



Identifying hostas Part 6

This month we look at fragrant varieties to see if there are distinguishing features that will help you identify these cultivars outside of their flowering period.

It isn't all about the fragrance – indeed this can be quite hard to detect in some varieties...

Common characteristics

Conveniently all fragrant hostas can be traced back to the fragrant species; [*Hosta plantaginea*](#). This does help make a lot of the subsequent generations more easily identifiable unless they have been crossed with quite different cultivars. Breeding can result in supposedly fragrant offspring having a scent that is too faint to detect unless you have a fine tuned sense of smell so it is useful to have other identifiable features to use.

The key characteristics of *H. plantaginea*:

- Very large, fragrant flowers
- Night flowering
- Widely spaced leaf veins
- Fine leaf substance and lots of leaves
- Early spring emergence



[*Hosta plantaginea*](#) '*Grandiflora*', or 'Japonica' as it is still often referred to because it is cultivated widely in Japan, has large flowers and produces a more upright habit with slightly narrower leaves – see below:

Fragrant flowers

The easiest way to identify a fragrant cultivar is through the scent of the flowers, but you need to wait until late summer for this.



The flowers of the species *H. plantaginea* (above and below) are quite hard to come by in the UK but are magnificent when they do appear, being about double the size of a typical hosta flower and their fragrance is delicate but divine.





It tends to be a bit more reliable in growth and flower production than the Chinese species, but can still be reluctant in the UK simply because we do not have the climate this species likes, although this could change in the future as we get warmer. I often suggest customers consider a modern cultivar for more reliable flower production.

The following are some of the best, and most popular, modern cultivars, which might help you identify your plant. See how the characteristics of *H. plantaginea* can be identified in many of them.

[Hosta 'Fragrant Bouquet'](#)

This is among the oldest cultivars in our collection and has been readily available for many years:



This cultivar has produced a number of offspring – see our [newsletter special](#) on *H. plantaginea*. Among them is another classic, *H. 'Guacamolé'*.

[Hosta 'Guacamolé'](#)

This beautiful cultivar is unusual among the sports of *H. 'Fragrant Bouquet'*, for its dark margins and lighter leaf centres. It has been steadily popular over the last three decades and has also produced some excellent leafy sports:

Close forms of the species

In our experience, the closer any offspring of the species is to the original, the less reliable it is as a grower. The main reason for this lies in our temperate climate. *Hosta plantaginea*, and its close relatives, do best in sustainably warm climates.

They are the only night flowering hosta and need evening and overnight warmth to encourage flowering and our summers do not tend to be warm enough for this.

In order to encourage flowering you can place the plant in a warm spot, not necessarily in full sunlight as the leaves will scorch as with most other hostas. The lea side of a fence or wall, which is in full sun all day absorbing the heat and then radiating it out overnight is perhaps

the best spot to encourage flowering. We have yet to try this but it is on my list of things to do, especially for the cultivar, [H. 'Venus'](#), which is a sport of the double-flowered [H. 'Aphrodite'](#). Neither has flowered for us, or grown particularly well, so it is obvious it needs a more conducive environment.

Climate change on a micro level?

Interestingly, last summer some of our stock *H. plantaginea* 'Grandiflora' began to flower and a cultivar we have had for many years in our collection, [H. 'Hadspen White'](#) had several huge white fragrant flowers. The jury had been out on that one since we added it to our collection before 1999.

This cultivar looks so much like another form of the species that it probably needs the extended

- [H. 'Fried Bananas'](#) – an all yellow sport with powerfully fragrant flowers
- [H. 'Fried Green Tomatoes'](#) – an all green sport
- [H. 'Holy Molé'](#) – chartreuse leaves with wide green margins
- [H. 'Avocado'](#) – light green leaves with wide green margins
- [H. 'Stained Glass'](#) – at times barely distinguishable from the parent when grown in more light.



Our parent *H. 'Guacamolé'* needs more light for more vibrant foliage, they can be quite subtle in deeper shade. *Hosta 'Stained Glass'* has bright foliage regardless of location so is a good bet for a darker spot. Once both are showing their summer colour they are almost identical.

A note on *Hosta 'Avocado'* and *Hosta 'Holy Molé'*

These two cultivars as they are often mistaken for each other when immature. Both have distinctive centre variegation but *H. 'Avocado'* (below) is typically narrower than *H. 'Holy Molé'*.



Also the flower colours differ, *H. 'Avocado'* has pale lavender flowers where *H. 'Holy Molé'* has white ones. It is worth taking a look at the [Hosta Library](#) as there are multiple photos of each cultivar, which may help you nail which one you have.

warmth we are now starting to occasionally experience in our summers. If this trend continues an upside could be more reliably flowering fragrant hostas.

Other fragrant cultivars in our collection

A full list of all the fragrant cultivars we hold in our collection can be found on [our website](#). Those we have available for sale varies year on year as they are so popular, especially in late summer when many of them flower. It can be quite heady in Tunnel 1 as we have co-located all the fragrant plants in one area due to being asked for them so often.

[Hosta 'Invincible'](#)

This cultivar, bred by Paul Aden, has been used widely for breeding and is a great grower in its own right.

All of my favourite fragrant varieties owe their existence to *H.*

'Invincible', at least in part:

[H. 'Sugar and Spice'](#) – a variegated sport with similar habit

[H. 'Irish Luck'](#) – a fabulous mound of wavy edged leaves topped with very fragrant flowers (below)



[H. 'Lederhosen'](#) – glaucous grey-green leathery foliage with amazing lavender striped flowers. It does suffer every year by emerging before the last of the frosts and develops rust spots at the junctions of the leaves and petioles where

[Hosta 'Tea at Betty's'](#)

Having been bred only two miles up the road from our nursery, this has become a modern classic, for its fragrance and reliable growth in our climate.



It is a variegated sport of [H. 'Rippled Honey'](#), which I love for its leaf shape. This is a cross between [H. ventricosa](#) and [H. plantaginea](#) and has the distinctive leaf shape of the former and glossiness of the latter. The leaves of [H. 'Tea at Betty's'](#) has lost a little of the leaf shape in the process but compensates for that with a beautifully defined rippled margin.

[Hosta 'Invincible'](#)

I would like to finish with the source of all my favourite fragrant cultivars, [H. 'Invincible'](#) – see side column.



A medium sized cultivar with a densely packed mound of rich glossy leaves. Widely available for many years, could this be your hosta?

Good luck with your identifying research.

Happy gardening

Team Mickfield Hostas

moisture gathers and freezes.



[H. 'Nightlife'](#) – dark blue-green foliage with heavenly flowers (below and foot of column)



[H. 'Red Stepper'](#) – super glossy dark green leaves on top of red petioles:



Check out the full list of sports and progeny of [H. 'Invincible'](#) on the Hosta Library.

Flower of [H. 'Nightlife'](#):

