



Growing Hostas

Hostas are among the oldest and most popular perennials in the world, having come to us from China, Korea, and Japan. They are available in a variety of colors, sizes, leaf shapes and textures, and flower colors. Every year, new varieties join the hundreds that already exist, making selection fun, but challenging.

Hostas are best known as shade-loving plants. However, some varieties thrive in partial to full sun. Though hostas usually are grown for their foliage, some have attractive, fragrant flowers. Flower colors vary from white to pink to lavender and violet-blue. Bloom time varies from early summer to fall.

In addition to enhancing shaded landscapes, hostas serve a number of functions. The foliage of many varieties provides a striking contrast or background for other plants. Many hostas make excellent groundcovers and are useful for stabilizing shaded slopes. Some specimen hostas deserve their own special garden spot where they can show off their striking leaf color, leaf texture, or flowers.

When selecting hostas for the garden, consider foliage color, size, and other plant characteristics.

Colors

One way to classify hostas is by foliage color. Hostas are available in shades of blue, green, yellow, and numerous variegations. All colors are available in a wide variety of leaf sizes, shapes, and textures.

Blue hostas generally require heavy shade to retain their blue color and prevent fading. Blues blend garden colors together and create a restful effect. They also add contrast to the gold and green varieties.

Green hostas provide a good transition between blooming perennials. Green varieties thrive in partial to full shade.

Yellow and gold leafed varieties brighten up garden areas. They work well with brightly colored flowers or gold-margined hostas. Most of the yellow and gold leafed hosta varieties develop their best leaf color in partial sun (approximately 4 to 6 hours). In partial to heavy shade, leaf color is often yellow-green.

Variegated hostas provide an interesting change from solid green plantings—if they are not overused. White and cream variegations work well next to pale flowers. Yellow and gold variegated hostas combine well with brightly colored flowers. Varieties with large amounts of variegation should be planted in shade to prevent leaves from burning.

Sizes

The American Hosta Society classifies hosta varieties in six sizes based on the height of the mature plant:

Dwarf—less than 4 inches

Miniature—4 to 6 inches

Small—6 to 10 inches

Medium—10 to 18 inches

Large—18 to 28 inches

Giant—greater than 28 inches

Keep in mind, however, that the mature size of any variety is affected by cultural conditions.

Dwarf and miniature hostas are ideal for rock gardens, patios, and other small garden spaces. Small and medium-sized hostas make good groundcovers. Large and giant varieties are good background plants.

Growing tips

Hostas are hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 3 through 8. Although they are easy to grow, good site selection and proper cultural practices are important. Hostas prefer well-drained, fertile soils that contain high levels of organic matter. Soils that contain high levels of clay or sand can be improved by incorporating organic matter (compost, peat, rotted oak leaves, etc.). In poorly drained sites, the best solution may be to construct a raised bed.

For best performance, hostas need a consistent supply of moisture throughout the growing season. Dry conditions inhibit plant growth and may lead to scorching (browning) of leaf margins. To help conserve soil moisture, apply a 2- to 3-inch-layer of wood chips, shredded bark, or other mulch. Also, water plants during prolonged dry periods.

Hostas do not require heavy fertilization. A single application of an all-purpose garden fertilizer, such as 10-10-10, in spring as growth begins to emerge should be sufficient.

Most hostas do not need winter protection if they have been in the ground for at least one full growing season. However, a winter mulch is often beneficial to hostas planted in late summer or early fall. Repeated freezing and thawing of the soil in the winter months may heave recently planted hostas out of the ground, causing serious damage. Applying several inches of clean, weed-free straw, pine needles, or other mulch in mid to late November should provide adequate winter protection.

Some hosta varieties have attractive flowers. Others are rather unattractive and can be removed as they form. If plants are allowed to bloom, remove the spent flower stalks. Deadheading improves plant appearance and promotes plant vigor.

Propagation

If additional plants are desired, most hostas can be divided after 3 to 5 years. Spring is the best time to divide plants. However, it is possible to divide hostas from spring until late summer.



In spring, dig up the entire clump as soon as the leaves begin to emerge. (Emerging leaves are bullet-shaped and are often referred to as “points” or “noses.”) Carefully divide the clump into sections with a sharp knife. Each section should have at least 2 or 3 points (leaves) and a good portion of the crown and root system. Replant immediately.

Insects and diseases

Hostas are relatively pest-free, but slugs and cutworms can be problems. Slugs feed at night, eating the leaf tissue between the veins. They also leave a slimy, mucous trail. Cutworms also feed at night. Slug and cutworm damage is most severe on thin-leafed hosta varieties.

Several strategies can be used to control slugs. Small numbers can be controlled by hand-picking. Since slugs are most active at night, handpicking is best done at night with a flashlight. Traps also can be used to control slugs. A trap can be a piece of wood or asphalt shingle. Place the object on the ground where slugs have been feeding. Lift up the trap after 1 or 2 days and destroy any slugs hiding under it. Pesticides (molluscicides) likely will be necessary to control large slug populations.

Hostas are susceptible to several diseases. Two serious diseases are petiole rot, caused by the fungus *Sclerotium rolfsii* var. *delphinii*, and hosta virus X. The key to controlling petiole rot and hosta virus X is not to introduce these diseases into the landscape. Carefully inspect all hostas before buying and planting them. Purchase only healthy, vigorous plants from reputable garden centers and nurseries. Foliar diseases, such as anthracnose and *Alternaria* leaf spot, cause aesthetic damage, but do not kill plants. Additional information on diseases of hostas can be found in SUL-14 Hosta Diseases and Pests.

For more information

For more information on plant selection, cultural practices, and environmental quality, contact your local Iowa State University Extension office or visit these Web sites:

[ISU Extension publications](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/store)

www.extension.iastate.edu/store

[ISU Horticulture](http://www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu)

www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu

[Reiman Gardens](http://www.reimangardens.iastate.edu)

www.reimangardens.iastate.edu

Prepared by Richard Jauron and Cindy Haynes, extension horticulturists, and Diane Nelson, extension communication specialist. Photos courtesy of Cindy Haynes. Layout by Jane Lenahan, extension graphic designer.

File: Hort and LA 2-1

This institution is an equal opportunity provider. For the full non-discrimination statement or accommodation inquiries, go to www.extension.iastate.edu/diversity/ext.