



*Hostas are a natural problem-solver in many landscapes and can be a valuable part of a low-maintenance design.*

*Do you know the best varieties?*

**B**ack in the 1600s, a gardening craze took over Europe. Everyone planted tulips — billions of them. Garden history books called it the period of Tulipmania.

We are in the middle (or just the beginning) of a period that may eventually be referred to as the age of hostas, grasses, daylilies and wildflowers. Nurseries that didn't offer any of these plants 10 (even five) years ago are now listing 10 or 15 of each, page after page in their catalogs, with few descriptions for buyers to make good choices. I think this fad is nursery driven, particularly the hostas, because so many of them make such a good looking, saleable container plant in such a short time (two years or less) from cuttings, divisions or from seed. Hosta stands tall among the most valuable genera in the landscape world.

#### **Sun and shade problem-solvers**

Through years of use, hostas can be used as:

- ▶ specimen plants
- ▶ ground cover in shade
- ▶ edging along a shady walk
- ▶ bold contrasting texture or color
- ▶ source of attractive bloom in the summer and early fall months

▶ light, bright foliage in a dark spot, around ponds or along stream banks (not in overly moisture retentive soils or standing water)

▶ as one of various architectural shapes (upright arching such as 'Sagae' or 'Krossa Regal' or tight mounds like 'Mount Royal' or 'Golden Tiara').

The following varieties are among what I consider to be the best, categorized by leaf and plant size, type of leaf and color of foliage.

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# Hosta-ile

## MADE FOR THE SHADE

# territory

By ANDREW SPARKS

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**Dwarf/Miniature** — Leaves smaller than 3 in. by 3 in., plants develop into a 15-in. mound or less.

▶ *Hosta venusta* or 'Tiny Tears' — green leaves; less than 1.5-in. violet flowers early in July.

▶ *H. venusta* 'Variegata' — leaves have green margins and white centers.

▶ 'Golden Tiara' — heart-shaped, green leaves with gold to chartreuse margins; long-blooming, deep blue flower to 22-in. height in mid-July.

▶ 'Dorset Blue' — blue, round leaves with heavy slug resistant substance; 12-in. tall, white flowers in early August.

**Small** — leaves to 6 in., plants grow to 24-in. across.

▶ 'Raspberry Sorbert' — dark green leaves; very neat and uniform; bloom stems reddish, striking with the violet flowers; slug resistant.

▶ 'Ginko Craig' and 'Allan P. McConnell' — leaves have white margins, lanceolate leaves; 'Ginko Craig' is brighter, and has long-blooming flowers in August; 'Allan P. McConnell' is neater.

▶ 'Kabitan' and 'Lemon Lime' — bold, bright, lanceolate, chartreuse leaves; purple flowers to 18 in. in August; Lemon Lime easier to grow, more slug resistant; Kabitan is more dramatic.

▶ 'Gold Edger' — is similar, but with white flowers.

▶ 'Blue Cadet' and 'Blue Danube' — very blue heart-shaped leaves; light lavender flowers in July; slug resistant.

**Medium** — leaves to 10 in., plants to 36-in. across, 18 to 24-in. tall.

▶ 'Invincible' — shiny, dark green leaf; 3-inch fragrant flowers in August on 33-in. tall stems.

▶ 'Mount Royal' — similar to 'Invincible,' but with lighter green foliage and a tolerance of full sun; like 'Ginko Craig' mature plant has hundreds of flower stems.

▶ 'Blue Dimples,' 'Blue Wedgewood,' 'Halcyon' — white flowers; blue, heavy substance, slug-resistant foliage; 'Wedgewood' is larger; 'Halcyon' is smoother leafed; 'Dimples' is smallest.

▶ 'Gold Standard' — leaves golden with a narrow, bright dark green, irregular margin; can sun scald; pale lavender 18-in. flower stems.

▶ 'Patriot' — perhaps the best of the white margined Hostas; 1997 Hosta of the Year; very dramatic with lavender flowers; 'Francee' has narrower white margins.

▶ 'So Sweet' — white margined Hosta without as heavy a substance as 'Patriot'; very fragrant nearly white flowers; 3/4 sun.

**Large** — leaves to 18-in. long and 15-in. across, foliage clumps to 7 ft. across and larger.

▶ *H. plantaginea* 'Aphrodite' — average green leaves; double flowered, very fragrant on top of 30-in. tall stems in late August into September.

▶ 'Blue Angel' and *H. sieboldiana* 'Elegans' — very blue leaves; 'Angel' leaves pointed looking; 'Elegans' leaves broader and more tropical looking; flowers on 'Angel' to 44 in., blooming in mid-June into July; 'Elegans' reach 22 to 30 in. and are not impressive (I would cut them off).

▶ *H. fluctuans* 'Variegata' 'Sagae' — my favorite hosta; blue-green leaves with wide, creamy yellow margins that become more cream colored into the season; heavy slug resistant substance without heavy corrugation; upright vase shape makes it a unique specimen; 4-in. lavender flowers; 2000 Hosta of the Year.

▶ 'Krossa Regal' — bluish-gray foliage becoming gray-green in late summer; unique vase shape like 'Sagae'; lavender flowers on 5-ft. tall stems in August.

▶ 'Great Expectations' — irregular blue-green leaf with light yellow-cream center; perhaps the best of the large-leaved hostas with lighter color in the center; the brightness and the streakiness of the center make this an eye catcher; 30-in. flower stems do not enhance the look of the plant; slug resistant.

### They take time, like good wine

Hostas, like most other perennials, change and improve with age. These descriptions are for mature plants, but if what you buy doesn't match the description, don't be alarmed. It usually takes two years for leaf size to develop and five years for plant size. Margins will also increase over time. If it is vastly different, ask your supplier.

If the flowers are not of particular benefit to the appearance or design value of the plant, cut them off before opening. They will drop petals onto the leaves and may stick there, diminishing the foliage value significantly. Flowers are unimportant to 'Dorset Blue,' 'Blue Cadet,' 'Blue Danube,' 'Patriot,' 'Gold Standard,' *H. sieboldiana* 'Elegans' and 'Great Expectations.'

Other hostas should have their bloom stems removed following bloom fade and their leaves washed off. But watch out with the water — too hard a spray or too frequent watering can dilute the waxy gray and blueness of the foliage.

### Getting fast growth

In my experience, the quickest to reach their design size are 'Ginko Craig,' 'Lemon Lime,' 'Mount Royal,' 'Blue Angel,' 'Sagae' and 'So Sweet.' The slowest are 'Dorset Blue,' 'Kabitan' and 'Aphrodite.'

For rapid development of a hosta, dig a hole four times as wide and 1.5 times the depth of its container or root spread, backfill with a mix of 1/3 peat moss or leaf humus, 1/3 topsoil and 1/3 excavated soil from the hole. Set the plant at the height of the existing grade and mulch with 1 in. of shredded hardwood bark. Plant should be sited in 50% shade as full sun or shade are usually not conducive to hosta development or appearance.

Until the next time, hosta la vista, baby!

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