



Our hosta collection

This month we bring you an update on more than 33 years of collecting hostas.

The hosta genus has expanded enormously since we began collecting, with thousands of cultivars now in existence. We have been endeavouring to keep up with the huge range since those early days...

The early days

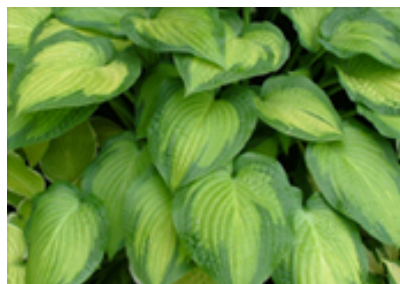
Triggered by a gift from a friend and quickly exhausting the dozen or so varieties available in British nurseries, the passion for collecting hostas was fuelled by new cultivars from the USA. Most of the original collection came directly from Peter Ruh, who had been an avid collector and breeder for many years. In recent years our collection has expanded predominantly through our relationship with Marco Fransen of Paradise Nurseries in Holland. Marco's first visit to our nursery was as a keen young collector, accompanied by Joyce, who is now his wife. We later came to know his parents and these days there is the added pleasure of watching the young Fransens grow.

Most of the collection comes either from originator stock or as close to it as we can get. That way we can be sure that the plants remain characteristic. These days the majority of the modern cultivars are produced through tissue culture. This enables plants to reach the market within a reasonable time scale and to give the breeders a chance to recoup some reward for their efforts. If a specific cultivar looks to be exceptional, breeders can assign Plant Breeders Rights to it and derive a royalty from producers. In some cases PBR status has been renewed several times for the same cultivar. It is debatable whether there should be a limit to the number of times this is allowed, particularly as hostas derive positive benefit from the division of mature plants once we have them in our gardens.

They all look the same!

Some modern cultivars do appear to be very similar to existing, established cultivars. Part of our work is to sift through them to identify the varieties which will grow well and reliably retain their characteristics. Many varieties do not develop their full glory for a number of years, which is another reason why every year brings new delights to us.

Some cultivars never do grow well and many seem to revert all too easily to their parent. As specialists, we take the time and effort to ensure we only sell the best examples, but even then reversions can occur for no apparent reason. Many cultivars are not easy to reproduce using tissue culture and have to be increased by root division, taking a significant number of years to increase stocks. One very good example is the beautiful *h.* 'Paul's Glory' (photo right). It is freely available now, but only after years of trial and error with the tissue culture growing medium.



It is interesting to see the different approaches of the many hosta breeders. Some concentrate on the breeding of new varieties, others try to introduce various traits such as red stems, increased pest resistance or heavier substance to the leaves.

Recent trends

Over recent years we have enjoyed collecting several 'series' of hostas:

Red stemmed varieties

H. 'One Man's Treasure' continues to be a popular cultivar, especially when planted with *h.* 'Harry van de Laar', which has pale green, wavy-edged leaves and brighter red petioles that contrast well with the depth of colour of *h.* 'One Man's Treasure'.



H. 'Miss Ruby', has gloriously dark red stems and rich green leaves but the crowning glory of this cultivar has to be the fabulous deep red-purple flowers on vibrantly red stems. This cultivar tends to flower a little later in the season but it is well worth the wait.

The 'mouse' series

This dear collection of thick, almost succulent-like leaved cultivars is a delight. *H.* 'Blue Mouse Ears' was the first cultivar of the series that we were able to offer for sale and this has been joined by:

Our approach

We remain true to our original aim to cover the whole spectrum from species to modern cultivar, from 'giants' to 'minis' and encourage everyone to enjoy these beautiful plants as much as we do. If we had to concentrate on just one aspect, that would be impossible as we love them all. By keeping our collection as broad as possible we are able to assess whether newer introductions perform better than their older counterparts, and the best growing conditions for them. We are also continually experimenting with different growing mediums, environments and pest control mechanisms. We have learned over the years that there are no universally specific rules for growing hostas successfully. They seem to do well in almost all soils, even sand and chalk. But they do not appreciate being allowed to dry out or to be sited where strong sun or cold winds desiccate their foliage. If a certain plant isn't doing well in its appointed situation, move it, see where it is happiest, even if it doesn't appear to be adhering to 'the rules'. If it works for you, go with it. Try experimenting with divisions from established plants in different areas of your garden. In many instances you will be delighted with the results, if not, it isn't a failure and you have added to your knowledge. Some varieties seem to do well with roots restricted by pots, others will soon show you if they need more space. It's all part of the fun of gardening.

Cataloguing

A few years ago we created a master database of the collection detailing as much information as we could find out about each plant. This was a major undertaking and made us appreciate the work that has gone into the creation of the **Hosta Register** - a brilliant source of information about registered varieties.

Despite much impressive work over many years to create the definitive tome on the genus *hosta*, there are still so many unanswered questions regarding the plants history. Perhaps, we don't need to get so deeply into this aspect of the genus, simply enjoy the plants for themselves, keeping that element of mystery. Botanical collectors over the centuries have introduced plants from the farthest extremities of the world, and may have done so on the fringes of acceptable collecting, often illegally, but if they had not been so dedicated to discovery, we would not have the vast choice we now have to enhance our gardens. As our weather patterns continue to change, we will be able to adapt by choosing our plants accordingly, continuing to create our own beneficial microclimates.

Our collection...

- comprises over 2000 different varieties,
- is laid out according to size and when the variety was added to the collection,
- currently lives entirely in the shade house but from 2010 will spread into the exhibition garden and a new collection house,
- is located at the nursery for anyone to visit in season.

We are adding new varieties to the collection as this newsletter is published and the details will appear early in 2010. Once again we have selected varieties from across the range and we look forward to bringing these plants on at our nursery. Physically housing the collection continues to stretch us so we have decided to build a brand new collection building on the north field of the nursery, which will almost double the current allocated space and should be big enough for a while!

Next month: we investigate the merits of different hosta propagation methods

The advice and opinions contained within this monthly newsletter have been formed over more than 30 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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h. 'Green Mouse Ears',
h. 'Holy Mouse Ears' &
h. 'Frosted Mouse Ears'.

We hope to have *h.* 'Snow Mouse' available in 2010 and extend the collection with *h.* 'Mighty Mouse', *h.* 'Mouse Tracks' and *h.* 'Pure Heart' in the near future.

H. 'Striptease' sports

The newest generation of sports from *h.* 'Striptease' includes:



H. 'Juha'



H. 'Hanky Panky'

And we hope to have more *h.* 'Kiwi Full Monty' available for sale in 2010:



H. 'Kiwi Full Monty'

In addition, we have added *h.* 'Yellow Polka Dot Bikini' to our collection, which has very distinctive yellow colouring in the spring, but look more like *h.* 'Hanky Panky' as the season progresses.