Since they have such large leaves, they undergo high rates of transpiration (that is loss of water through leaves by evaporation), so a moist soil is imperative. Typical garden soil should be amended with leaf mould, compost or well-rotted manure. These organic compounds not only help the soil retain water, but also provide nutrients for the growing plants. It is very important that the soil be well prepared prior to planting, since hostas are very long-lived and, like peonies, improve with age.

When watering hostas, there are three very important points to keep in mind.

- 1) Water gently so that the soil is not compacted or eroded. As well, a strong jet of water can remove the blue waxy coating from the blue-foliaged forms.
- 2) During dry spells, water deeply on a weekly basis. Such watering will encourage a deep root system better able to withstand heaving that occurs during the freeze-thaw cycles that we experience every winter. Lightly sprinkling water every day will only encourage a shallow root system.
- 3) Water in the morning so that the leaves can dry by nightfall. Wet leaves at night encourage the major scourge for hosta, slugs and snails!



Flower details.

Weeds are not generally a problem. With the size and spread of hosta leaves, weeds simply do not get enough light to become a serious threat.

Hostas are not normally affected by any serious diseases. Sometimes the leaf margins can become brown, especially in the types with variegated edges. This browning is a physiological problem caused by compacted or droughty soil. If this problem occurs, gently cultivate the ground around the plants to loosen the soil and water deeply at least once a week. A mulch of one part peat, one part leaf mold, compost or old manure, will help maintain soil moisture.

The only serious pest of hostas are slugs and snails. While they seem to feed on just about any herbaceous plant, a foliage plant like hosta is extremely at risk. Most damage is done in the late spring and early summer, when the leaves are first unfurling. You can hand-pick the slugs and snails and discard them. Alternatively, slug/snail bait is available from most garden centres, but remember that it is poisonous, especially to pets and wildlife. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions for its use.

Companion Plants

Because hostas thrive in shade, they are a favoured plant for a woodland garden. Fortunately, they are also invaluable in a typical perennial border, especially in more shaded locations where many flowering perennials are difficult to grow. The wise choice of appropriate plants can effectively extend the season of garden interest as well as provide a source of variety in the form of complementary colour, texture, shape and flower form. Most of the companion plants about to be mentioned also thrive in shaded areas.



Hosta 'North Hill' growing among other perennials in a border setting.

The true companion plants of hostas are those perennials which will grow side-by-side with them throughout the summer season. Some of the best companion plants include *Astilbe*, *Bergenia*, *Cimicifuga*, *Convallaria*, *Dicentra*, *Digitalis*, *Epimedium*, *Heuchera*, *Lamium*, *Polygonatum*, *Primula*, *Pulmonaria* and ferns.

Since hostas usually emerge fairly late in the spring, the use of small spring bulbs, such as *Crocus*, *Galanthus*, *Scilla*, *Muscari* and *Chionodoxa* can provide some much-needed colour early in the season. As the *Hosta* leaves unfurl, they hide the dying foliage of these spring bulbs.

Of course, hostas can stand alone as well. A particularly attractive bed of just hostas can be grown as a ring around the base of a large tree. And don't forget that the small-sized and edger hosta can also be appropriately used in the rock garden.

Hosta Selections

Since hostas range in size from miniature to giant, the choice of which hosta to grow can be a daunting task. Many plant catalogues which offer a wide selection of hostas will classify them into one of the five groups listed below.

Small Hosta (20 cm or less in height) These plants may seem fragile and indeed, can be seriously harmed by the browsing of slugs. Otherwise, they are quite tough. Because of their size, they can be tucked here and there in a rock garden setting. They are particularly attractive in shady nooks between rocks. They are also useful in small garden settings.



Hosta 'Tot Tot' (left) and *H.* 'Blue Moon' (right) are examples of small hosta cultivars.

Edger Hosta (20-40 cm) These are low and leafy, with neat, horizontal growth. As a result, adjacent plants have a tendency to mesh together, forming in essence a very low hedge-like effect. They are very useful along the edges of a perennial border or planting under small trees or tall shrubs.

Hosta 'Golden Tiara' is a popular edger type.



Groundcover Hosta (30-70 cm) These hostas are similar in growth habit to the edgers, but the plants are a little larger and even more vigorous. They produce a wire-like network of roots, thus are useful for planting on sloped surfaces where soil erosion could be a problem. They are also useful for planting as a groundcover under larger trees, where the growth of grass is poor.



Hosta 'Ground Master', a ground-cover type.

Specimen *Hosta* (any size) Some hosta should be placed where they can be easily viewed as they often deserve a second glance. These specimen hosta have leaf colours, textures, shapes or growth habits, or such fragrant flowers, that their details are better appreciated when viewed close-up.

Hosta 'Sum and Substance' is one of the largest specimen hosta on the market



The following is a list of some popular hosta available either locally or from mail-order catalogues. Most of these are growing at the Botanical Garden.

- Small Hosta

Blue Moon – 20 cm; heart-shaped blue foliage
Gold Drop – 20 cm; heart-shaped yellow-green foliage
Tot Tot – 10 cm; heart-shaped green foliage

- Edger Hosta

Blue Cadet – 40 cm; heart-shaped blue foliage
Ginko Craig – 20 cm; narrow green leaves with white margin
Gold Cadet – 40 cm; yellow-green foliage
Golden Tiara – 35 cm; somewhat rounded leaves with yellow margin
Halcyon – 35 cm; lance-shaped leaves with blue foliage
Janet – 35 cm; yellow foliage, green margin
June – 35 cm; blue foliage, yellow margin
Shade Fanfare – 40 cm; bright green leaves with white margin
So Sweet – 30 cm; shiny green leaves with white margin; fragrant flowers
White Ray – 35 cm; deep green leaves with central white strip

- Groundcover Hosta

August Moon – 50 cm; crinkled, yellow foliage
Birchwood Parkey's Gold – 45 cm; chartreuse to yellow foliage
Francee – 60 cm; narrow green leaves with white margin
Fringe Benefit – 70 cm; blue-green leaves with cream margin

Frosted Jade – 50 cm; blue-green leaves with white margin
Gold Standard – 50 cm; cream leaves with green margin
Ground Master – 30 cm; undulating white margin
Wide Brim – 50 cm; bright green with wide cream margin
H. undulata 'Albo-marginata' – 40 cm; undulating leaves with white margin
H. undulata 'Univittata' – 40 cm; undulating leaves with white-centers

- Specimen Hosta

Krossa Regal – 75 cm; large vase-shaped, grey-green leaves
Royal Standard – 45 cm; plain green foliage; large white, fragrant flowers
Sum and Substance – 90 cm; large puckered leaves ; yellow-green foliage
H. montana 'Aureo-marginata' – 75 cm; glossy, ribbed, deep green foliage with gold margin
H. sieboldiana 'Elegans' – 60 cm; large, deeply-ribbed blue leaves
H. sieboldiana 'Frances Williams' – 60 cm; large blue leaves, yellow margin



Miniature and edger types are suitable to a rock garden setting. Above is the edger cultivar 'Louisa'