

HOW MANY HOSTAS DOES A GARDEN NEED?

Diana Bellerby

Probably half a dozen would be adequate, but unfortunately this seems to be a genus with addictive properties. My own collection has now reached well over double that number and seems to continue to grow. Each one is distinct in appearance and habit, so calling a halt seems unlikely, with temptation at every show and nursery.

All my hostas are grown in black ceramic pots, each with a band of copper about two-thirds of the way up. Their compost is a mix of multipurpose and horticultural grit, plus a little slow-release fertiliser at planting time, just to get them going. This is topped up with the same sharp-edged grit and (fingers crossed) the combination of copper and grit has avoided any slug or snail damage so far. Care has to be taken that the growing leaves do not touch a wall or an overhanging plant, as this creates a bridge for the little blighters. The containers sit in a position which gets some sun in the morning, but shade thereafter. In my experience, although hostas are happy in moist conditions, they are very forgiving if watering is forgotten.

As well as their variety, hostas are equally fascinating for their history. Much of this is relatively recent, from their origins in north-east Asia, across the world to enthusiastic breeders in the US, and now in Europe too.

Yet two of my larger plants have a UK origin; *Hosta* 'Hadspen Blue' and *Hosta* 'June'. They are both from the Tardiana Group, which means they are the result of Eric Smith's breeding programme of 1976, in which he initially crossed *H. 'Tardiflora'* with *H. sieboldiana* var. *elegans* 'Alba'. Although the original cross, 'Halcyon', was blue like 'Hadspen Blue', subsequent crosses created a wide range of colours, including the reliably green and white 'June'. There are now numerous other progeny of this group.

The deep green leaves of *H. 'Praying Hands'* point directly to the sky. It has an interesting history: it was found loitering, unidentified, in a nursery in Minnesota in the 1980s by local gardener, Jerry Williams. Over several years he divided and gave away plants of this unusual form, named by his daughter as its upright leaves reminded her of Albrecht Dürer's etching of the same name. After much investigation, it is thought to be the result of a bee cross-pollinating (possibly) *H. fortuneii* var. *aureomarginata* and *H. lancifolia*. In 2011 it received the American Hosta Society's award for Hosta of the Year.



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The glaucous foliage of *H. 'Hadspen Blue'*



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H. 'Praying Hands' displays rippled, lanceolate foliage

© David J. Stang



The beautifully subtle variegation of *H.* 'Fire and Ice'

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With large, pucker-edged, lime-green leaves, *H.* 'Eye Catcher' certainly lives up to its name

© Green Mountain Hostas



A little sweetie: *H.* 'Blue Mouse Ears'

Minnesota seems to be a hotbed of hosta breeding. Hans Hansen hails from there; the man responsible for hybridising *H.* 'Fire and Ice', a striking white with dark green edging and streaks of paler green. This variety was introduced to the market in 1999 by Walter's Nursery in Michigan, which was also responsible for *H.* 'Fireworks', a very similar cultivar but with narrower leaves.

Investigating the origin of *H.* 'Eye Catcher' online - a gold, puckered leaf variety - I came across an article illustrating the garden of breeder Randy Goodwin from Indiana, on the American Hosta Society's website. Wow! The photographs showed a symphony of green, yellow and white in a gorgeous Japanese-style setting, clearly demonstrating why hostas have become the most popular garden plant in the US. Goodwin has become known as 'the man who paints with hostas'.

And then we have the small, or miniature, types, which are irresistibly addictive. For example, there is the 'Mouse' series, characterised by heart-shaped leaves which curl inwards, reminiscent of a mouse's ears. The first of these, a sport of *H.* 'Blue Cadet', is 'Blue Mouse Ears', registered by Emile and Jane Deckert. It became Hosta of the Year in 2008. Since then, numerous offspring have been bred, including 'Smiling Mouse', a 2016 Jan Van den Trop introduction from the Netherlands. A recent acquisition of mine, it bears gold and green, highly curled leaves. I must now look out for 'Ruffled Pole Mouse', this year's [2018] introduction from the same source, with much whiter variegation.

Looking into the origins of a small, upright green-leaved form with white edges, known as *H.* 'Stiletto', I discovered a tale of possible fraud and skulduggery. Introduced in 1987 by a highly successful commercial hosta seller, Paul Aden, as

one of his creations, he was later accused of purloining plants hybridised by others and passing them off as his own. A huge scandal ensued in American hosta circles, which makes for a fascinating story to read online. If you're interested in finding out more about hostas, hostalibrary.org is a must for the enthusiast.

And to answer the initial question? Randy Goodwin believes 500 different varieties is a good number!

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