

April 2023



## *And, here they come!*

This month we thought we would indulge in a spot of shoot photograph, as they look so colourful and promising of the leafy joys to follow.

We also look at protecting these long awaited shoots from the vagaries of our spring weather...



## *The most joyous time of the year?*

Here follows a visual feast of emerging hostas, starting off with [H. 'Little Bit'](#) – photo above. There is so much colour and variegation to enjoy before the great unfurling of the leaves.



Left to right: [H. 'Mosel'](#), [H. 'Fruit Punch'](#) and [H. 'Fountain of Youth'](#) showing some of the close up details. They look like pastel drawings, varying from delicate shades to the more dramatic.

Some shoots are very representative of the colour to expect, while some can be quite misleading. The photo below shows the shoots of [H. 'Blue Hearts'](#), a delightful small blue-green cultivar:

## *Protecting the early risers*

Spring can throw all manner of weather at the gardener in any year, so it is with trepidation that we welcome the emerging shoots and spring growth.

Hostas are no exception but if they are allowed to emerge gently they have a much better chance to harden off as they leave the protection of the soil. This helps the guard leaves to protect the first flush of foliage.

So whilst we eagerly watch out for the first shoots, our eyes are on the weather at all times to try to ensure the soil is sufficiently moist to cater for the start of the spring thirst, whilst not too wet that frost can penetrate more deeply into the pots and potentially cause damage.



You might imagine the unfurled leaves would perhaps be gold rather than the colour they actually are.

The hosta below is [H. 'Sea Gulf Stream'](#), a stunningly bright gold leaved cultivar with ripple margins and these are the fabulous shoots with their purple guard leaves:



Purple buds are a common feature of many hostas but as the shoots extend the guard leaves protecting the first leaves take on different hues.

One of the best of the Tardiana blues is [H. 'Camelot'](#) and these are the spears showing peachy pinks and greens:



There are quite a few cultivars that exhibit nest like clusters of roots above ground, such as [H. 'Wheaton Blue'](#):

Watering at this time of year is fraught with indecision. Timing any watering to avoid frosts is important as excess water in the crown of the plant could cause significant damage if there are wild fluctuations in temperature. Rapid freezing and thawing water has shaped so much of the UK landscape and riddled our highways with potholes. It's no surprise that delicate new shoots are so vulnerable to this issue.

Mature hostas generally cope far better with extremes of weather but sales stock is more at risk, not just because they are younger plants, they are also in smaller pots, so have less soil around them to help regulate fluctuations in temperature.

#### **At the nursery**

When we had all the sales stock under polythene, the temperature differential between night and day was more pronounced, especially if we were experiencing bright warm days and frosty nights.

This weather creates a 'stop-start' emergence where your plants can skip forward really quickly in the heat and then stop abruptly in a cold spell. If this is happening every 24 hours it can really hold back emergence and can also result in premature flower heads appearing.

Polythene degrades at quite a fast rate so the protective UV properties do not last and the plants can get quite scorched where there is less airflow and intense sunlight.



The photo below is [H. 'Designer Genes'](#) poking its shoots through a mossy carpet. There are several bright gold leaved hostas, which have deliciously red shoots protecting the early leaves. You can just see the limey tips to the shoots.



The photo below is of [H. 'Celtic Dancer'](#). The leaves of this cultivar are a rich dark green but the limey spring shoots are a delight, especially bathed in sunlight:



Another wave of purple shoots, this time emerging from a mossy carpet is [H. 'Lakeside Breaking News'](#) – hold the front page!



I like the way the shoots of [H. 'Laura Lanier'](#), are as pretty and subtly variegated as the leaves:

Replacing the polythene with horticultural net creates a completely different environment for the plants. Being much closer to the ambient temperature, creates less extreme temperature fluctuations. Airflow is enhanced and sunlight is filtered through the net layers.

The downside is there is less control over watering but wet weather is usually accompanied by wind so evaporation helps mitigate the risk of saturation, alongside free draining trays. So far the benefits of the net far outweigh those of polythene.

#### **Our advice**

Keep a weather eye on your emerging shoots. You can always fleece them if there is a risk of frost. If you need to water, do so sparingly and try to avoid getting water into the crown of the plant. Ground grown hostas should emerge later with the added insulation of the soil, but water in the same way only if it is exceptionally dry.

#### **At the shows**

We have been growing hostas for over 40 years and exhibiting for 30 years. Throughout that time we experimented with all manner of schemes to lengthen the season to give us a longer period in which to propagate, market, sell and exhibit, with very mixed results.

The financial imperative after winter meant we exhibited at shows which were really too early for hostas.



The following shoots herald of the approach of Harrogate Flower Show to me. I exhibited [H. 'Spartacus'](#) there on several occasions. It was always among the first up in spring, but the leaves have great substance and were seldom affected by late frosts:



I hope these photos will encourage you to take a closer look at your own hostas as they emerge this spring. Obviously all these featured cultivars are grown in pots in our collection. Your ground grown plants will soon be as advanced, especially if the warm weather continues.

Next month Lenore and I explore some of our favourite cultivars which have earned space in our gardens, among the thousands of different varieties available.

[Speak soon](#)

[Team Mickfield Hostas](#)

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Encouraging premature emergence was the aim at these early spring shows. However, for all the reasons listed above, our forced plants were so prone to frost damage and low light levels that the results were never brilliant.

Removing plants from the semi-protected environment of the tunnels, transporting, storing and exhibiting them inflicted such a range of conditions they could not fail to be impacted. Sometimes hold ups on the journey would mean the plants couldn't be unloaded until the following day, and a night in a metal box could hold the plants back even more.

Often the exhibit halls and marquees were very cold with poor lighting. The plants would end up stretching towards whatever light they could detect with the result that, if we didn't sell all our stock, they were so stretched they needed to be retired for the rest of the season. We always hoped we could re-use the exhibit plants for the first couple of shows but often found we needed to refresh these if the conditions were particularly challenging.

Needless to say, early exhibiting was very stressful and now we can enjoy much less traumatic springs.

Indeed, the joy of the shoots emerging is just the start of the seasonal journey and a reminder to slow down and savour the moment.