



Spring is finally here, so where are my hostas?

This month we share our experiences of forcing the early emergence of hostas for exhibiting...



I was trying to think of a subject to focus on for this month as the plan was to show images of us re-covering tunnel 2. However, as with so many plans, this has been delayed by a few weeks while we await the arrival of the cover, which is being made to size as we speak.

To be honest, it would have needed to wait until at least the first week of April as we have been working hard to get all our mail order up to date, and sent out, before the Easter holiday. Once again we would like to thank all our customers for their continued support – it is so much appreciated but never taken for granted.

Help I've lost my hostas

Inspiration for this issue came from some social media feeds I subscribe to, which recently have featured conversations about the late emergence of hostas. We would just like to reassure you that it is still early in the year and we haven't had the benefit of a warm spring to encourage early emergence this year. Having said that, the last few days have warmed everything up and there is evidence of most of my plantings emerging outside. Some cultivars are late risers too, especially [H. 'Praying Hands'](#), so don't worry just yet.

Early season exhibiting

Since we began exhibiting our hostas in 1993 we have been transfixed by the weather events every spring and could be considered real nerds on the subject. A recent conversation got me thinking back to 2013 when we seemed to go from winter to summer, almost completely missing out all the joys of the spring transition. Every spring is different and each is challenging when

Four different springs...

I revisited my videos for the last four Harrogate Spring Flower Shows and they illustrate nicely how very differently early spring weather affects the emergence of hostas.



The first video from 2016 shows how very late the season was to start. The decision to create educational displays saved my bacon as I was able to fill the display with ideas of how to grow and display hostas without requiring the plants to be fully out. Even by Malvern, two weeks later, the plants were still not fully unfurled but they were certainly stretching for light.

Click on the images to view the videos and see the differences.

the need to exhibit is part of your business.

In the early days of exhibiting we used to head out on the road in March but quickly found it almost impossible to create an inspiring display for show visitors that early. Subsequently we decided that the Harrogate Spring Flower Show, usually at the end of April, was the earliest we could reasonably expect leaves to unfurl for display but that was never guaranteed. Indeed it was usually the show requiring the most preparatory work.

Breaking dormancy

Over the years we tried all sorts of ways to encourage early emergence including installing a warming bench to break dormancy, which we used with varying success until 2015 when we decided to stop forcing early emergence.

Every method we tried only succeeded in damage to the early growth, if not at the nursery, then certainly during the transit and duration of the first shows. If we succeeded in getting a beautifully lush display out in time for judging, it would always suffer in the cold halls or marquees with the lack of natural light. All the plants would stretch towards the nearest light and miniatures would return to the nursery at least a foot tall!

Every year we would identify plants looking as though they would be among the first to emerge. We would then bring them into the poly tunnels, break dormancy via the warming bench and then stand them down where they could 'harden off' at least a fortnight before loading up the lorry to head north.

Very occasionally we would get a warm spring when the plants emerged naturally and then we were quite likely to be able to take them to other shows after Harrogate. I do recall a couple of times when I couldn't use all the plants I had taken because they were so far along, I hadn't the space to show them off. Just by way of comparison I have popped links to videos of our Harrogate displays from 2016-2019 so you can see how each year has varied.

The photos below, and at the head of the newsletter, show parts of our Harrogate Spring display from 2013 for which we were awarded a Premier Gold and the North of England Horticultural Society's Challenge Cup. Although the colours look a little muted in the light of the hall, the vibrancy of the shoots was eye catching. Our display was chock full of educational information about the genus, as well as all the props I could reasonably use, but it was so well received by show visitors that we decided to investigate doing educational displays again at a later date. As regular readers will know this became our main focus from 2016 through to 2019.



**Malvern Spring Flower Show
2016 display**



**Harrogate Spring Flower Show
display 2017**

Just see the difference some early warm weather does to the emergence of the plants in a different year.

Indeed I couldn't fit all the plants I took into the display as they were too large!



**Harrogate Spring Flower Show
display 2018**

Another cold spring up to the middle of April when the warmer weather started to have an effect. The plants are further forward than normal but not as far advanced as they were the previous year.



**Harrogate Spring Flower Show
display 2019**

Our last display at the Harrogate Spring Show saw the damage cold weather can make to freshly unfurled leaves, which were effectively forced in transit. We load the lorry the day before travelling the four hours up to North Yorkshire and so the plants are usually quite chilled overnight but then the day of our travel was



Soft leaves and weak petioles

One of the biggest issues with forced hostas is their lack of rigidity in both the leaves and the petioles. The leaves are soft and the stems struggle to support their weight reliably, especially when they are stretching for light.

