

June 2020



No shows: no problem

So what have we been up to without all those shows and plant fairs we normally attend? As we finally open our nursery for the season, we reflect on what we have done so far with the extra time.



Mail order

Wow! What can we say other than a huge thank you to all our existing, and new customers, trying us out for the first time.

We have been building the mail order side of our business for several years because we wish to focus on the nursery and re-orientate our business away from the large shows. We have been delighted by the volume of mail order sales with many customers returning for further orders having seen the quality of plants we offer.

As you will know, we do not operate an e-commerce platform through our website, primarily due to the logistical problem of stock control. If we lose the occasional customer because they prefer the automation of a web shop, we take it on the chin because we have found our customers prefer the personal touch. Seldom are orders straight forward and often customers are buying gifts for friends and family, so it is good to be able to have the flexibility to offer a more bespoke service than we might achieve through an online shop.

There are no short cuts to a good mail order service as the plants must be picked, checked, cleaned, wrapped, parcelled and posted. The paperwork can be a little long-winded if customers decide to



Rubber Rockery

One of the areas we have managed to find more time to work on is the Rubber Rockery - recycled tyres planted up with hostas. All of these plants were originally single head sales plants, apart from *H. nigrescens*, which was a spare parent plant from our National Collection and the tallest one in the photo at the head of the newsletter. They all survived last year, which was a massive surprise as the area was somewhat neglected.

add to their orders or we spend a little while playing telephone tag to capture payment details. We have also had to allay fears over slightly longer delivery times as the Post Office has been doing all it can to handle the immense increase in parcel deliveries since the lock down started. However, all your wonderful orders have helped us plug some of the shortfall we are experiencing since all our shows and plant fairs have cancelled until at least July, so thank you once again.

Nursery open for business

As of today we are opening the nursery by appointment. We are not restricting the time you can spend with us, just keeping visitor numbers low so everyone can take their time and see everything they want to see whilst being able to socially distance and not feel under pressure. All we ask is that you call or email us to arrange a date to visit and don't just drop by on the off chance as we might have to turn you away, and we would hate to do that. We also respectfully request that you don't bring pets or children with you as we need to practice social distancing and this becomes very problematic when children and animals are concerned.

In the run-up to opening we have been doing lots of work round the nursery, which we do not usually have the time to do. Our sales tunnel is fully stocked, labelled and weeded and Roy has started work on dividing the large and giant varieties and re-organising that tunnel so the plants have more room to exhibit.

Watering in the tunnels

At this time of year we become rather obsessive about watering. We have had to augment the watering of the poly tunnels for several years, as our automated system began to fail, and it was extremely time consuming for Roy as most of the job fell to him when David and I were at shows. The decision to strip out the old system and use large trays was a good one. We can fill the trays in the same way as we flooded the benches with the old system. However, this way the water doesn't eventually run through, leaving some larger varieties with too little water and small varieties with too much, and the water is directed to the roots rather than evaporating off the leaves. It still takes a while to do but we only need to do it periodically whereas before Roy was watering every evening/morning to keep up with the requirements during the long dry periods we are increasingly seeing with our weather.

Watering in the garden

The garden is another matter as I only managed to get out and water a couple of times during the whole of the last season, and one day (my birthday) spent weeding. Maintenance was always



50 out of the 55 plants have been labelled with thanks to our local [Plant Heritage Suffolk Group](#). I thought it too greedy to ask for more, so the rest can wait for now. These labels are brilliant and look like they will last many years. Once our other beds are more established we will look to label these too but for now visitors will need to ask for the names unless they can identify them as they walk through the collection tunnels - now there's a challenge

A new hosta bed...

We have interred Robin's ashes in the little copse at the end of the bungalow garden, which you can see from the front of the tunnels. We planted [H. 'Paul's Glory'](#) and [H. 'Frances Williams'](#) to stand guard there and have plans to add several other cultivars that he particularly liked. They were looking fantastic until the chickens had a go at them after we removed the wire guard. The chickens are now suffering lock-down but we will build them a new enclosure over the next few

going to be a tricky aspect to creating the garden from a fallow field, which had been colonised by self-sown oaks, blackthorn and hawthorn. Demands for the limited rainfall we experience in East Anglia (although last autumn/winter was wet) means there is little left for anything else we wish to grow. The hostas in the beds all survived last year but were quite stunted and this spring we realise we have lost a few. As a consequence we have buried some leaky pipe around the beds to help provide much needed water to the roots.

A little reminder...

I'm sure I have already mentioned the importance of not watering into the crowns of your hostas, but rather water round the plant to encourage root development. Watering into the crown can cause crown rot, even in hot dry weather, especially in more mature plants with densely packed leaves. If there is insufficient air reaching the crown the humidity levels rise, encouraging the rot to develop. Ideally hostas need watering from below but until their roots reach moister ground they need encouragement to go find that moisture. Continuous overhead watering simply encourages the plant to shallow root, so in prolonged dry periods watering can be a tricky business. I have buried the leaky pipe up to six inches down, which isn't a lot but is enough to ensure the water has a chance to flow to the right places rather than simply evaporating off hot dry soil. Future beds will have leaky pipe laid before I build up the soil.

David has removed most of the blackthorn and hawthorn trees from the garden. The tree butts were very wet when he felled them, which just goes to illustrate how much these little guzzlers were taking. We are also thinning out the oaks but they are still quite young. Eventually we will need to remove more but for now they are providing valuable shade.

I planted a Ginkgo on my birthday, which is not a great time of year to plant trees but I figured this little lovely was strong enough to get away. It has been in a pot for a few years, along with two others, which are destined for the reservoir garden. I also planted a Tetrapanax by the rubber rockery. This might be too shady for the tree, so is an experiment. Again the plant had been in a pot for a couple of years so it was probably relieved to get into the ground.

So as you can tell, not being completely consumed with the demands of the show season has given use all much needed time to spend on all the other work the nursery needs.

We are all feeling the benefits of that extra time, especially as Robin is no longer with us. David has been helping out a lot with strimming, mowing, watering and fencing. Yvonne has been stretched dealing with all the enquiries, orders and invoicing,

weeks to stop them moaning every time we go near them.

Being a man down, we need all the help we can get but I'm not sure Misty is managing to justify her position in the team, beyond looking cute.



Why do you always lie on what I am working on?



... being a paperweight..

which Roy then picks and packs. I have been stripping out the sales tunnel and refreshing the plants, creating new labels and doing a lot of early season propagation with the occasional day skiving in the garden.

We have made it a point to share our tea breaks outside in the sun in the mornings and afternoons, chewing over the changes we have all had to take on board during the past year and recent strange time. Reflecting on the past 27 years of exhibiting has been a subject we often return to, so we might devote a newsletter to it later on in the season.

Happy gardening

Team Mickfield Hostas



... and contemplating a little
light mowing.

Little does she know, we're
buying a new trolley with a
harness!

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