

March 2024



Companion planting for better Hosta health

Hosta will not grow in all situations, although they are generally very resilient plants.

Success will largely depend upon the strength of the root system together with the characteristics of the cultivar you have chosen, and where you want to plant it. It is very important to create the right environment in which your Hosta will thrive and expecting it to do well in adverse conditions will result in disappointment, or at least a plant struggling to meet expectations.



Generic conditions

I have written a lot on the best conditions for growing Hosta – see the website for [more information](#). Also, check out our [Newsletter Archive](#).

Hosta are described as shade loving woodland plants but they can grow in lots of other places very successfully. Like most plants their need for water depends upon the time of year. Hosta need lots of water in spring when they emerge when it is wise to water around the plant rather than into the crown to avoid damage from late frosts. They also like extra water when they start producing flowers.

Otherwise, it is good to allow the plant to send down its roots to find water to encourage the development of a strong root system. This is essential to the health of the plant - water well but infrequently if possible. Obviously dry hot conditions will dictate the need to water more often so keep a weather eye open to judge their needs.

Keeping Hosta foliage intact

It may be stating the obvious but the better the condition of your Hosta leaves, the better the health of the plant.

This is because the leaves are the engine of growth, creating sugars through the process of photosynthesis. If leaves become dry and brown it shows the cells are dying and can no longer function to feed the plant. Likewise, a bad snail attack reduces the area of the leaves available to the process but is much less of a cause for

Shelter from other planting

Trying to plant Hosta in situations where even grass is struggling should tell you it is too harsh an environment for them. If you look at the photo above it shows larger trees and shrubs in the background, well away from the Hosta, which is planted among more delicate flowering plants.

It is a good rule of thumb to look at the canopy, or spread, of a plant and assume the root system mirrors that area under the soil.

In the wild Hosta are often grown underneath Acer, on sloping ground, where they can gather water as it percolates through the soil. However, Acers can be just as thirsty as other trees, so be aware they can require even more water to keep everything thriving. If you see photographs, or are lucky enough to experience Japanese gardens in the flesh, a key indicator of their lushness is the ease in which moss grows underneath everything. These gardens are usually more sparsely planted than gardens in the UK, where we do like to cram all sorts of planting together. Japanese style gardens are a labour of love in a more considered way as they require control to keep the plants from getting too overgrown in such verdant conditions.

If your existing planting is well established then we would always recommend you start your Hosta off in a pot to allow it time to develop its root system. You can stand the pot near where you would like to plant it and ideally wait a few years until you can divide it. Pop a generous piece into the ground and pop the rest back into the pot to grow on should the ground grown piece struggle. That way you reduce the risk of losing your plant and at the same time you are acclimatising it to the position it is destined for.

If you are planting an area out from scratch, you can plant your Hosta out at the same time but give it enough room to mature and bear in mind the height and spread of your other plants to avoid them all competing and harming each-others growth prospects. Over time they will need room to develop their full potential.

Hosta, Fern and Astartia together



Shelter from structures

Fences and pergolas provide shade without competing root systems. Do check what is growing on the other side of the fence as your neighbour might have some well-established planting that may impact your Hosta. In the image below, the fence is not a border but is being

concern than the complete removal of the leaves, by deer for example.

If the leaves of your plant are suffering then review where it is situated, and move it to a more sheltered spot. You can remove the damaged leaves as this will encourage the plant to produce new ones but only remove the worse ones, unless the deer have already got to them first. If you completely denude the plant of leaves then it may struggle to produce new ones.

Some trees and shrubs produce sticky saps which can not only damage the look of your Hosta leaves, it can also impede photosynthesis. For a few years we exhibited in the Stud Gate Plant Village at Hampton Court. It was a great spot but the only downside was the sap the lime trees produced, which liberally covered anything underneath them for the duration of the show. This was impossible to remove fully without further damage to the leaves, so we had to rest any plants we used for the rest of the season.



used as a shelter from wind for the [H. 'Sum and Substance'](#). This cultivar will take more sun and turns gold in such conditions:



Pergolas are great ideas for new gardens as they instantly create shade whilst providing a frame over which to train other planting, which may prefer more light. They also offer a degree of privacy.

