



Getting into hostas

This month we have a brief interview with Liz Burroughs, our 'pollen lady', and a look at some interesting ways to engage with the genus. Usually, with St Valentine's Day approaching, we suggest an appropriately named selection of cultivars in the side column, just for fun...

Liz is a customer who visits several times during the season to gather pollen and look for cultivars to add to her breeding programme. This interview is a distillation of a conversation with Mel over the past few months when they met at the nursery for the first time this summer, one of the benefits of not having events to drag her away. She thought that what Liz was doing was very interesting and asked her if she would be willing to share how she got into breeding hostas with our newsletter readers in case any of you fancy giving it a go.

Mel: My interest in hostas started with my parents' love of the genus, so my first question to Liz, why breeding hostas?

Liz: Falling into hosta breeding was kind of an accident: I was looking at eBay and purchased an Empress Wu purely because of the grandeur of the foliage in the photograph! Then I noticed how many different types of hosta there were. So I bought a few more varieties and joined a U.K. Facebook group to learn more. And THATS when I got hooked!

Mel: I don't have a background in horticulture but my parents have always been keen on cultivation and I adore gardening. My lack of knowledge initially was no barrier as I have found much of the joy of gardening comes from the serendipitous nature of the process. Learning not to worry of something doesn't thrive, just move it and see what happens. How about you Liz?

Liz: My interest in Horticulture in general comes from my maternal grandmother. She was always growing cuttings and seedlings, even things that weren't supposed to be



H. 'Valentine Lace'

The perfect plant to start the selection - click on the images as you go to view more details. This is an older cultivar and grows exceptionally well.

It has wavy margins and a sheen to the leaves which are much bluer in more shade. We have used it in displays numerous times throughout the years as it is such a beautiful foil, and lovely on its own too.



H. 'First Love'

A vibrant and elegant cultivar, which holds its colour well all season. Just like a first love, this cultivar needs placing on a pedestal. Be careful what you put nearby for fear of it overshadowing everything.

easy to grow! My mother also has a keen interest in gardening and floristry. She worked at Writtle Agricultural College in the 1970s, and it was no surprise that I opted to go to the same college to study an Honours Degree in Horticulture 20 years after she left!

Mel: So did your interest in breeding plants originate with your studies then?

Liz: I've always had an interest in genetics - who I am and where I come from - so I chose the genetics modules held at Hatfield Polytechnic (now Hertfordshire University) as part of my Writtle Degree. I discovered that the Americans were crossing and breeding their own hostas, and the leaf colours and sizes were endless! So when my own hostas started flowering I examined the flower parts and saw how easy it should be to try my own crosses!

Mel: You mentioned buying [H. 'Empress Wu'](#) when it piqued your interest, that's a reasonably modern cultivar so I take it you haven't been experimenting with hostas very long?

Liz: Three years so far. I have no particular objective other than to produce new cultivars with characteristics I like and to share that, perhaps making a name for myself along the way.

Liz claims she doesn't need to use any special equipment, the key to the process is in timing when the flowers open so you can beat the insects to the job of harvesting and depositing the pollen. At times the fridge has more pollen in it than food!

Liz did bring us some fertilised flower scapes labelled up ready for harvesting. She needs to ensure each flower bud shows the origin of the pollen used so she can track progress.

It is a fascinating hobby and one which you don't have to have acres of space to experiment, at least at the beginning when they are seedlings. As Liz says, "I am looking at extending my garden into an area, which hasn't been cultivated for a while, so I have space at the moment."

Many hosta cultivars are listed as being infertile, so it can be a serendipitous task to identify suitable cultivars to use. Liz is looking for cultivars which hold their colour well and show an ability to 'take on' other characteristics, such as coloured stems and leaf textures. This is something she needs to see, as much as read about, to make her selections and wandering through the collection tunnels



H. 'Heartleaf'

Like H. 'Valentine Lace', we have used this cultivar a lot in displays for the leaf shape and colour. This is a much greener foliage clump so is great for displaying against blue variegated cultivars and golds. The heart shaped leaves layer up to produce a beautifully full mound.



H. 'Bridal Veil'

Another well named cultivar as it hides its loveliness behind a more subtle colouring. Elegant and under-stated, so worth adding to any collection. It would look fabulous alongside H. 'Valentine Lace' with the mix of blues, greens and fine white margins.



H. 'Love Pat'

Whether or not your name is Pat, this is a cultivar you simply fall in love with if you appreciate deeply corrugated leaves, cupped to collect rainfall. A great alternative to its larger contemporaries in the giant

can reveal varieties with promise.

We expect Liz will be back in the summer to do some more harvesting and bring us up to date with progress. Watch this space and hopefully she will be able to share some interesting new cultivars in a few years' time.



It is easy to become hooked on hostas as they have so many aspects of interest to them, not just from the perspective of breeding.

Tracing parentage

One of the aspects of hostas Mel finds most interesting is tracing parentage. When she decided to catalogue the collection back in the late 1990s she was fascinated to learn where the cultivars originate and the characteristics that mark each branch of the genus, tracing back to the species, where possible. It certainly helped us understand so much more about the genus and encouraged further research when she gets the time to do so. Liz's methodical approach will ensure that whatever she produces will have its parentage traceable at least to the plants she has used. It can be a little dispiriting when we have researched some cultivars only to find a DNA test is probably the only way to establish parentage. We suspect that most of these were sports found accidentally, rather like our new discoveries, mentioned in the August 2020 newsletter. We swing between a desire to be definitive about the origins of every cultivar and a simple pleasure they exist, so does it really matter?

