



Difficult growers

As a break from our recent focus on great growing hostas, I thought it might be interesting to feature a number of what I would describe as collectors' plants, cultivars that are notoriously tricky to grow.

A common theme among the trickier growers is the amount of white in the leaf...



The lure of the unusual

When customers visit our nursery we are often asked for the more striking cultivars that stand out as unusual.

These 'stand out' cultivars can change year on year and illustrates the same phenomenon we used to witness at flower shows. You can design a display to showcase specific varieties but quite often these are not the ones visitors actually seize upon. Moving the plants around within a display may not change this, unless you actively hide the subject of admiration. An important aspect of attention grabbing is the choice of plants you use to 'set off' another as too much variegation can argue with itself.

There is one type of variegation that attracts the majority of people and that is a white leaf with a green or blue-green margin.

The problem that hosta cultivars with this variegation suffer from is a lack of chlorophyll in the most important part of the leaf – the centre. All the food produced by the leaf has to travel through the veins, into the midrib and then down through the petioles to the crown of the plant where it is stored within the root system. The lack of chlorophyll in the centre of the leaf inhibits this flow of sugar and so the plant struggles to feed itself.

This is the point at which I have to mention *H. 'White Feather'* as one of the most disappointing hostas to have ever been developed. You may

Slow growing cultivars

I have not always appreciated the joy of watching a plant grow – something to do with the pace of life when you are juggling a career and children. There's no denying how fast plants can grow, especially when you turn your back for a few weeks to find you need a machete rather than a strimmer to find the lawn again.

In my experience, hostas grow quite quickly once they get their roots down, so are quite satisfying.

The general rule for hostas is 5-6 years for a plant to achieve its expected dimensions.

guess, having spoken about the problem a lack of chlorophyll presents, this might be a difficult grower. Indeed, this cultivar needs to start turning green quite quickly in the spring in order to have sufficient season with which to generate food. The problem is, it doesn't reliably do this. Often the leaves just turn brown and die back, so the only way to get any nutrient into the root is to feed the plant. However, additional feed doesn't encourage good root development, rather the production of more leaves, which would help the plant if they turned green. Ultimately, what has captured the imagination is a white leaved plant, the promise of something very difficult/impossible to achieve for any length of time. We tried growing it several times but had to admit it really isn't a good plant.

A much better option is a variety with a stable section of chlorophyll to support the natural production of food for the plant, such as [H. 'Ghost Spirit'](#) – the banner photo in this newsletter. This plant is a slow grower but the blue-green margin stays stable, giving it a fighting chance.

I asked Lenore if she had any varieties that had proved tricky to grow:

Greetings, Hosta Growers,

I grow 400 in-ground hostas here in Maine. Typically they grow dependably into beautiful, mature plants. Occasionally a hosta will struggle, remaining smaller than expected. When this happens, I likely find I've planted it in a less-than-ideal spot (e.g., not enough sun). When I move it to a new location, it thrives!

Some hostas are just a bit quirky. H. 'Spilt Milk' is one of my favorite hostas, but it can be disappointing in some years, losing its typical streaked appearance. Other years it has surprised me with lovely variegation. I found this photo of 'Spilt Milk' from June of last year showing bright white streaks that look almost unreal!



Some are more rapid and, conversely, some are dreadfully slow. Also, if you try to grow any hosta in too small a container, it will never achieve its expected dimensions, so bear that in mind when making a selection to container grow.

Certain plants are going to take far longer and need much more attention to weed out reversions and ensure the variegation stays true. That's not to say they are bad growers, just that you need to be more patient and take more care.

Breeding opportunities

Although I admit I am not a fan of some of the modern cultivars being bred, I can understand the challenge to push the envelope of hosta possibilities.

One of the most sought-after characteristics for breeding is 'streaking', or 'mottled' colouring. These plants are always in demand but are often disappointingly stubborn growers.

One of the most prolific breeding parents is [H. 'Dorothy Benedict'](#), a streaked seedling from [H. 'Frances Williams'](#).

It is a slow grower and inherently unstable but has produced some beautifully stable offspring. A couple of my favourites are [H. 'Alligator Shoes'](#) and [H. 'Seducer'](#)

Another streaked lovely is H. 'Spilt Milk', which Lenore mentions opposite. It has Tokudama heritage, which is

Speaking of things unreal, Mel is addressing this month the very misleading photos of hostas in some advertisements. I'm attaching a shocking, contrived photo found recently. Please do not be misled by such phony advertising!

