



The nursery in autumn

As 2011 draws to a close we share the latest developments at the nursery, the 'out-of-season' jobs we are doing both with the plants, and in preparation for next year...



Big boys' toys...

We have two new members of staff at the nursery - a JCB and a dumper.

Both are undergoing some much needed TLC but Robin prefers to spend his time with them as they don't tend to argue with him, or disagree over what needs doing. Roy has been helping source parts for these trusty workhorses but his idea to 'pimp' the JCB might be a longer-term project!

Reservoir maintenance

Robin has rediscovered the side of the reservoir, which has been seriously overgrown for years. He is working on tidying up the whole area around it in preparation for the construction of a replacement building for the barn, which originally occupied the spot when we kept house-cows. We hope this project will get underway sometime in 2012.

In the meantime, Robin wants to bring down the height of the reservoir sides to create a wider walkway along the top, which we can keep clear more easily. At the same time he is constructing two access ramps at opposite corners for maintenance equipment to use. We will then be able to harvest rainwater from the new building to directly feed the reservoir. Keeping the reservoir sufficiently topped up has become a real issue over the last year and the water level dropped low enough for the herons to pick off some of our precious fish.



Polytunnels



Robin has re-covered tunnels 2 and 3 this year and plans to re-cover number 1 next year. This time he has used plastic to cover the top section, down the sides to just above the benches, and used net below that, down to the ground. This should encourage better air circulation throughout the length of the tunnels, combined with the fans when the weather is particularly hot. It has been very pleasant working in tunnel 3 this season as a result of the re-covering.

Beneath the surface it is a hive of activity...

The leaves may be dying back rapidly now, but the hostas are far from inactive. Prior to entering dormancy, the plants spend a couple of months processing the food they have produced to feed their root systems, and produce fat new buds for next year. It is fun sending out orders at this time of year because when we remove the soil to wash through the roots it is good to see evidence of next year's growth potential. Dormancy only really kicks in around Christmas - sometimes earlier or later depending upon the weather, and needs to last 6 weeks minimum. As with many plant species, this is an excellent time to plant providing the weather is still reasonable.

Expanding the collection

Each year we add over 100 new varieties to the collection, sometimes the number is nearer 200! Consequently our collection tunnel is rather full and we are now planning the next stage of the collection development to help us cope with the volume of plants.

New shade house

We are planning to construct a new collection house to run from the end of the existing one, back through the orchard. When we have completed it we will be moving at least one of every variety into the new house so that we can refurbish the existing one. This year we have had a few bench collapses and the netting needs replacing, so it is due to for some attention.

Last winter we re-classified the collection according to size, so a complete re-organisation is also on the cards. We hope to do this as part of the move into the new shade house but it will be a BIG job because at least half of the collection needs re-potting.

Exhibition garden

Now we have the JCB and dumper we can start the hard landscaping aspect of this project and hopefully get the first few beds ready to receive plants.

Sales plants

We do the bulk of our sales plants dividing in the autumn for a variety of reasons, the main one being the strength of the root system at this time of year. We do focus on dividing the smaller cultivars first to give them greater time to settle prior to dormancy. This is a time-consuming job and extremely fiddly with some of the really tiny cultivars. However, it is a highly satisfying job creating next year's sales plants and planning which ones to feature in the forthcoming season.

Some slower growing varieties may need to take a back seat for a season or two in order to grow to sufficient size for sale, so we usually plan ahead at least 2-3 years.

Dividing in the autumn, after the plants have flowered, lowers the risk of spreading disease. Hostas do not suffer from many problems in this area but we have to keep a constant look out, and take as many preventative measures as we can, to avoid any problems. Once the leaves die back it is easier to divide the plants as they are less top-heavy. Some of the giant varieties need to be staked, if divided during the season, for this reason.

Check out our **December 2009** newsletter for more information on dividing.

Collection plants

We grow our mature collection plants in pots, which sit in shallow trays in the netted shade tunnel. This creates a reservoir of water for the plants to take up as required, in a normal year. However, this past year we have had to water the collection several times due to the lack of rainfall.

During November we check the condition of the parent plants and this year Roy has been keeping an eye to see when the soil would be suitably moist to last the winter. He then removes the plants from the trays, which are upturned to drain and the plants placed back on the upturned trays. We reverse the process in the spring, once the worst of the bad weather is over. Fortunately, we have had a few downpours over the past fortnight to allow us to do this, otherwise we would need to ensure they have a good watering before removing from their trays. This is a back-breaking job because some of our plants are getting enormous - good job he is a strong chap...

Important note on watering

It is important that your plants do not dry out prior to dormancy, but you don't want them waterlogged when the frosts begin. Check your pot-based plants if the temperature is threatening to drop below zero for more than a few days. If they are a bit wet, move them into a more sheltered spot and try to tilt the pot or lay it on its side, to avoid any further build up of moisture. If your plants are too big to move then it is likely they are sufficiently mature to weather the conditions.

Once the water in the soil freezes, it expands, which is what causes ceramic and earthenware pots to crack. Likewise it can damage more fragile root systems, or those that have been left too dry or wet prior to freezing. Just try to avoid extremes and your plants should be fine.

All our collection plants and immature sales plants, in the polytunnels, get frozen to the benches during the winter and we rarely experience losses.



Next month: We start a new series on the origins of popular cultivars...

Our aim is to establish 2-3 plants of each variety in the garden so we can evaluate how they grow in the ground, versus in a pot. We are already aware that quite a few older varieties do much better in the ground, and the giant varieties certainly need space to flourish.

It is an exciting project, especially in light of the development of some of the modern giant cultivars, promising enormous dimensions.

Trip to Lancashire

We are still suffering drought conditions in our part of East Anglia, so it was quite a novelty for us to visit Lancashire at the start of the month.

It was lovely to see the rivers so full but there was a lot of standing water around. For an island so small it is such a shame we cannot do more to share resources.

We were in Lancashire to attend the **Horticultural Exhibitors Association**

AGM. This is great opportunity for us to get together without the time constraints we suffer during the season. Mel joined the HEA Committee and will be helping promote the organisation over the next few years.

It does appear that, despite a few isolated examples, the season wasn't as dire as was predicted.

We do hope our fellow exhibitors had a good year and that we will see them all again in 2012

The advice and opinions contained within this monthly newsletter have been formed over more than 35 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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