



Fragrant flowers

This month we feature the best fragrant varieties. We have visited the subject of fragrant *Hosta* flowers in previous newsletters and generally in August because that is when those varieties start to flower.

Sniffing out a story

Having already covered the subject of fragrant *Hosta* in previous newsletters, I approached this 'best of' issue without a new angle to explore until I stumbled across one purely by accident.

Preparing plants for the RHS Tatton Park Flower Show, I was transferring parent plants, from our collection, into exhibit pots and bent to top dress the pot with bark. As I did this I narrowly avoided a honey bee in one of the flowers on *H. 'Key Lime Pie'* - below and opposite:



It was then I detected a distinct fragrance from the open flowers. I didn't know whether to grab my camera first, to catch the bee at work, or check up on the parentage of *H. 'Key Lime Pie'* to see if it should have a fragrance. All my usual resources fail to mention this, and the registration information doesn't mention it either. This is not the first time we have detected fragrance in *Hosta* cultivars, which do not claim to have fragrant flowers.

A quick search of the Internet has revealed several conversation threads about other *Hosta* cultivars with fragrant flowers, including *H. 'Blue Mouse Ears'* and *H. 'Green With Envy'*.

The ability to detect even the faintest fragrance often eludes me, but Roy has a much better sense of smell and has detected faint fragrance in lots of different cultivars. We need to be a bit more systematic in future and make a note of those we identify as fragrant to expand this popular category of *Hosta*.

Previous research led me to believe that all fragrant cultivars will have *H. 'plantaginea'* as the basis. This is the only species widely acknowledged to have fragrant flowers. Unfortunately, I cannot trace the origins of *H. 'Key Lime Pie'* back to any fragrant varieties.

Once again the genus piques the interest and I launched into a brief bit of research into flower scent. At this time of the year there is little time to pontificate and reflect, as we juggle the demands of the season, so I apologise for being very sketchy with my findings for now.



Top 12 fragrant varieties

The following list is our selection of the best fragrant varieties, not just for scent but for foliage colour too:



H. 'Cathedral Windows' (above) - for foliage colour and fragrance



H. 'Fragrant Bouquet' (above) - still one of the best for fragrance

H. 'Fried Bananas' - lovely bright foliage and great scent

H. 'Guacamole' - great scent and foliage that brightens as the season progresses

H. 'Holy Molé' - lovely dark variegation, which we find holds better than *H. 'Avocado'* later in the season

Evolving characteristics

All flowers give off a complex mixture of compounds, or volatiles, to attract pollinators. Obviously these combinations of compounds will vary, with fragrance only being part of that mix. This makes me think that the statement that all fragrant flowering *Hosta* must originate from a single species might be flawed. Might it be more accurate to suggest that *H. plantaginea* is the only *Hosta* species with a flower scent detectable by human senses?

Volatiles are very specific and intended to attract only the pollinators suitable for that plant to ensure the greatest chance of successful reproduction. However, research has discovered that nature can be quite deceptive and that some plants have evolved to mimic characteristics to attract pollinators. If some species evolve to lose their scent, it is feasible some could evolve their volatile compounds to emit fragrance and could the intensity of that fragrance vary depending upon the nature of the weather from year to year? It is a fascinating subject and one worth delving into in much more detail than this brief newsletter can afford space and time to undertake.

As an interesting footnote to folks asking about the stripy flower on our promotional leaflet, many *Hosta* flowers use stripes to visually attract pollinators - *H. 'Key Lime Pie'* shares this characteristic.

Flowering times

Hosta plantaginea gives off its strongest scent notes late into the evening and overnight and is one of the latest flowering species, generally blooming from August into September. It has very large white trumpet flowers - see below:



Usually the fragrant varieties tend to bloom from August, many of them have large flower heads emerging now, but *H. 'Key Lime Pie'* is near to finishing its flowering period. Once again we won't be able to exhibit fragrant varieties actually doing their thing at a major show this season - oh well.

Encouraging flowering

We are more often asked for fragrant varieties these days and advice on how to encourage flowering.

Encouraging the blooming of fragrant varieties is getting slightly more problematic as newer cultivars are introduced which require more shade for their best leaf colour. A classic example of this is *H. 'Stained Glass'*, which readily scorches in too much light. *Hosta 'Cathedral Windows'* can also look very washed out if kept in bright light.

Conversely, *H. 'Fragrant Blue Ribbons'* copes quite well, as does *H. 'Secret Love'* (pictured in the newsletter banner) and *H. 'Secret Ambition'*.

We are looking forward to experimenting with planting positions for fragrant varieties in the exhibition garden. Late afternoon and evening warmth seems to be the most important element of positioning, so locating your plant near to a wall or fence which has absorbed heat during the day, emitting it after sundown, is ideal. Along the east side of a red brick wall or dark fence, or in a sheltered part of a patio facing a source of radiating warmth such as a house wall, could be good places to try.

We would certainly recommend planting your fragrant *Hosta* in a container and trying it out in different locations until you find the best place in your garden, before consigning it to the ground.

Next month: Varieties with the best corrugated leaves...

H. 'Irish Luck' - the lush, shiny foliage is stunning

H. 'Lederhosen' - the leathery glaucous leaves are beautifully topped by the lavender flowers

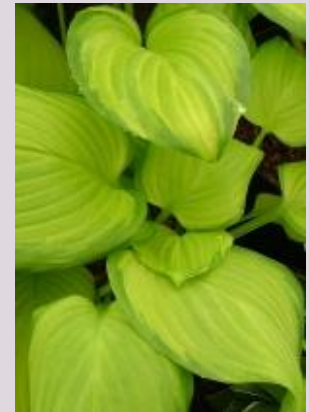


H. 'Nightlife' (above) - a brilliant combination of dark foliage and fragrant flowers

H. plantaginea - the original and, in our opinion, still the best for fragrance



H. 'Secret Ambition' (above) - very pretty foliage



H. 'Stained Glass' (above) - fabulous lush foliage and great scent

H. 'Venus' - large double flowers, we are waiting to see if the scent is as good as *H. plantaginea*...

The advice and opinions contained within this monthly newsletter have been formed over more than 39 years of experience with the *Hosta* genus. We are constantly learning and refining that knowledge and would welcome any suggestions that readers of this newsletter would like to make so please **contact us**.