



I want the blue hosta!

This is a phrase we often hear, especially at shows. It is telling that, aside from the colour, people often cannot help us narrow down the variety they have seen - the colour dominates their recollection to the exclusion of all else...

Bloomingly blue

The really blue hosta varieties look that way due to a light diffusing waxy bloom covering the leaf.

This bloom can easily be removed by touching the leaf or exposing the plant to too much sunlight, revealing the true colour of the leaf cells underneath. Therefore, the description of a variety being 'blue' is a bit misleading. Invariably the actual leaf colour will be a shade of blue-green. It is true that many varieties 'look' blue in context to other planting, but that is primarily due to how we individually perceive colour.



Hosta sieboldiana 'Elegans' at Chatsworth - June 2005

Hosta leaf colour often changes during the season and attempts to establish colour characteristics in descriptions needs to be done during the peak of the season, between May and June. Many 'blue' varieties lose their blue-ness as the season progresses. This loss can be accelerated by heavy rain and overhead watering, more pronounced differences in day to night-time temperatures and increasing warmth of the air and ground. The temperature differential issue is something we have experienced quite widely in the UK this spring with quite warm days followed by night frosts. As a result we advise customers to shelter their blue varieties well and consider popping them into deeper shade to help keep them cool.

Exaggerating colour

We also advise customers to consider their companion planting to help create the contrast required to exaggerate the blue colour of their plant.

For example, we under planted *H.* 'June Fever' with *H.* 'Slim and Trim' for display at the Harrogate and Malvern shows this spring.

The turquoise blue of *H.* 'Slim and Trim' looked more pronounced when *H.* 'June Fever' first emerged with its bright lime-gold centres. As the leaves turned more limey, the colour differentiation became more subtle and customers appreciated the form of *H.* 'Slim and Trim' more than the colour, which actually improves as the season progresses.



20 of the best 'blues'

In our opinion the following list of cultivars we have experienced to be excellent blues, and good growers to boot:

H. 'Big Daddy'

H. 'Blue Angel'

H. 'Blue Chip'



H. 'Blue Cascade'



H. 'Blue Mammoth'

H. 'Blue Moon'

H. 'Blue Mouse Ears'

H. 'Canadian Blue'



H. 'Chesapeake Bay'

H. 'Cutting Edge'

In our experience the waxy blue bloom seems to act as a deterrent to snails with minimal early season damage. The only explanation we have is that the bloom might be distasteful to the snails or it may give off an odour they dislike - it would be interesting to observe this more closely but time doesn't permit at this at the peak time of the season.

I want 'the blue hosta'

Having said all this we still need to address the request for 'the blue hosta'. On the rare occasion when customers can give us more information we can often narrow down the search somewhat. When the plant is described as large leaved and has been spotted at a stately home, or established garden, we can often identify it as *H. sieboldiana* 'Elegans'. This old variety has magnificent foliage, especially when planted en-masse. The photo at the start of this issue shows a particularly gorgeous group on a sloped area in the Chatsworth gardens, which we visited back in 2005. The blue is startling due to its position in plenty of shade and the companion planting giving it a beautiful contrast for the foliage. We also regularly get asked for the 'elephant ears' hosta and, on further questioning, it often seems people are asking for *H. sieboldiana* 'Elegans'.



If the plant is described as smaller but with excellent shaped leaves, and prominent veins, we can narrow down the search to members of the Tardiana Group, such as *H. 'Halcyon'*.

The image opposite shows *H. 'Halcyon'* at Gardeners' World back in 2011, where some of the lower leaves have brushed against other planting and the 'bloom' has been removed - revealing the green leaf underneath.

Readers of this newsletter may already be familiar with the Tardiana Group - see the **July 2007** issue. This group of hostas was developed by Eric Smith, a UK breeder who crossed *H. sieboldiana* 'Elegans' with *H. 'Tardiflora'* to produce arguably the most popular branch of the genus among devotees today. The group includes some of the most stunning blue varieties, and they always sell well because of the colours and their very neat habits. It was a division of *H. 'Halcyon'* from America which began our collection back in the 1970s. The irony of getting a UK-bred variety from America has rather become the norm nowadays. Research has lead us to be confident our original plant is characteristic, some cultivars purporting to be *H. 'Halcyon'*, produced in the UK, are not true to type.

One of the characteristics of the Tardiana Group is that some cultivars lose their spring bloom to reveal very deep green leaf colour. This is probably due to the *H. 'Tardiflora'* element of their background. This provides extra seasonal interest in a versatile plant, which can be used to draw together seasonal planting schemes.

Creating waves

In our opinion, one of the loveliest trends in newly introduced 'blues' is improved leaf shape, especially the introduction of cultivars with rippled margins.

There is now quite a list of these, such as *H. 'Queen of the Seas'* - opposite. *Hosta 'Fleet Week'* is another fabulously rippled cultivar, as is *H. 'Cutting Edge'*.

Each of these varieties has a very architectural habit, which is enhanced by the colour of the leaves. They are fast becoming the 'must have' plant among those we exhibit.

Blue is quite an unusual colour to work with in the garden but it can be very worthwhile as a foil for all kinds of planting schemes.

Next month: The best green and white variegated cultivars...



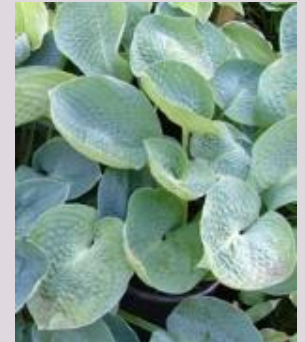
H. 'Deep Blue Sea'

H. 'Elegans'

H. 'Fleet Week'

H. 'Halcyon'

H. 'Krossa Regal'



H. 'Love Pat'



H. 'Moody Blues'

H. 'Queen of the Seas'



H. 'Sherborne Swift'

H. 'Slim and Trim'

The advice and opinions contained within this monthly newsletter have been formed over more than 39 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**.