We know that stating a cultivar as having 'unknown parentage' usually causes a few titters among nursery visitors and often sparks questions into the subject. Our hope is that it inspires people to do their own research into the plants they love.

collection, if you have less space to play with. We challenge you not to reach for your camera to capture droplets of dew/rain throughout the season.



H. 'Seducer'

A firm favourite of Mel's even though she prefers plain leaved cultivars. This fabulous cultivar really does seduce you with its water colour effect markings and the way it changes during the season. It is a great grower, tall and elegant with the most amazingly ruffled margins. It also looks amazing with raindrops balancing on the leaves - opposite.



H. 'Faith'

Every relationship needs faith and this selection needs some gold, so here we have one of the best. The texture and substance of the leaves is superb, the colour lasts all season too.



H. 'Bridal Falls'

Featured last month as newly available in 2021, we couldn't have

Experimenting with light

Mel's love of physics, and a career in optical technology, has fostered her interest in light and its effects on everything from how we feel on a sunny day to how you can send digital data. Light affects everything and hostas are no exception. We are often asked what a particular cultivar likes in terms of light but it is very difficult to say as hostas are very environmentally sensitive. We usually suggest customers experiment in their own garden by putting the planting a pot and moving it around to find the place where it does the best.

Whilst we would never recommend situating your plants in full sun for the whole day, this doesn't harm the plant unless it is transpiring more moisture than it is getting. Too much direct sun can bleach the colours from the leaves and 'scorch' them. It does actually look like a burn when you examine the damage. If your hosta has white in the leaf, this area is not protected by light reflecting pigmentation. This can result in the leaves becoming translucent and papery in texture, turning brown. A windy spot can do this too as the leaves can 'dry out' quite quickly. We always caution giving white variegated cultivars more shelter/shade but there are always exceptions to this rule. Never panic though, if your hosta looks like it is suffering simply move it and remove the affected leaves. It will usually recover providing it hasn't dried out completely.

Conversely more light can bring out colours, which would otherwise be quite subtle in shady conditions. Mel particularly likes [H. 'Old Glory'](#) for its subtle colouring in the shade. She planted one in the rubber rockery where it is receiving more light. The result is much more vibrant colouring and more prolific flower production. [Hosta 'Volcano Island'](#) retains its spring colouring for much longer in a bit more light. Usually the leaf centre turns lime green by summer in more shade. The classic full sun variety is [H. 'Sum and Substance'](#), which can turn gold in more light. However, it is such a huge plant it really needs to be near a water source to thrive. The larger the leaf the more readily moisture can be transpired so situating near a pond or ditch can be a good option. Just beware that the plant crown will need to be elevated to avoid crown rot.

a romantic list without this fabulous plant. You will certainly fall in love with this cultivar, it is as stunning as any wedding day.



[H. 'Happy Hearts'](#)

A beautiful older cultivar with heart-shaped leaves. The matt quality of the colour goes particularly well with glossier leaved cultivars, or rich greens. It is a great foil for all sorts of planting beyond hostas. It also has such a lovely name.



[H. 'None Lovelier'](#)

Just looking at how the sheen of the leaves makes the green colour pop among these images shows just how great it is to pair plants with different surface textures. The fine margins help enhance the effect. Apologies if this choice is a little tenuous to the theme but surely there is none lovelier?



As we perceive colour as a result of the refractive nature of the surface of the leaf, it is not surprising that light levels greatly alter a plant's characteristics and this is something that hostas show very well. Cultivars with a glaucous bloom may lose it if placed in more light. We describe it in simplistic terms as the sun destroying the bloom on the leaf. This is right but the bloom is simply disappearing as the sun changes the refractive qualities of the leaf surface so it no longer reflects the blue end of the spectrum as before. The leaves appear to 'turn green' when this happens but this is a different process to leaves naturally turning green through the season to enable photosynthesis longer into the season, which is called viridescence.

Where to start...

Beginning a collection of hostas can seem daunting just trying to decide where to start. However, there are so many routes in, just think about what you like and remember to balance your preferences with varieties that will help 'show off' your choices.

At one time we thought about creating a sub collection of Eric Smith introductions, to celebrate our most prolific UK hosta breeder. The problem with that is the extremely subtle differences between the cultivars that it would look a bit like the same plant repeated – it needs breaking up.

In our experience many customers are attracted to the eye-candy of variegation – the brighter the better. However, when you attempt to put them all together they simply distract and need breaking up with some plain-leaved varieties. There are some fantastic plain-leaved varieties now available, with red stems, deeply corrugated leaves, rich and deep, or subtle and matt colours, just begging to be used in a scheme.

Next month we look share some insights into the early years of our collection, until then, stay safe.

[Team Mickfield Hostas](#)

H. 'Blue Hearts'

This old cultivar is a stunning foil for planting with more colourful arrangements, especially as the colour becomes a more intense blue in the shade. The heart-shaped leaves form a dense mound of foliage.



H. 'Everlasting Love'

We divided our parent plant of this cultivar as a special request from a regular customer. This is an enduring cultivar, which will give years of pleasure. It is aptly named for a happy ever after.

Footnote: we toyed with the idea of adding a section at the foot of this choice featuring hostas named for life after love, such as *H.* 'Independence' and *H.* 'Liberty', but there is more than enough negativity around at present!

There is a very intriguing history around the name 'Empress Wu' though, which you might find interesting to look up...