



Choosing and Growing Hostas

OH 83

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No wonder hostas are one of the most popular perennials. They are very easy, adaptable, and relatively fool-proof. To know how to grow them successfully, you should know a couple of cultural needs. To know how to choose from the many available, and to grow them at their best, there are a few more facts.

If you're like me, when faced with hundreds of choices and many looking so similar, your eyes may glaze over. Yet a good place to start is those cultivars (cultivated varieties) that have been chosen as hostas of the year by the American Hosta Society (www.hosta.org). These have proven good in all parts of the country, are popular, affordable, and available.

AHS hostas of the year:

- 'So Sweet'— 1996 winner, 20" tall x 36", green with yellow to white margins
- 'Patriot'— 1997, 24" tall x 36", green with wide white margins
- 'Fragrant Bouquet'— 1998, 18" tall x 36", green with irregular wide light yellow margins
- 'Paul's Glory'— 1999, 24" tall x 48-60", chartreuse to gold with dark green margin
- 'Sage'— 2000, 36" tall x 60-72", dark green with gold margins, large textured leaves
- 'June'— 2001, 15" tall x 30", dark blue with yellow shades and dark green margins
- 'Guacamole'— 2002, 24" tall x 48", gold and shiny with irregular green margins
- 'Regal Splendor'— 2003, 30" tall x 40", blue green edged creamy white
- 'Sum and Substance'— 2004, 36" tall x 60", large leaves chartreuse to gold, puckered
- 'Striptease'— 2005, 20" tall x 36", green with wide gold centers, white streaks between

In addition to these winners, when choosing other hostas consider their ultimate size, the cost, and what they look like. Size may be important if you have a small or limited space. Many new introductions can be quite expensive so, unless you are a collector and want the newest, you may choose some similar and much less expensive selections. Finally, some just may be more appealing to you than others.

If you have dense shade, you might want more variegated ones to help brighten such areas. Keep in mind that many of these will have brighter colors in more light. If you only have full sun, choose selections better suited for high light.

Many growers rate their favorites too. Just keep in mind these are often subjective, and what may perform well in a nursery in another part of the country may not perform as well in your own landscape. Hostas are hardy in USDA zones 3 through 8, meaning they grow in most areas except deserts and the tropics or subtropics. They need about 700 hours below 40°F to meet their dormancy requirements, which they get in these zones.

Most blue hostas have better growth and color in cooler regions. Certain hybrids (from *plantaginea* and *montana* species) may come up too early in the spring in the far north, so get freeze damage. Fragrant hybrids (usually from *plantaginea* species) generally tolerate more heat and sun, but may need longer growing seasons than in the far north to flower.

Keep in mind that with hostas, whichever you choose, you really can't go wrong. Plant in bright shade, give plenty of space for their mature size, water if dry, fertilize occasionally, and you should have beautiful plants for many years. Unless plants need moving, spacing, or have no stems in the centers, they won't need dividing.

Make sure you read plant labels or other written information to learn how large they will get, so you can space them appropriately. Too close, and you'll be moving large hostas in a couple years.

The two main points to growing hostas successfully concern light and water. As mentioned under choices, leaf color of variegated cultivars may vary with the amount of light. There are also some selections, usually marked in catalogs or ask your perennial grower, that tolerate more light. Often in the north, hostas can be grown in high light if provided plenty of water, otherwise leaves will burn (discoloring and turning brown on edges).

Hostas suggested for higher light conditions:

August Moon	Inniswood	So Sweet
Fortunei Aureomarginata	Invincible	Squash Casserole
Fragrant Bouquet	Minuteman	Sum and Substance
Francee	Patriot	Summer Fragrance
Gold Regal	plantaginea and hybrids	Sun Power
Gold Standard	Regal Splendor	Sundance
Golden Sculpture	Rising Sun	Undulata Albomarginata
Honeybells	Royal Standard	Undulata Univatata

Keep in mind that to look their best, hostas generally need more water than the rain provides in an average year. This is true especially if growing under trees which take up so much soil moisture. Hostas are native to Korea, Japan, and coastal China-- areas generally cooler and wetter than most parts of the U.S. These areas receive an average 50-60 inches of rain a year, compared to about 30-40 inches for the midwest, and 40-50 inches for the south. Only the deep south tends to get over 50 inches of rain a year. Hostas need this extra water when they are growing, but not in winter when they are dormant. Heavy and wet soils in winter and spring can lead to crown and root rots. Best for them is a well-drained soil, with plenty of organic matter.

Other cultural considerations for even better plants concern fertilizer and problems. With so many different opinions on fertilizer, the best advice probably is to provide what is lacking in the soil. This can be determined by a soil test, with kits available from your Extension office or many complete garden stores. This can help you avoid applying too much, either burning the plant leaves, or having it wash into water supplies. If you fertilize, this is best done in spring as the plants begin to grow.

The main problem with hostas is slugs chewing the leaves at night. Poison baits can be used, but I've heard of several cases where these poisoned and almost killed the family pets as well. Less toxic controls include copper strips (slugs seem not to cross the copper), dishes of beer (in which the slugs drown), providing more air circulation (less damp) among the plants, or placing boards in the garden (slugs crawl under these by day, and so can be found and collected).

Deer may also eat hostas. Repellents may keep them away (taste, odor, sound, or light) if they're not too hungry. Otherwise you may have to fence the area with a high fence or electric wire. Keep mulch away from plants, especially in winter, to avoid voles from living nearby and eating the plants.