Mixed border plants

Hosta are a great plant for a mixed border but be careful as densely packed mixed borders are a great hideaway for snails during the day. To help guard against snail damage you can select companion plants that they do not like, such as *Astrantia*, *Agapanthus* and *Alliums*. Members of the onion family are good deterrents. I have yet to try wild garlic as I have been advised it can be quite invasive but, as such, it could produce a rather lovely under-story to some giant Hosta? Ferns look fabulous with Hosta, as do Hellebores, *Trilliums* and other shade loving woodland plants. Removing Hellebore leaves in January allows light to the soil and encourages the flowers to multiply and flourish. In the process you can remove debris and this helps keep the soil clear as spring arrives and the Hosta shoots emerge.



Avoiding pest damage

In the process of clearing the area you can find, and destroy, snails that may be hibernating among the debris. Usually, I find more empty shells than full ones, a satisfyingly good sign of predator activity. You can help prevent snails from using your mixed border to hide in by trimming off the low hanging growth of any taller trees and shrubs standing at the back, allowing more light into the area. This creates a

Preserving the bloom

Cultivars blessed with a delicious blue bloom to their leaves are so much more vibrant if situated in shade. This is because direct sunlight, or high temperatures, will break down the bloom, exposing the base colour of the leaves. At the end of the willow fence in the photo opposite, is [H. 'June'](#) sitting in the shade and looking her best:



Alliums growing alongside Hosta



If snails are a big problem in your garden there are lots of ways to combat them. A warming climate affects their breeding cycles so you need to plan your strategies to work all year round. It is far easier to keep the numbers down but scanning your garden out of

more structured, layered look, which can be quite dramatic and helps you to see what is growing in the border more easily:



Island beds are great for Hosta growing, especially if you keep the surrounding area clear and keep grass mowed. Snails generally stick close to perimeters and shady areas where they can easily retreat to. Removing tall grass, or overgrown corridors, reduces incursion but wherever you do find damage, act fast. If you can't find the snail but can find the trail, remove that as a start – [read here](#) to find out why.

Longer term impacts of weather

The long, hot, dry summer of 2022 reduced the water table to the lowest levels since 1976, in many areas of the UK. The following spring, gardeners were finding they had lost all manner of plants, even long-established shrubs had succumbed to the lack of water during the previous summer. Unfortunately, you cannot see where your water table lies, and how it is being affected, unless you have a bore hole or, in our case, a reservoir. The best thing to do is to monitor water levels locally to see if levels are dropping lower than usual.

Conversely the prolonged wet weather the UK has endured more recently presents the problem of plants rotting in the ground if they become too wet. Usually this only occurs in flooded areas but if the soil becomes so saturated, and the water cannot drain away for a long time, this can have the same effect as a flood. To help mitigate this effect we often advise planting your ground grown Hosta into a slight mound of soil, which will assist drainage from the crown of the plant, especially in heavy soils, such as clay. The more mature the surrounding planting is, the greater protection it will offer against saturated soils.

Hosta can cope with anything except the extremes of wet or dry, so the plants that surround it play an important role in the health of the Hosta. A little time spent planning your planting can reap dividends.

[Speak soon,](#)

[Team Mickfield Hostas](#)

season, when you can find snails hibernating under anything that has been sitting in place for any length of time.

It is never too early or late to do something about your snail population.

Getting it right

I have already written about [Fuller's Mill Garden](#) in Suffolk as a place where well considered planting has led to wonderful displays of Hosta – most of the images in this newsletter were taken there.

This clump of [H. 'Elegans'](#) sits in full sun for much of the day but is close to water, so can endure the conditions.

