

July 2024



The sporting season

With all the distractions of a full calendar of summer sports it seems appropriate to return to the subject of Hosta sports, and how fascinating they can be.

But before we do that, I thought you might like to try to guess what this is a renovation of:



Those eccentric Victorians

I'm sure you wouldn't have guessed it was a 'seal' pond.

This fascinating project is one of the latest developments in the gardens at [Somerleyton Hall](#) in the far north east corner of Suffolk. The pond was established by the owners of the Hall back in Victorian times to give their resident seals an entertaining place to do their thing. It is remarkable to think they imagined such animals could live a comparable life in such a small environment, but then we continued to do exactly that with zoos and wildlife parks decades on. Obviously, the role of such establishments has become more about conservation than status over the years but the Victorians were a bit of an eccentric bunch and their ideas formed the basis of many of our cultural activities since. Flower shows are another carry through of that time where explorers could exhibit the latest weird and wonderful plants from every corner of the globe. The Victorian plant hunters Philip von Siebold and Robert Fortune were among them and we do have them to thank for the introduction of hostas to the world, outside of their native wilds of far eastern Asia. Not all eccentricities are pointless!

Anyway, I will enjoy re-visiting the pond on 7th September when we return for the [Autumn Plants and Crafts Fair](#).

Sporting greats

Hostas can, and do, sport, which is the term used when a plant produces a non-characteristic offshoot. As with many other perennials it is best to separate the non-characteristic piece of a plant, at the root, to avoid the risk of it dominating.

Visiting gardens

A huge bonus of doing plant fairs is getting the opportunity to visit the gardens they are often located in, if time allows. During June I had the chance to have a quick wander around Somerleyton Hall Gardens – see opposite.

There are plenty of gardens I have yet to visit, usually because we are too busy to escape. I do have to remind myself why I am there and resist the urge to go walkabout. Indeed, it took me

12 years to finally visit the Japanese Garden at Tatton Park and I only got to see some of the gardens at Hampton Court by choosing to walk in on different routes each day. There must be some amazing hostas at some of these gardens as it often inspires visitors to seek us out to try some for the first time, or add to their own collections.

Hosta 'Gold Standard'

Perhaps one of the best cultivars for producing sports is [H. 'Gold Standard'](#), which has produced quite a range of interesting offspring. Last year I was weeding the *H. 'Gold Standard'* stock and found one doing all sorts of interesting things so I decided to grow it on in a pot in my garden. Rather than separate the different offspring I thought I would just grow it as one, and see what develops:



So far it looks like the leaves are largely showing any differences in the margins, rather than centrally. There's a proper mix of various offspring already introduced but it does look rather nice as it is, so I look forward to next year's growth. The most intriguing sport from *H. 'Gold Standard'* is [H. 'Striptease'](#), which has a leaf pattern almost as if you are looking at a leaf overlaid onto another, or a leaf within a leaf. There is the most delightful white flash outlining this colouration. Although *H. 'Striptease'* is like its parent, reasonably stable, it has in turn produced some very desirable sports with similar patterns but different colouring, one of which is [H. 'Snake Eyes'](#). Here is our parent with a plain green sport emerging:



In many cases a sport looks just like a reversion and are not really worthy of consideration other than as a foil against which to plant

My own garden

I don't have a large garden, but I do have quite a bit crammed into it. Every year I have to re-site plants which have become smothered or have outgrown the dimensions I was expecting. That happens quite a lot and I suspect many of you have found the same. I think crowding plants can work well, especially when we are suffering more extreme weather patterns. However, when the rain does stop, and we enter drier periods, they do then have to fight each other for sufficient water.

This year I have had to get quite ruthless with some of my plants to open out the view and my strawberry tree needed to have some of the fresh growth chopped out so I can watch the birds on the lower branches and see to the back of the garden:



My hellebore bed under the acer needed weeding badly and the action of all that weeding helped shake out the seeds from the dead flower heads so it will get even more packed with beautiful flowers next January – always something to look forward to:



more colourful cultivars so why not do that and grow it on separately for that purpose?

Hosta 'Embroidery'

A few years ago we sold [H. 'Embroidery'](#) to a customer who recently sent us a lovely photo of how well it is doing. However, among the foliage are leaves of a very different sort, which she correctly surmised as a sport. Indeed one of our *H. 'Embroidery'* specimens in the collection is doing the same thing, see the two leaves on the left of the main plant, which is showing the correct characteristics:



The sport has been introduced as *H. 'Maniac'*, quite an apt name for this strangely drawstringed trait. I was delighted to be able to tell her that she has this quite rare sport of a rare cultivar, and to separate the two at the root to encourage them to both grow to their own characteristics. We will add our sport to the collection and watch it develop.

Tardiana sports

Offspring of the Tardiana Group of hostas have produced some interesting sports. Just a stroll through the collection revealed [H. 'Robyn's Choice'](#), a sport of [H. 'Hadspen Blue'](#) (top photo) and [H. 'First Frost'](#), a sport of [H. 'Halcyon'](#) (bottom photo) with plain leaved sports emerging:



Here is the view from our south side alleyway as you enter the garden – it's one of my favourite vistas.



I have trained euonymus into standard forms along the fenceline for shade but this has been so successful that nothing wants to grow beneath it!

Here is Misty beside [H. 'Moonlight'](#), which is a sport of *H. 'Gold Standard'*, and is Yvonne's favourite cultivar. I love the variegation as subtle but intricately detailed – as a lover of plain leaved cultivars it has the right balance of variegation for my liking to make it into my garden:



I have [H. 'Dress Blues'](#), [H. 'Déjà Blu'](#) and [H. 'Sky Dancer'](#) in pots outside the back door alongside the raised bed:



Neither have been introduced as sports probably because they are so similar to other cultivars already in existence. Also, there is so little chlorophyll in the yellow leaves sporting from *H.* 'First Frost', the plant would probably struggle if trying to grow without the parent to support it.

Among our stock of *H.* 'Halcyon' are a couple of streaky sports looking to become either [H.](#) 'El Nino' or [H.](#) 'Great Escape':



The more time I spend with hostas, the more interesting they seem and the more rewarding. There are not many plants with such a long season, or that can change colour as the season progresses. Add in the chances of finding a sport and you may discover a whole new level of interest in the genus.

Due to the weather, the tunnels are only now changing into a riot of flower spikes towering above the foliage – it is a sight to see, so make the most of our July opening times before we revert to appointment only for the rest of the season.

Happy gardening,

Team Mickfield Hostas

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Although I don't have a garden out front, I do have a few hostas in pots, mostly un-named sports. They help break up the expanse of fence around the gas tank:



Giving up exhibiting has freed more time but the nursery will take all the hours you care to throw at it and occasionally I do like to take a day or two out to work in my own space.

Unfortunately, it is never a gentle tweak or prune because I don't spend enough time in it. Usually, I return to the nursery exhausted after wrestling with overgrown shrubbery after these breaks.

Nursery Open Dates

The nursery is open every weekend throughout July

Friday to Monday

10am – 4pm