



Re-classifying miniatures

This month we report on the recent update, from the American Hosta Society, on the subject of classifying miniature varieties of hosta. The latest change brings many more varieties into the miniature category - read on...

Miniature hostas

Over the past few years miniature hostas have become very popular, especially among growers of alpine plants and bonsai.

We have always classified varieties in our collection according to height of the plant mound. This is primarily because most customers want to know how large the mature plant will be, so they can understand where best to plant it in the garden. This is fine for larger plants but a more refined method of classification is required for miniature varieties. Here leaf blade size is just as important as plant mound size. This is a particularly important consideration for growers of alpines and bonsai trees and shrubs, as they are often looking for accent plants that are in scale with their other planting.

Latest miniature list

In August this year the American Hosta Society (AHS) published its latest list of miniature hostas. It is interesting to see the AHS proposing that **h. 'Blue Mouse Ears'** (below) be considered the de-facto miniature standard.

From August onwards the AHS mini forum has stated that a miniature variety should have a **leaf blade area of no more than 6sq inches** (38.7sq centimetres).



This variety grows so well that it has won over customers sceptical about growing smaller plants.

An important result of the AHS having 'upped' their miniature sizing, is that the classification includes more varieties, in fact, there are now so many that it would be a bit silly to list them all in this newsletter.

Instead we invite you to take a look for yourselves - **follow this link**. We have updated our **online collection list** (organised by size), to include those classified by the AHS as miniature.

Caveat to the classification

The AHS criteria is simple to operate. However, the classification should be used in conjunction with the plant mound height for more clarity. This is because there are some varieties now classed as miniature that grow in excess of 8-10 inches high, such as **h. 'Hacksaw'** (opposite). Conversely, there are some very low-growing varieties, with leaf blade areas larger than 6sq inches, which are not classed as miniature, such as **h. 'County Park'**.



So what are our favourite varieties recently re-classified as miniature?

We too love the 'mouse ears' series, and have featured it often in this newsletter.

A particularly lovely little family of newly miniature hostas is the 'heart' series:



h. 'Cheatin Heart'



h. 'Faithful Heart'



h. 'Illicit Affair'

Within the classification of miniature, there is no limitation on the spread of the clump. But, once again, we feel we should add the caveat that hostas grow differently in different climates so these guidelines are simply that.

Although we find occasional differences in the growth characteristics of plants in our collection compared with their registered dimensions, it is not often so radical as to necessitate re-classification. We are planning to revisit the size classifications for all our plants when we begin migrating to our new Collection House, which we are due to begin constructing this winter. We will probably retain the plant mound height classification to organise the new Collection House but will need to re-assign some varieties that have clearly not grown to expected dimensions.

Larger/stronger miniatures

Although this sounds like a contradiction in terms, we are pleased that the range of varieties now classed as miniature includes many that are stronger growers, with better developed root systems.

Some existing miniature varieties are quite problematic to grow, mainly because they have such insignificant root systems. Keeping these going is difficult to say the least. A particularly disappointing variety in recent years is ***h.* 'Cat's Eye'** (opposite). This variety will survive the harshest winter, but it suffers from scorching, due to the amount of white in the leaf.

Because its' root system is so fragile, it is prone to damping off and drying out - the two conditions hostas will always struggle with. Due to its size people have a tendency to over-protect it. We have managed to keep ours going in long-toms, which sit in a tray of water. This keeps the root system well clear of the water source, whilst capillary action ensures the plant gets all the moisture it needs. We use this method with all our fragile miniatures and they seem to do OK. However, this does limit their use in the garden and so we only really recommend them as 'collectors' plants. We do have a number of varieties that fall into this category: ***h.* 'Cameo'**, ***h.* 'Cherish'**, ***h.* 'Cookie Crumbs'**, ***h.* 'Daisy Dolittle'**, ***h.* 'Hope'**, ***h.* 'Kinbotan'**



***h.* 'Heart Broken'**

These fabulous little varieties have heart-shaped leaves, which have slightly wavy margins. They look delicate but grow well. We especially like ***h.* 'Illicit Affair'** as the leaves emerge plain and the variegation improves during the season, becoming quite striking in late summer.

We are also pleased to see ***h.* 'Green with Envy'** included:



This variety grows very well and soon bulks up to create a colourful accent for other planting of a similar scale. We have often recommended this variety for the scale of leaf size, and it would be interesting to see if it would bonsai as well as some of the other varieties.

We do have a good range of miniatures and smaller varieties in our collection, many of which we can offer for sale - **why not take a look?**

Bonsai-ing miniature varieties

We feel that a better way to grow truly tiny plants is to start off with a stronger, larger miniature. Hostas are quite amenable to being restricted in their growth, in the same way as other plants. As long as the root system is strong you should be able to separate off a section to bring on as a bonsai-ed plant. We would recommend not keeping the plant restricted for too long, say a few years maximum, as the plant may start to die off where the roots are too compacted. More information on this subject can be found in our **July 2008 newsletter**.

Psst... using different systems to classify our collection

We are happy to use methods of classification proposed by organisations such as the AHS. However, we are UK based and operate closely with the RHS and Plant Heritage. Therefore, we will be revisiting the issue of species classification, in the January issue of the newsletter, with a view to aligning with the RHS Plant Finder - more to follow.

Next month: How hardy are hostas?

The advice and opinions contained within this monthly newsletter have been formed over more than 30 years of experience with the Hosta genus. We are constantly learning and refining that knowledge and would welcome any suggestions that readers of this newsletter would like to make so please [contact us](#).