

August 2020



### *A very unusual July...*

July is usually Mel's 'hell month', so this year it has been brilliant to have the time to spend on the heart of the nursery, our Plant Heritage National Collection.

We expect a lot of our precious parent plants but this year we haven't had to tote them around the UK, or subject them to the rigors of exhibiting. Consequently they have flourished unmolested, not that they complain when moved. Fortunately hostas do seem to benefit from frequent soil changes and being 'worked on'. They especially enjoy having their roots washed!

### **Re-potting collection plants**

The number one job on the list for the collection was to re-pot all the large and giant varieties being grown in 35 litre pots. These pots are incredibly heavy to lift and so we made the decision to divide plants to go into 15 litre pots and any surplus plants would either be destined for the various garden projects around the nursery, or divided for stock.

A natural consequence of this work is the creation of a limited supply of rarely available cultivars. After we have satisfied customers on our 'wish list' for specific varieties we are adding them to our website. Please note they may not be up there for long as the numbers are very limited. The prices are also higher than we would ordinarily charge because of the pedigree of the plants we can offer, and the progress they have made towards maturity. Although there may only be a single head, the root systems are well developed and the plants will be exhibiting mature characteristics in their leaves.

### **Checking all is well**

A very important element of holding a National Collection is ensuring what you hold is true to its registered characteristics. As we have mentioned numerous times over the years

### *The excitement of finding new sports*

During lock-down we delved into our collection and have several very interesting sports/hybrids currently under evaluation, three of which have remained stable for at least five years:



### *Sport or hybrid?*

This very exciting cultivar was found growing in a pot of *H. 'Snowden'*, an Eric Smith introduction not known for any streaked offspring. The flat leaf exhibits all the characteristics of the parent but where has the gold element come from? The pod parent of *H. 'Snowden'* is *H. 'Fortunei Aurea'*, which leads us to consider the gold element of the leaf

reversions, or plain leaved sporting, can often happen to cultivars with quite unstable characteristics. For example, our [H. 'Dorothy Benedict'](#) is down to two pieces exhibiting the streaky variegation. As this cultivar comes from [H. 'Frances Williams'](#) it was apparent the plant was turning to a plain leaved cultivar, in this case [H. 'Bob the Builder'](#). We had thought we had lost it when we looked for it recently but fortunately enough remains for it to have another go at flourishing. We have had *H. 'Dorothy Benedict'* for many years and it would have been such a shame to have lost it.

Likewise, *H. 'Gunther's Prize'*, has had to be rescued from sporting into [H. 'Ufo'](#). Although we love *H. 'Ufo'*, perhaps more than the tricky *H. 'Gunther's Prize'*, it is important we can continue to cultivate it as part of the collection. This one is down to a single head so unfortunately anyone with either of these streaky cultivars on their wish list will need to look elsewhere because even if they grow sufficiently large to divide for sale, we wouldn't choose to sell them due to their fragile nature.

#### **Sport of *Hosta 'Richland Gold'***



#### **Finding new sports**

One of the happy by-products of having a large collection, all occupying the same space, is that cross pollination and sports can occur without us being aware of it. Over the years we have isolated a number of such plants. We then take pains to discover whether it already exists, having been introduced by another breeder. We detail a few of these in the side column and will update in the future if any of them warrant being registered as new introductions.

One of our pet irritations is the practice of introducing what are effectively already existing cultivars, or sports that are so similar as to be indistinguishable by anyone other than a hosta nerd. Because there is not sufficient attention paid to this practice there are now so many duplicate cultivars out there, it is very difficult to keep up with the latest developments and the number of cultivars has exploded in recent years. Just be aware and question whether what is

could be from the pod parent but we cannot find any record of a streaky sport having been identified previously. Besides the gold element is lost after the spring as the leaves are viridescent, turning green.

*H. 'Snowden'* was recorded way back in 1988 so it would be strange to think a sport exhibiting this colouration wouldn't have occurred already. The *H. 'Snowden'* we have in our collection have been there since the early days of our collection, certainly within 10 years of the plant first being introduced. We have noticed a tendency, as the plant gets older, for the colour to look a little misted but that could be our meanness with feed.

Another explanation could be the fact that our parent plants of *H. 'Snowden'* have been co-located with [H. 'Sun Power'](#) for at least the last 25 years. Could this cultivar be a hybrid of the two? If so, this could be a particularly fabulous cultivar.



#### ***Sport***

This particular plant comes

being touted as new is anything really worth making a fuss about. Every year we spend a lot of time deciding what to add to our collection. As a consequence of this issue, we have become ultra picky about what we add to our collection not least because we keep running out of space.

### **Sport of *Hosta* 'Saint Elmo's Fire'**



### **Dead-heading**

Now is the time to remove spent flower heads as they can damage your lovely hosta leaves if they land on them and decay. Hosta flowers do not have a long vase life, unlike the leaves, which can last weeks if you change the water routinely.

### **Summer uglies**

Recently scanning through an online forum for pests and diseases in hostas, I came across the term 'summer uglies' and it made me chuckle as it is a great term to use for all those imperfections that occur in hosta leaves around this time of year. One of the most important things to remember with hostas is they rise early in the year, often well before frosts have finished. Consequently all that tender new growth can be damaged by late frosts, especially following a hotter and drier than average spring. Many of our plants were scorched in the poly tunnels as a result of the intense heat and light at the start of the season.

All we do is remove the damaged leaves and cut off any scorched areas, if the rest of the leaf is looking good. The scorched/damaged areas of the leaves are not any more use to the plant and just look ugly. Removing damaged leaves encourages the plant to divert some more energy into a second flush of leaves. By now the leaves will have been producing sugars for four months, a third of the year and so are often not looking as good as they were in spring. Some varieties cope better than others and get more intensely coloured as the year develops but some would definitely benefit from have their leaves removed. If your hosta leaves

from *H.* '[Richland Gold](#)', which is a sport of *H.* '[Gold Standard](#)'. *Hosta* Gold Standard'. has produced numerous offspring, many of which exhibit unusual variegation, so it is perhaps unsurprising that *H.* 'Richland Gold' is prone to sporting.

This particular sport of the plain leaves *H.* 'Richland Gold' has central flashes, varying in width, of green and white streaking. The variegation has remained true for a number of years.



### ***Sport***

This lovely plant originated from *H.* '[Saint Elmo's Fire](#)'. Like its parent, it changes colour during the season. However, this sport becomes albescent (whiter) in the centre where its parent turns greener (viridescent). The centre and margin colours seem to 'swap' during the season and the interface between the two colours has a water colour effect. It is a vigorous grower and is currently outdoing *H.* 'Saint Elmo's Fire' in scale.

Once again, it is an intriguing plant and one we would like to know more about.

are turning brown and papery just remove them and you should be rewarded with fresh growth appearing very soon.

### *Plant fairs*

We heard very recently that two plant fairs are happening in our region in September - find out more on our [shows page](#). Hopefully the latest Covid19 developments won't scupper these plans and we can catch up with some of you in the autumn, if you cannot make it to the nursery.

### *Plant Heritage talks*

If you missed Mel's and Jonathan's talks on 23rd July, you can catch them online through the [Plant Heritage website](#), for a small fee payable to Plant Heritage.

Speak soon,

Team Mickfield Hostas

### **'Prior art'**

As hosta collectors, rather than breeders, we are more interested in the preservation of existing cultivars rather than developing new ones.

If any of our readers have come across sports/hybrids of the varieties we list here, which already exist but are currently under development, perhaps you would let us know. It would be just as exciting for us to hear that these sports already exist so we could give them a name.