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Hosta Heaven: Best-Selling Perennials In North America

By George Africa

If you haven't tried growing hostas yet, now is the time. If you've got a few plants in your garden, you ought to have a few more. Trust me. Millions of gardeners can't be wrong, either.

Among the best-selling perennials in North America, hostas range from miniatures less than two inches tall to many with extra-large leaves the size of horses' heads and flower scapes more than five feet tall. Planted as single specimens, as companions to other plants or as entire hosta gardens, these plants draw attention and don't ask much in return.

Where else can you find a plant that can enhance your garden architecture as well as carry so many different and interesting leaf descriptions? They come seersuckered, leathery, oval, puckered, irregularly margined, heart-shaped, abruptly tipped, crinkled, highly corrugated and ruffled. They range from dark green to almost white, and from yellow to rich gold. Though not known for their flowers, many push out blooms that rival the beauty of almost any other plant.

The two best attributes of hostas -- and the reasons they're so widely planted -- are their shade tolerance and ease of care. Just remember these planting tips and you'll be on your way to a nice hosta collection of your own:

Here in Vermont, when the snows have melted we clean up any leftover debris from autumn before any sign of new growth. As the first leaves begin to unfurl, we fertilize with Epsom salts at a rate of five ounces to five gallons of water. We mulch our hosta gardens with an inch of shredded maple leaves from the previous fall. This helps maintain moisture during the summer and over time adds to the organic makeup of the soil. Throughout the summer, we provide supplemental water mixed with fish emulsion.

Growing great hostas is not without challenges. Deer and slugs prefer to eat hostas, not admire them as we do. For deer control, we use a latex foliar spray called Tree Guard that is applied during the growing season. It contains a very bitter-tasting agent and a reminder scent. It is available online and at larger nurseries and garden centers. Areas with higher densities of deer require control efforts to the point of strong fencing. The Summer 2004 issue of PPP does a great job covering the continuum of

deer-control methods.

When dealing with slugs, controls range from organic to chemical. We have used coarse sand, ground oyster shells, diatomaceous earth and coffee grounds under our hostas, with varying success. Any control program should begin early in the spring before the first signs of growth.

As for hosta varieties, the sky really is the limit. Our personal hosta collection exceeds 400 varieties, but like many gardeners our obsession has become lost in the numbers. We're often asked to name our favorites, and it's virtually impossible — it usually depends on which hosta I've looked at most recently. Here are five great selections, though, that offer a range of appearances and usefulness in the garden:

1) `Halcyon' — A medium-sized blue hosta to remember, it will hold its great color even in more sun than it cares for. In time, this hosta will clump to 30 inches wide with near-white flower scapes to 22

inches. Planted just within a border or at points where visitors stop to gaze, it's an eye-catcher.

2) `Tokudama Flavocircinalis' — The down-side of this plant is its reluctance to increase in size, but within four years the wait obviously will have been worth it. This plant's slightly cupped leaves are medium blue with a wide, irregular yellow margin that streaks back into the blue. The flower scape cluster is held just above the leaves. Plant it in light shade and the colors become stronger.

3) `Regal Splendor' — Although many incredible new hostas are registered each year, some of the older varieties have qualities not to be forgotten. `Regal Splendor' is a tissue-culture sport of `Krossa Regal.' The leaves of `Splendor' add creamy-white edges to an otherwise blue-gray `Krossa Regal' look. It's the vase shape and the tall flower scapes that make it so useful in broadening the dimensions of your landscape.

4) `Little Sunspot' — This is a small sport of `Little Aurora,' and it shares the ability to look great planted close to a border. The leaves of `Little Sunspot' have rich yellow centers with dark green margins and a subtle mix from the yellow to green. As the season progresses, the yellow fades to chartreuse and the seersuckering becomes more obvious. It looks bigger and more sophisticated than it actually is.

5) *H. montana* `Aureomarginata' — Large and spectacular, this cascading hosta becomes more magnificent each year. The dark green leaves have irregular golden yellow-creamy white margins and streaks to mid-leaf. A glossy finish entices you to get closer. Here in Vermont, it is early to rise out of the ground in the spring and guaranteed to be hit by frost a couple of times. But when that time passes, it grows strongly upward.

George Africa and his wife, Gail, own Vermont Flower Farm in Marshfield, Vt., which is profiled on . They offer more than 140 hosta varieties for sale and are available to answer questions by phone at 802-426-3505, by e-mail at

lilies@together.net

, or online at

<http://www.VermontFlowerFarm.com>

. They also recommend

<http://www.hostalibrary.org>

as the best

hosta web site and photo gallery.

- Hostas are shade-tolerant, but as with many plants, different varieties require different amounts of sun and shade to do well.
- Hostas grow best in rich, friable soil with a pH of about 6.
- With good reason, successful hosta growers say the best fertilizer is water, so keep the soil somewhat moist from spring until fall frosts approach. This is especially true with young plantings.
- Be patient! The attractive leaves and flower scapes require a well-developed root system. You'll get a jump-start by purchasing field-grown plants with adult root systems, but even if you buy young seedlings in containers, you should be smiling by year three.

<http://www.ppplants.com>

How To Use Biennials & Perennials In Landscaping Your Garden

By Paul Curran

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Biennials

Biennials are generally very beautiful plants, with most attractive flowers. They are somewhat more trouble for the gardener, since they keep growing during their first year and do not bloom until the second. Their great advantage is that their seeding stage produces new plants which will bloom again two years later, making it unnecessary to plant additional seeds.

The biennials are usually planted in early summer and transplanted to good soil when they are large enough to handle. It is a good idea to pot them at this time, particularly in areas where plants cannot be left outdoors all winter. In some cases,

they can be transplanted to a coldframe, and then placed in the flower bed the following spring. The requirements of careful soil preparation apply to biennials as well as annuals.

After planting, if you want a continuous new growth of plants, it is best not to weed and cultivate too assiduously. If a really fastidious biennial patch is planted, it will be necessary to replace the plants with new ones each year.

Perennials are the basic flowers of any garden. Each year they die and renew themselves for the next growing season.

They are long-lived and last for many seasons. Perennials are also, historically, among our oldest plants. They have been cultivated for centuries and often, as a result of breeding and crossbreeding, bear no resemblance to their wild forebears. In some of the perennials, the blossoms have become so specialized through centuries of cultivation that they no longer grow 'seeds.

Other perennials are continually being developed by amateur botanists and gardeners. As a result of this cultivation and inbreeding, perennials as a rule are not as hardy as other varieties. Another disadvantage is the tendency of certain perennials to die down after flowering, thereby leaving gaps in the garden.

There are a number of ways to solve the problems of short-flowering periods and the resultant unsightly spaces. One way is to intersperse perennials with annuals and other bulbs and flowering plants whose bloom occurs either later or earlier than that of the perennials. Some perennials are easy to transplant: chrysanthemums, for example, can be moved from one place to another with no noticeable effect on their vigor.

This is another way to keep color and bloom throughout the growing season. A garden of perennials, either by themselves or mixed with annuals and other bulbs, should be placed along a path, or as a border, with a background of trees, shrubs, a wall or fence.

The background shows the brilliant coloring to best advantage. Some varieties can flourish in the shade, such as anemone, lily of the valley, day lilies, sweet pea, primrose, hollyhock, harebell and peonies, but these flowers must be chosen carefully and faced so that some sun reaches them every day.

Paul Curran is CEO of Cuzcom Internet Publishing Group and webmaster at Trees-and-Bushes.com, providing access to their nursery supplier of a range of quality plants, trees, bushes, shrubs, seeds and garden products.

Visit their site now to find a great selection of flowers for your garden



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