

Hostas' popularity ready to soar

Ohio grower says landscape pros should educate themselves to the growing variety and versatility of one of America's favorite perennials.

by Ron Hall, Senior Editor

■ The hosta is a flowering plant that landscape pros should become more familiar with for reasons you'll discover here. But first an anecdote from a top Mideast hosta grower:

Van Wade says that in 1986 he had a huge dog on his Wade & Gatton Nurseries in rural north central Ohio. He says it weighed about 140 pounds and one hot day that summer it proudly deposited a dead ground hog at his front door.

After a while Wade's wife, Shirley, protested about having a dead ground hog in their yard, and commanded Van to bury it. Obediently he did. He shoveled the ripening woodchuck into a hole near their big white frame farm house; then he planted a hosta over it.

Although it's been nine years, Wade still grins every time he points to that hosta and comments about its prodigious growth. The huge yellow leaves of the



Ohio's Van Wade with his 'Sum & Substance' hosta, the world's largest.



Hostas show incredible diversity in size, color, shape, according to expert Van Wade.

hosta are each about the size of a tennis racket. They give the plant (variety: 'Sum & Substance') an 11-foot span at its base.

"It's the biggest hosta in the whole world, and it's probably the most photographed hosta in the world too," he declares.

That specimen hosta is just one of an amazing 1,500 varieties of hostas that the Wades have collected. Many came from hosta hybridizers, but Van has developed a few himself.

The hosta is a "plant of the future" because of its amazing variety and versatility, says Van Wade.

Originally from Asia, the hosta varies in size and color from the huge yellow 'Sum & Substance' variety to the tiny-leaved 'Poo Poo', a blue/green miniature that spreads no larger than dinner plate. The different shapes and textures of leaves among varieties is almost as remarkable as the differences in sizes and colors.

Hostas are easy to care for and, generally, require minimal maintenance. They're winter hardy, develop few pest problems (apart from slugs or black vine weevils), and tolerate shade well. Most hostas, in fact, do best in a dappled shade. If they can

get some morning sun they prosper. Growing in well-drained, but moist soil they'll form large clumps from basal rhizomes and stolons.

Because they tolerate different growing conditions and because they're so diverse, hostas fit well in many landscape areas. There are varieties that qualify as specimen plants, ground-cover, and varieties that can be used with shrubbery, near a pond, in the perennial border or as edging plants.

But, with all this praise, the hosta's main attribute is its beautiful foliage. This lush foliage makes the hosta a perennial to enjoy in spring, summer and fall. Mid-summer blossoms that range from snow white to blue are attractive too, but really just a bonus. (The blossoms of some varieties are quite fragrant.)

Wade says landscape pros need to educate themselves about hostas to keep up with the gardening public.

"Many landscapers probably only know 5 to 10 varieties of hostas," he says. "That's just scratching the surface. In fact, we're all just scratching the surface because as the public sees more gardens with different varieties of hostas, there's going to be more demand for them."

Van says he and his wife began building the hosta gardens, and adjacent gardens containing about 1,000 varieties of daylilies, just over 10 years ago. He says many of their ideas come from other "wonderful inspirational gardens" that they visit.

Their gardens, located just east of the tiny town of Bellville, Ohio, are open to the public Monday through Saturday. They are a part of the 1,000-acre operation that is a large regional grower of shade and ornamental trees.

—To learn more about hostas, contact The American Hosta Society, 7802 NE 63rd St., Vancouver, WA 98662. There are also a number of state and regional hosta societies.