Storage at flower shows is never something given much thought by show organisers and we exhibitors have to get very inventive about how we deal with the issue. Ideally hostas need to have shelter but also access to daylight. At Chelsea, this was impossible and our last two years at Harrogate involved us having to store our sales plants in the hall which stretched them beyond belief. When hostas emerge they are thirsty, hungry and crave light. Deprive them of any of these things and they will let you know how it is! Not only do the plants 'stretch' they also lose their spring vibrancy. Anything we didn't sell we couldn't use without chopping the early leaves off and waiting for the second flush to emerge.

What have we learned?

The successful timing of hosta emergence is tricky to say the least and hugely stressful. It was one of the main reasons we decided to stop attending the Harrogate Spring Flower Show after 26 years. That was enough time for us to admit defeat in our attempts to bring hostas forward with any real success.

NOTE: If an early warm spell encourages your hostas to emerge too quickly and a late cold snap damages the first leaves, just remove them to encourage the plant to produce another flush. You may find it worth chucking some fleece over your early shoots over the Easter weekend because there are frost predicted after this wonderful brief warm spell.

There are real advantages to allowing plants to emerge gradually this - the shoots look fabulous and hold the promise of the display to come. There is something wonderful about watching them almost unfurl in front of your eyes in the same way we watch blossom develop. If you try to force nature the display is

in the mid 20s and the plants started to unfurl on the trolleys. When we unloaded and unzipped the trolley covers the plants were already quite stretched and then the low light levels of the hall just made the stretching worse.

Four different locations at the Harrogate shows and four different spring weather patterns illustrate a little of what the plants experience and how they respond. In previous years, when we forced the plants to open ready for the show, we had experienced much more damage and distortion due to stretching.

We did create some beautiful displays and won numerous Premier Gold awards but the flip side was that we usually spent much of the week allaying customer fears that they hadn't lost their hostas, we were just forcing ours for exhibiting.

Chelsea 2010



Perhaps the most challenging year we faced was 2010, the last time we did Chelsea.

Spring 2010 wasn't particularly cold but it was one of the darkest, dreariest springs we could recall. We had a real issue with the low light levels and heat alone wasn't doing the trick to break dormancy.

As Chelsea was a month after Harrogate Spring, with Malvern in between, we had three lots of plants being 'encouraged' to emerge at once and the tunnels were a congested scene of semi-

over and done with really quickly and you miss how brilliant the transitions are between the seasons.

Don't forget that a late emergence usually means the leaves will continue to look good for longer. A gradual emergence allows the shoots to 'harden off', a term used to describe how the new growth becomes acclimatised to being above the soil. Harder shoots are less susceptible to pest damage too, so don't be tempted to hurry the process. Gardening is all about the rewarding of hard work and patience with the amazing spectacle of spring.

Other nursery work

We haven't been blessed with good weather this winter and the projects we had planned haven't happened as the soil was too wet to work on. At least our water table is good and high. We know this to be the case as the reservoir is holding the most water since we stopped manually topping it up. It's so typical, but good to know how a wet winter will affect the plans to create the garden. We will just have to revisit it in light of the expected high water mark.

I have managed to find time to transfer all my plants I rescued from my front garden when the gas tank was installed in 2019. These have ended up planted around the rubber rockery and David and I have planted a temporary wind break of wooden stakes and wire to help protect the rockery from westerly winds. We plan to plant some more conifers between the wind break and west boundary to do the job more attractively than the wind break, which won't last for many years.

Things to do now

If your hostas are emerging they would benefit from feeding and watering. We do not have any hard and fast rules for this preferring to work with the weather. If you would like an idea of our schedule then take a look at our [Cultivation Special](#) newsletter. Also, don't forget the pests are emerging from hibernation too so take a look at our [FAQ page](#) for hints and tips on mitigating damage.

Finally for now, we have needed to update our 2021 availability list because we are selling out of several varieties and our wish list for the unusual and rare is growing. Don't forget to ask if there is something specific you would like from our collection but isn't listed as available. We will be getting onto division and propagating again very soon.

Enjoy the spring and speak soon

Team Mickfield Hostas

Copyright © Mickfield Hostas 2021, All rights reserved.

emerging plants. We couldn't re-use any of the plants we selected for the three shows as each show took its toll on the plants we used in different ways but the most dramatic effect was felt by the five plants that didn't make it into the display at Chelsea. They had to be wedged down the side of the staging between the stage and the vinyl wall of the Great Pavilion as there isn't any storage facility at Chelsea. These poor plants were then subjected to a couple of frosts, over 30 degrees of heat and no light for 6 days. By the time we pulled them out to load up at the end of the show, they looked like tree ferns!



A grand day out

We will be open by appointment from 12th April through to the end of September and open long weekends throughout May, June and July (Fridays through to Mondays). Please do call or [email us](#) in advance with your preferred date so we can ensure you have a safe and enjoyable visit.

If you are travelling some distance why not bring a picnic? There is plenty of space at the nursery to sit and enjoy a packed lunch and you would be most welcome. We have lots of regular visitors who decide to make a day of it and take advantage of extra time to wander round the collection. We are in a very peaceful part of East Anglia.