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Embrace the Hosta-bilities!

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Hosta are an exceptional herbaceous perennial, grown more for their foliage than for their blooms. There are few shade-loving plants with foliage that has as much visual variety as hosta which is also known as the plantain lily. Widely cultivated in Asia for centuries, especially on the islands of Japan where hosta is thought to have originated, hosta came to Paris, France in the late 1700s.

It was almost one hundred years later, in 1861, that a plant collector by the name of George R. Hall sent some hosta to the U.S. from his garden in Yokohama, Japan. In 1862, Thomas Hogg Jr., recognizing value of variegated plants, supposedly bought hosta directly from Japanese street merchants to sell in America. The son of a British horticulturist, Hogg came to Manhattan as a child, learned the nursery and florist trade from his father, and became the U.S. Marshal for Japan under President Lincoln.

It was during two trips to Japan in 1860s and the 1870s that Hogg collected many horticultural species which he then delivered to his family nursery in the US. Among the plants that he brought back were Japanese hemlock (*Tsuga diversifolia*), Japanese false cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera*), Japanese stewartia (*Stewartia pseudocamelia*), Kousa dogwood (*Cornus Kousa*), and the Veitch fir (*Abies veitchii*), and, of course, Hosta (*Hosta sp.*).

Hogg is also credited with bringing several invasive species to North America: kudzu (*Pueraria sp.*), oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), and porcelain berry (*Ampelopsis glandulosa*). Hogg had no idea which of the species that he brought back would become invasive in their new habitats. It could just as easily have been the hosta that decided to overtake the North America.



In some ways though, it can be said that hosta has conquered our gardens. There are more than 45 species in the Hosta genus with over 3,000 registered varieties. Whether dark or light, solid or variegated, small or large, there is a type for every garden and gardener. Should you doubt any of that, just check out some of the names: 'Blue Angel', 'Big Daddy', 'Golden Meadows', 'Munchkin Fire', 'Lakeside Dragonfly', and 'Night Before Christmas'.

Night Before Christmas

For 2018, the Hosta of the Year as selected by the American Hosta Growers Association, is 'World Cup'. 'World Cup' is a large herbaceous perennial that will grow to 23" high and 43" wide. It has beautiful, bright gold foliage that has a corrugated-looking surface on its deeply cupped leaves. As with most hosta, the flowers bloom in late June or early July from tall racemes, rising high above the foliage. 'World Cup's' lavender-colored flowers contrast nicely with its glowing foliage.

It is the hosta foliage that is at the center of its popularity. Most varieties have broad, lanceolate or ovate leaves, meaning that they are wider near the middle and lance-shaped or wider at the base of an oval-shaped leaf. Sizes vary from the 1" long x ¾" wide leaf of the miniatures (I love the appropriately named 'Baby Booties') to the 18" long x 12" wide leaves of the giants such as 'Sum and Substance'. The variety 'Curly Fries' only grows to 6" high but it provides a lot of impact with its very long, slim, and wavy chartreuse leaves. Hosta plantings are called clumps and the clumps of the miniatures are perfect for tucking in between other plants where just a touch of interest is needed.

In fact, one of the best things about hosta is that you can have an expansive border or grouping of hosta without having two alike. When planting the new clumps be sure to space them according to their size at maturity to avoid ending up with an over-crowded bed. As they are shade-loving too much sun will dry them out so choose an area that is in shade most of the day with well-drained but moist soil. Adding organic matter to the soil at planting is helpful. As the plants mature, they may show signs of overcrowding or of clumps that have no growth in the center. This means that it is time to divide the clump. Spring or fall are the best times to divide hosta as the heat of summer will create too much stress for a newly divided plant. Use a shovel to remove the hosta from the ground and either pull apart the clump or use the same shovel to divide it. Place the new smaller clumps into prepared holes and keep them well-watered until they are established.



Hosta have few pests although slugs may be attracted to the same shady, moist environment that the hosta enjoy. Egg shells, coffee grounds, or diatomaceous earth can be spread beneath hosta to discourage slugs. Deer and rabbits will feed on hosta foliage and voles may eat the roots and crowns. If you don't have an issue with wildlife or don't mind sharing a few plants with them then hosta will bring quite a bit of interest into your landscape.

For more information on growing hosta or other horticultural questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.