Happy gardening and best wishes,
Lenore

It is really interesting how Lenore's *H. 'Spilt Milk'* returns some years with lovely variegation and other years without. Our *H. 'Spilt Milk'* lost its variegation permanently. We put it down to prolonged container growing but as it was so fickle, we didn't feel brave enough to try it in the ground. I wish I had tried that instead of admitting defeat after several years of no show with that distinctive variegation.

When is a hosta not a hosta?

As Lenore mentions, I thought it would be useful to flag up the increasingly wild advertising of 'hostas' lurking out there on the Internet. Image manipulation is not new but it is far easier to achieve these days with decent image editing software in even the cheapest of smart phones. To illustrate this, I have used the photo of *H. 'Snake Eyes'* from last month's newsletter and simply adjusted the colour balance to create the kind of images being routinely posted online as new hosta varieties:



I'm sure you will all recognise the only genuine image among them but you might be surprised to hear how often we get enquiries for these types of outrageously coloured options. We are only too pleased to let people know what is going on but for all those who ask the question, there are probably many more who do not think to ask advice, and get caught out. Buyer beware!

Only last weekend I had a couple ask me to name the hosta they had grown from hosta corms sent from Japan. I almost suggested they remove the very large weed in the pot because I couldn't see the hosta they were pointing out! I did make the polite suggestion that they stop looking online and instead choose to buy their plants from growers so

probably why it is so slow as the variegation is so fine as to not interfere with the photosynthesis process.

We lost our last piece of *H. 'Spilt Milk'* several years ago and haven't sought to replace it. Instead, we have focused on *H. 'Pistache'* as this sport of *H. 'Spilt Milk'* has a solid green margin surrounding the streaked leaf centre:



This seems to stabilise the variegation and allows the plant to come back every year looking as it should. As it is another slow grower divisions are not often available.

Hosta 'Ghostmaster' (below) and *H. 'Ghost Spirit'* (in the banner photo) are both similarly variegated but the colour is more of a blue-green than the rich greens of *H. 'Pistache'*:



Hosta 'Arctic Circle' is an interesting variety as it starts the season mottled all over and then develops a more stable variegation for the rest of the season. It looks like it is colouring itself in as it goes.

they can see what they are getting, whilst waving my arm around the beautiful hostas I had bought with me for sale. I watched as they took my advice to ask a colleague with a much broader knowledge of plants to identify their plant. They seemed pleased with what he told them – it was a crowfoot grass!

And, here is the photo Lenore mentioned in her piece – what can you say?



Not a hosta...

It doesn't stop there though... I remember having a debate with a visitor to Gardeners' World Live one year, who challenged me as to why I wasn't selling the hosta 'Jack Frost'. In the end I had to get him to show me the plant he was referring to in another display. I even had to get my colleague, whose display it was, to confirm it was indeed a brunnera, because they simply didn't believe me.

One of the most frequently mistaken plants for hostas are begonias.

When Begonia 'Escargot' was launched we had plenty of wags asking why we weren't stocking and showing it. Plenty of people refused to believe it wasn't a hosta. It's no surprise there is a lot of confusion with all the misinformation lurking out there on the Internet.

When asked for more brightly coloured hostas I tell people to investigate begonias instead. Indeed, I watched in horror a recent sales video of an extremely vibrantly red veined plant being sold as a hosta. It was quite clearly a begonia, so I do hope they don't manage to con too many people with that one.

Speak soon

Team Mickfield Hostas

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The most fleetingly streaked variegated variety we hold in our collection is [H. 'Photo Finish'](#), which you have to catch really early in the season before it turns blue-green for the rest of the year.

This is probably the inspiration for the name.

See for yourself

Why not search for 'red-veined hostas' yourself. Click on the 'images' tab and then you will see the multitude of outrageous claims being made for the most hideous coloured hostas. You might even find the video I mention in the last paragraph below.

In between these images you will find some genuine ones. I am not going to risk calling out the channels peddling these plants but many are household names, and should do more to stop such misinformation spreading.

It could be depressing but the images are so appalling as to be amusing, so we do just that and have a good laugh. There is very little we can do about it other than commiserate with people who have been caught out and hope to spread the word about this practice.