

May 2021



The long, dry, frosty spring continues

Last month I wrote about the difficulties of exhibiting in cold springs. I would have been a stressed wreck had we been staging exhibits this year, as the cold continues to hold everything back...



As we welcome in May I really hope we soon see an end to the record breaking frosty nights of the past few weeks. Although I don't feel it has been as cold as some years, it has certainly been a different type of cold with the combination of dryness, with almost zero rainfall.

Watering is a key theme this month

Hostas tend to need more water as they emerge but frosty nights can make the process a little fraught. Watering from below is the saving grace as the plants can then take up what they need without risking getting water into the crown of the plant.

As regular newsletter readers, and nursery visitors, know, this is our preferred method for maintaining a good level of moisture in our plants. It is especially important for the immature sales plants and miniature varieties in our collection. I thought it worth just listing the benefits of doing this in the side column once again.

Tunnel 2 re-covering: net versus polythene

Our parent plants in the collection tunnels spend their life under horticultural net. This keeps the plants at a very similar temperature to those in the garden, not under cover. They tend to emerge later as the soil takes longer to warm sufficiently, but they harden off as they emerge and are less



Our first video of 2021

It's about time we shared a new video and surprise, surprise, the subject in the nursery.

In this video we take you on a quick tour and show how the different environments have influenced hosta emergence during the cold spring.



The importance of water

It can be tricky to gauge moisture levels in pots so we advise watering your container grown hostas from below:

susceptible to the effects of frost to early leaves. The shade tunnels act as large cold frames but ones that allow rainfall through to maintain moisture levels over the winter.

NOTE: We have all probably neglected to water plants over-wintering in a cold frame and the risk to hostas is that they become so dry that the roots cannot re-hydrate and the plant dies. Just overwinter them in the shelter of other garden shrubs or a house wall, which radiates some heat into the night. You will know your garden best and where your plants should receive adequate protection. But don't forget that hostas like to be frozen solid for a period of time each winter if possible.

Hostas are hardy perennials and even the most delicate, temperamental miniatures will survive better if allowed to develop naturally.

The problem with polythene is that it can create more extreme micro-climates.

Our row of stock tunnels are positioned alongside each other, between the first collection tunnel and the packing shed. This is a very convenient arrangement for the operation of the nursery but it does cause problems with airflow and the effects of extreme cold and heat.

The middle tunnel (number 2) has always been noticeably colder and hotter with less airflow than the other two, either side of it. It used to get so cold in winter that we decided to put our warming bench in it to encourage the breaking of dormancy each spring for exhibiting purposes. Having abandoned this practice for the reasons mentioned [last month](#), we have been contemplating replacing the polythene cover with net.

The old cover was becoming degraded and offering very little UV protection to the plants. Unfortunately the winter was so wet and windy we couldn't risk uncovering the tunnel and doing this work as we have a three phase power line running above tunnels 1 and 2. Delays caused by the weather, lock-down, and component supplies, meant the cover didn't arrive until last week, over 6 weeks late.

Unfortunately, by this time the polythene was so wrecked it was barely covering much at all in the tunnel. At least it didn't take long to remove what was left - see the banner

1. It removes the guesswork from watering

Rather than wondering how much water your plant needs, simply keep your dish full and the plant will take all it needs. A shallow dish will ensure the crown of the plant is well above the water and so not at risk of rotting.

Maintaining a good level of moisture in your container is essential to avoid any risk of your plant dehydrating.

2. It encourages strong root development

Hostas will sink their roots an incredible distance to find water so watering in this way helps build a strong root system. If you water little and often from above, your plant will shallow root and this can cause all sorts of problems. We often say to treat your hosta a little meanly to encourage deeper root development but watering from below solves that problem.

3. It helps mitigate pest damage

It is good to use a dish that is quite a bit wider than the plant pot as this makes it a moated barrier against pests such as slugs, snails and vine weevil. These are the major bane of the hosta grower's life but they need air to breathe so a water barrier can be very effective against all but the airborne divisions!

Using water to aid division

Use of water is integral to our method of dividing plants. Hostas love having their roots washed and the addition of a dash of bleach to the water

photo at the head of the newsletter - you can just about see how far back the wind had stripped the polythene.



The new cover only took one and a half hours from unrolling to fully securing - what a vast improvement to covering with polythene, which takes at least a day or two to fully tighten and fasten down.



Roy devised a plan for covering the tunnel to within a foot of the ground and it worked really well. He is now finishing the metal frameworks, which will replace the old wooden doors and tunnel ends so we can complete the job. It is already a much nicer light and temperature in the space BUT despite watching the forecasts and trying to judge the best time to remove the old cover, we still ended up with the tunnel contents being exposed over a couple of frosty nights.

As a consequence we have suffered frost damage to some cultivars, which emerged a little too quickly under what was left of the polythene. Fortunately, the plants were largely dry at the crown because we water from below, so it appears no lasting damage has occurred and the damaged leaves can be removed once the frosts leave. The plants can then produce fresh replacements and will probably still be looking great well into late autumn.

A bigger disappointment was how the frosts have ruined the blooms on the magnolias and left so much blossom looking brown.

Talking to some fellow nurserymen this past few weeks has left me feeling we have escaped lightly. They rely on early spring blossom and flowers to encourage plant sales and it

helps remove any invisible pathogens that may be affecting growth. If your hosta is looking unhappy, it is always a good idea to give it a root wash, so you to see how the roots are doing. Although you can tell a lot from the leaves, we feel the real indicator of hosta health lies beneath the soil.

Removing plants from pots

Water can help greatly when removing impacted plants from pots. Tipping the pot on its side and wetting the root ball should help ease it out of the container without breaking the pot or damaging your back. Jet water over the roots to remove as much soil as possible and it becomes a much more pliable mass to divide.

Removing vine weevil

Water is also a great way to remove an infestation of vine weevil grubs. Simply submerge the plant and the grubs float to the surface. Always check through the roots for any stubborn ones and then re-pot in fresh soil.

One of the major pitfalls of container growing is the fact that you have created the perfect conditions for your plants, which just so happen to be pretty ideal for pests too. We seldom have any problem with our ground grown hostas as we garden on clay, which is a tough medium for pests to invade.

Plant health check

All our mail order plants receive a thorough wash in water (with a dash of bleach), and rinse, before packing and sending bare rooted. This way we can be

has taken customers some imagination and trust to continue buying. Most gardeners know that adverse weather isn't the end of the world but we have welcomed lots of new gardeners to the hobby throughout the pandemic and don't want them to be put off by such a drastically different spring to last year.

And, on that note, I need to end this month's newsletter and get back outside as this is our first open weekend of the season and yesterday was very busy. We will be open from **Fridays through to Mondays** (10am to 4pm) **every weekend until August 2nd**. All other times are by appointment so we can fit in essential nursery work and group visits. We look forward to welcoming many of you back and enjoying the 2021 hosta season.

Speak soon

Team Mickfield Hostas

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sure the plant is in tip-top condition for planting when it arrives with the customer.

We call the washing of hosta roots in bleached water a 'spa treatment' as this process always seems to re-invigorate them and encourages fresh leaf production. Having had my first haircut in 7 months, I know how they feel!

Plant Fairs

We will be attending the Plant Lovers Day at Creake Abbey on Saturday 29th May and the Helmingham Plant fair and Artisan Market on Sunday 30th and Monday 31st May - check out the details on our [shows page](#). Hope to see you there.