



Growing conditions

This month we thought we should devote our newsletter to growing hosta in more challenging growing conditions. However, thinking about it, the last 12 months have perhaps proved the most challenging, climate-wise, for years...

Spring!

What a different year we are having compared to 2012.

Last spring was glorious, with warm temperatures and bright, sunny days as early as the end of February. In East Anglia we suffered some penetrating late frosts before the rain began to spoil everything mid-April, coinciding with Anglian Water's announcement of a hosepipe ban.

This year spring is very late and the cold weather is still biting. There is a dearth of spring colour, as the soil is still very cold with plants struggling to emerge from dormancy. Buds remain tightly closed with only the most sheltered shrubs blossoming.

We have just returned from Harrogate Spring Flower Show, where some exhibitors cancelled, because they couldn't stage a display. There was much less than usual in the way of spring colour to inspire gardeners, but still some beautiful exhibits.

Three years ago we made the decision not to break dormancy on our plants prematurely by applying heat to our display plants. This was a tough decision because the temptation is always to try to exhibit the plants as advanced and fully open as possible.

In early April we contacted the show organisers to explain our situation and offer to stage an educational display, rather than a floral exhibit. This is something the Harrogate Show allow floral exhibitors to do but they are then judged as a scientific and/or educational exhibit, rather than floral. The judging criteria is based upon the RHS Lindley specifications and is as strict as the floral criteria.

We were delighted to receive a Premier Gold Award and the North of England Horticultural Society's Challenge Cup for our efforts - a great accolade, which was only exceeded by the public reaction to the display. Throughout the show we received numerous congratulations for showing our plants as nature was allowing. People were encouraged that their hostas were not dead, simply late emerging.

Click on the images to view



Our potting mix

We are often asked what is a good medium for container grown hostas. We use the following recipe for our plants:

30% good potting compost
30% composted bark
25% vermiculite
15% combined horticultural sand and loam

Notes:

Potting compost

Because hosta do not require rich soil we recommend you avoid general purpose multicomposts, which can be very rich in fertiliser, especially when the soil dries out. John Innes number one is about as rich as you should get.

If hosta are over-fed their root systems suffer and the leaves do not develop as they should. The plant will get weaker as a result. You may have noticed that hostas available from garden centres do tend to look uniform in size, despite being different varieties, with very different characteristics. This is due to their being fed alongside all the other genus being grown at the garden centre, for which a rich fertiliser may be fine.

We have been trialling a sheeps wool and bracken product to combine with

Engineering growing conditions

One of the main themes of our display was to show how gardeners can help engineer improved growing conditions in their own gardens, using containers. We included varieties, which have been grown in our shade house, and invited people to compare their growth with the same varieties planted in containers. Because the soil warms up quicker in a container, and stays warm, the plants emerge and unfurl before those in the cold ground.

Over the past 12 months, most of the country has suffered prolonged wet weather and we have many questions regarding ways to combat excessively wet conditions. Containers are a great way to mitigate damage and loss of plants, when it is wet. Keeping the crowns of the plants well above the ground helps prevent damping off and if flooding occurs, containers can be elevated quickly out of harms way.

Several visitors to the stand asked about soil conditioning. One gardener has a particularly chalky soil and has struggled to grow anything well, despite extensive attempts to augment the soil with conditioning treatments.

We cannot grow acid loving plants in our clay soil, so have built some raised beds to create the right conditions. The beds are dug down a couple of feet below ground level. Hardcore and/or a shingle layer replaces the removed soil and then the bed is built up at least two feet above soil level. Topsoil and ericaceous compost is used to create the right environment. We have successfully managed to grow azaleas, camelias, pieris, and other acid-loving plants with just a top dressing of ericaceous compost, added every other year.

We advised our gentleman to try the same thing. If you have a large area to condition, this can be very effective.

On a smaller scale you can try planting an over-sized container for your plants. This will give plenty of room for the plant to mature, but sufficient protection from the surrounding soil to encourage growth.

Tanking an area with a membrane can help retain moisture in very dry soils. You don't want to create a subterranean pool but restricting the drainage of water can help enrich the soil.

Visit our **container planting** page for some more ideas.



the rest of our mix ingredients. It has given some excellent results and now forms part of this element of our mix.

We are now potting peat free. Once all our parent plants have been re-potted we will be able to say we are completely peat free.

Composted bark

Over the past couple of years we have moved to using Melcourt Fine Composted Bark. It is sufficiently fine to go through our soil machine and integrates really well with the other components. It is also an excellent top dressing for our exhibit plants.

Vermiculite is designed to be hold moisture. When dry it helps create a friable soil mix, which enables good capillary action of water, when watered from above or below.

Sand and loam provide the final ingredients and, if we are potting miniature varieties, we add grit to the mix, as you would with alpine plants.



Our award

Next month: The Kiwi series from New Zealand...

The advice and opinions contained within this monthly newsletter have been formed over more than 38 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**.

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