

October 2023



## *A review of the 2023 season*

It seems to have gone by in a flash but we are now entering the last month of the hosta season, with the plants already showing off their autumnal colours as they prepare to enter dormancy.

It has been another really good year and encouraging that folks are still enjoying their gardening...



## *Plant fairs and events*

Once again this year we attended a lot of plant fairs and were invited to several specialist events too, which were great fun. These small plant fairs enjoy some fabulous locations and visitors are often able to combine a garden tour with the plant fair. In particular, Helmingham Hall and Somerleyton Hall are a draw in their own right. Add a specialist plant fair, where visitors can purchase plants they may have seen in the Hall gardens, and it is a recipe for success.

This year we returned to Lavenham for their Hidden Gardens event and spent a wonderful day in the Market Square in front of the Guildhall. The gardens are a great inspiration and full of surprises.

### **Lavenham Hidden Gardens**



## *Customers and friends*

One of the best aspects of our business is meeting new people and catching up with customers, family and friends. This year we kicked off our plant fairs at the Suffolk Trust's Redgrave Fen early plant fair, where David and I met Danny for the first time:



As a stall holder it is rather lovely to attend the events we do, in such beautiful surroundings. The combination, together with a picnic lunch, makes for a lovely day out despite the fact we are working. Our usual pitch at Creake Abbey Plant Lovers Day backs onto a natural lake complete with wildlife. It is under trees so technically we can do away with the pergola but it does stop tree debris and birds doing their thing over the plants.

#### **Plant Lovers Day at Creake Abbey**



We often attend events at visitor attractions such as the fabulous gardens at the Old Vicarage at East Ruston in Norfolk, where we go for summer and autumn events. Occasionally we get to attend events at fellow nurseries such as Woottens. This is always a treat as we know exactly the level of work required to host such events and the girls always manage to pull it off even though this year overnight rain had made conditions a little trickier than usual.

#### **Woottens Summer Plant Fair**



Doing smaller, specialist plant fairs allows us to be much more flexible with the range of plants we sell and we can more easily sell larger, more mature, specimens as we are not seeking to limit our plants to what we can squeeze onto a lorry.

There is just as much organisational demand on doing multiple plant fairs rather than a handful of large events but not having to prepare much more stock than you expect to sell, and keeping that stock looking great in a sheltered part of the nursery, has

Our friends Norman and Tina offer their loving home to rescue greyhounds, and Danny is their latest addition.

#### **Peat-free purchasing**

The Suffolk Trust at Redgrave now limit their plant fairs to nurseries who grow peat free plants, so we attend alongside other nurseries from the region who propagate and grow their own plants for sale using peat-free media. We are lucky in that hostas are fairly tolerant of different soils – the trick is growing them on in a peat free mix successfully year after year.

The peat free issue is something that more event organisers are taking on board and we suspect the Suffolk Trust is blazing a trail others will follow. Indeed, the RHS have put peat free at the heart of their efforts for future events, which could well see a reduction in the diversity of plants available to buy at these events.

#### **Goodbye to exhibit-based events**

As I have written previously this was our last year of exhibiting so we won't be at the Suffolk Show or Hyde Hall in 2024.

We have been exhibiting since 1993 and it has been both successful and eventful. However, times have changed and some would say the writing was on the wall at least a couple of decades ago, with the horticultural content of even the most prestigious shows dwindling steadily over time.

We always find it deeply gratifying that customers will travel miles to

always been problematic.

To protect the stock while in transit and during the events, we customarily 'tie up' the plants using sticks and ties. This is a great help when customers decide they want to pull everything out to find the one they want and helps mitigate damage to the plants, making them difficult to sell to someone else.

There is never sufficient selling space at any event and we always want to maximise the range we take, so crowded selling tables is usually the norm.

