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Features

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All Hostas are NOT Created Equally

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Left: Hosta montana Aureomarginata is always one of the first to emerge in spring. Be sure to protect it from late frosts in the north. Center: 2014 Hosta of the Year Abiqua Drinking Gourd and other blue hostas retain coloration better when grown under 70% shade. Right: Despite its light coloration, Hosta Island Breeze is a fast-growing hosta that establishes its roots and fills out a pot quickly.

With their ease of growth, variety of plant shapes and sizes available, and diversity of leaf colorations, hostas are one of the most desirable perennials for gardens with partial to full shade. In the landscape, the foliage can provide a bold presence while softening the appearance of well-defined areas.

Hostas form attractive mounds of basal foliage with leaves ranging in shape from narrow elliptic to very broad ovate or heart-shaped. The leaf texture may be shiny, smooth, or puckered and consists of numerous colorations of yellow, white, greens to blue-green with and without distinct veining or variegation.

They produce lily-like, bell shaped, white, lilac or purple colored flowers on stalks that rise above the basal foliage in midsummer. Cultivars of *H. plantaginea* parentage produce fragrant flowers, which are great for attracting hummingbirds into the garden.

There are literally thousands of hosta cultivars, hybrids and species to choose from. Though they're all hostas, they certainly don't all grow the same way. Given their diversity, it's beneficial to break them down into

categories, such as fast growers, late-emergers, best-finished sizes and crop timing for finished growers. This article provides listings of various categories of hostas, which will prove handy for any grower-retailer producing, marketing or selling hostas.

Shade Requirements

Although hostas are marketed as shade perennials, most of them don't grow as well in full shade as you might expect. Hostas are shade tolerant and will do well in varying amounts of shade, yet they still like to receive some sun during the day. In the landscape, pick shady areas with diffuse sunlight and avoid exposure to full sun in the afternoons.

During production, sites with 50% shade cloth are usually sufficient for most cultivars.

Hostas with blue foliage, such as the 2014 American Hosta Growers Hosta of the Year winner Abiqua Drinking Gourd, should be grown with more shade (70% shade cloth) to help them retain leaf coloration throughout the season. Hostas with chartreuse or yellow foliage such as Dancing Queen can typically tolerate more exposure for longer durations to direct sunlight.

Slow Spring Emergers

It's perfectly normal for hosta cultivars to emerge at significantly different times in the spring. Some varieties will emerge rather quickly, while others are slower to appear. There are several reasons why hostas re-emerge at various rates in the spring.

Hostas require a particular amount of cold temperatures for them to break dormancy; each cultivar has its own requirement regarding the length of vernalization it needs prior to spring emergence. Most hostas require 6 to 10 weeks of cold temperatures (below 35F/1C). Plants that haven't received the appropriate amount of cold will take significantly longer to emerge.

Plant genetics also greatly affect spring emergence. Hosta cultivars with *tokudama* (Abiqua Drinking Gourd) or *fortunei* (Striptease) parentage generally emerge slower than varieties with *montana* (Aureomarginata), *plantaginea* (Sum and Substance), *sieboldiana* (Elegans) and *undulata* (Albomarginata) parentage. Since most hostas are sold as hybrids, it can be difficult to learn a cultivar's parentage in advance and the exact origins are often unclear. Growers learn over the years how their crops behave and plan accordingly.

During production, it's helpful to group hostas by how quickly they emerge in the spring. Cultivars that emerge quickly can be placed in one environment and grown cooler, while slow-emerging cultivars can be placed in a warmer environment to promote faster emergence. When grown in this manner, all types of hostas can be marketed at approximately the same times.

Fast Versus Slow Growers

Hosta cultivars grow at various rates; some grow quickly while others are slow. Types of hostas with slow-growing habits usually encompass the miniature hostas (Examples: Alakazaam, Church Mouse and Cherry Tomato), tetraploids hostas (Rhino Hide) and cultivars with lots of white coloration (Dancing Stars). Faster growing hostas include Empress Wu, Sum and Substance, Vulcan, Island Breeze and Royal Wedding.

Changes in Hosta Appearance

Growers should note that hostas that have not yet been vernalized often appear different than more mature plants that have undergone a cold treatment. Young, non-vernalized plants will often not display their true variegation patterns, coloration and leaf texture and/or morphology, which are characteristic of each cultivar. Following vernalization and through successive years, the plants will display more of their true characteristics.

Container Sizes and Crop Timing

To produce the highest-quality hostas, it's important to allow adequate time for rooting and bulking. In most cases, it's best to pot up hosta plugs during the summer (June or July is ideal) prior to spring sales. Hostas planted in this manner develop more eyes, have a better developed root system and display more mature characteristics than plants grown under shorter time frames.

Miniature hostas are best produced in small, quart-sized containers. Hostas of small to medium stature can be easily produced in quart, trade gallon and premium gallon containers. Large- and giant-sized hostas are well suited for production in premium gallon or 2-gal. containers.

Finishing times will vary from one cultivar to the next. In general, it takes 8 to 10 weeks to root out 1-gal. containers of hostas planted from 20-ct plugs or 16 to 20 weeks to root out 1 gal.-sized containers using non-vernalized 72-ct plugs. Hostas can be grown from bareroot planted in the late spring or early summer before they're to be sold or potted in the late winter or early spring while they're dormant.

Understanding the differences between cultivars can help growers improve their success with producing hostas. With the diversity of leaf colorations, plant habits, flowering characteristics and ease of growth, hostas will likely remain one of the most popular perennials of the 21st century. **GP**

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