#### **Our rather crowded tables at Hethersett Plant Fair in August**



This year every plant fair has exceeded expectations and this was especially welcome as we awaited the arrival of warmer weather. Yet again we have experienced broad range of weather this year, starting with a prolonged wet and cold spring. In early May we had to cancel a garden club visit when overnight storms flooded our display tunnel. The poor group affected had had to cancel in 2022 due to the near 40 degrees of heat – hopefully they will be third time lucky in 2024.

When the weather finally turned warm in June we then had over six weeks of heat and no rain – from one extreme to the other. At least this year we didn't have the high temperatures we had in 2022 or the extreme heat southern Europe and many other places across the northern hemisphere experienced. After mid July our weather was much more like a traditional summer with warm days and intermittent rain. This was a huge blessing as it greatly reduced the need to water, just when we thought we would need to get the hoses out it rained, doing the bulk of the work for us.

#### **Our website and visiting the nursery**

Usually May and June are packed full of plant fairs every weekend and we do our best to attend as many as we can, whilst allowing room in the calendar for other events and opening the nursery. We plan to add a few more events to our calendar in 2024 and once confirmed they will be on our website.

see our National Collection. It is the only way to truly appreciate the range and scope of the genus as we were only ever able to take a representative sample to flower shows for exhibiting. Our choices increasingly relied upon their commercial value, so we could realise sufficient return on the investment needed to stage an exhibit at a show.

So, adios to the Hyde Hall Show:



Once again Roy's beautiful screens came to the rescue, making our booth light and airy but still sheltered from the grotty weather.

Goodbye too to the Suffolk Show:



This goodbye is particularly sad as I love our local show but it is simply too much for us to handle at the busiest time of year.

Now Helmingham Spring Fair is a two day event, it is very difficult to stage a display and sales tables in a single day between that and the Suffolk Show. We participate at Helmingham as part of the Suffolk

We update our website at least once a month during the year, more often in the season as plant fairs and other details are hot off the press. Please do check this out first rather than rely on word of mouth, especially when planning a visit to the nursery. Although we try every year to make our calendar as clear as possible, people don't always check and sometimes turn up when we are closed. We hate to disappoint people but we cannot be responsible for other sites that might have out of date information on it, so always check it is actually our website you are looking at. If in doubt call or email but do remember we are not always there to answer straight away, so planning ahead is the best way to ensure a successful visit.

### ***Hosta 'Frances Williams' in our Hyde Hall display***



Overall we have had a good year despite the challenging economic and climatic times. Expecting the unexpected seems to be the new mantra and we need to be poised to make the most of all eventualities whilst maintaining our Plant Heritage National Collection and ourselves, which isn't an easy balancing act. However, the consistent support of our excellent customers ensures we can continue to succeed, so thank you one and all.

Next month we will bring you up to date at the nursery as the out of season work resumes. We are hiring in some heavy plant, of the mechanical variety, to get us underway so we will keep you up to date with developments as they are made.

Speak soon,

**Team Mickfield Hostas**

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Group of National Plant Collections, so this has to be our priority event.

The irony of 2023 being the last Hyde Hall event for us was how brilliant the display plants looked at the end of the week compared with the start. Every year we have been exhibiting at Hyde Hall our plants were wrecked because of the lack of shelter and exposure to the drying Essex winds. This year the weather was wet and overcast and the plants loved it – see the photo of [H. 'Frances Williams'](#) opposite. This wonderful older cultivar is very prone to scorching if exposed, even to a slightly windy or bright spot. I was in two minds whether to take her along but she just got better as the week went on.

In order to create the wow factor in a display we need to be exhibiting more mature specimens and these are heavy beasts to manoeuvre and transport – *H. 'Frances Williams'* was among half a dozen giant cultivars we used in our Hyde Hall display, and they weighed even more after a wet week at the show.

Future displays will need to be created at the nursery, as we have done with Tunnel 3, where they can spend the entire season, or more, in situ. To this end I am planning a display to sit in Pop's Patch using some of our ex-exhibit props as a tribute to 30 years of exhibiting – watch this space.