



Winter is coming...

Sorry, we've been re-watching 'Game of Thrones' so it seemed appropriate to state the obvious. However, it isn't here yet, and before it arrives we have the glorious colours of autumn to enjoy. This month we share some insights into over-wintering hostas, both here and in Maine...



UK winters

We need to ensure our plants are in tip top condition to cope with whatever mother nature has lined up for us. Thankfully hostas are very hardy plants and can withstand very low temperatures. However, our winters are seldom very cold due mainly to the fact that we are a small island in the path of the Gulf Stream. This gives us a temperate climate, which is subject to more variability than if we were part of a large continent. Lenore has to deal with gardening on a large continent, which is subject to quite different winters. This month she shares her winter preparations by way of contrast, in the side column.

Five tips for over-wintering in the UK

Hostas do not like extremes of wet or dry. If the roots get too wet they will damp off and the rot will travel into the crown, and vice-versa if the crown gets too wet. They do tend to cope with drier conditions more readily but there will be a point at which the roots could become so dehydrated they can no longer process any moisture they receive. Therefore, our first tip focuses on this issue.



October is a beautiful time in Maine

Visitors (called "leaf peepers") come to see the fall color. We may have our first frost by late September or early October, although a hard freeze (less than 28 degrees F or -2 degrees C) comes later, and the ground likely won't freeze until December or January.

Tip 1. Maintain a good soil moisture level

Ground grown hostas do best in free draining soil but they can cope in clay providing they are not the only plants dealing with a deluge. Trees and shrubs help wick away excessive moisture so even in the wettest of winters your hostas should be OK. If, however, your garden is prone to flooding then it might be better to grow your hostas in pots and elevate them if flooding is a risk. Container grown hostas tend not to get too water-logged as drainage is inherent to this form of growing (providing you have the requisite holes in the base of your pot!) If the soil level of your pot is not to the brim then place a small wedge under one side of the pot to tip it slightly. This will help avoid water settling in the top and freezing.

At the nursery we drain the trays the pots sit in, using plugs. This takes the heavy lifting out of the job as the plants can remain in situ. They are all under horticultural net and so will still get rainfall to keep the soil from getting too dry.

Sheltering from the worst of dry winds is a good idea to prevent the soil from drying out. If we have a dry winter a little light watering is a good idea but keep an eye on the forecast, and avoid watering when there is a risk of frost.

Tip 2: Remove dead leaves

At this time of the year the leaves are still working hard to manufacture sugars to feed the roots, so we leave them to do their work until they turn brown. Once the colour has gone we recommend you remove the dead leaves on container-grown plants, which you can discard in the compost bin. Removing the leaves helps avoid excessive wet getting into the crown of the plant as our winters tend to be quite damp. It also helps remove a layer under which pests can shelter. We remove all the leaves from our collection plants but tend not to bother with the ground-grown plants in the garden until we do a clear-up, which can be anytime over winter.



[Hosta 'Whirlwind'](#) crisping at the edges:

Winters here are beautiful as well, although challenging. We have an average of 66 inches of snow over the season here in Orono and more than 100 inches in northern Maine. Although some snow melts during our sunny winter days, we often develop a long-term snow cover, sometimes several feet deep, which may last from January through March.

It is fairly easy to over-winter hostas here in Maine. The first substantial snow helps to insulate hostas from possible below-zero temperatures (below -17.778 degrees C), and the continuing sub-freezing temps help them maintain dormancy.

Hosta leaves can be beautiful in the fall. In our Maine garden we choose not to remove the leaves until spring cleanup. Since we have a short growing season, we want our hostas to absorb nutrients until the first hard freeze, when they likely are covered with snow. And to be practical, we simply have too many hostas to remove all leaves in the fall.

We mulch our gardens heavily with aged wood-chip mulch in the spring, and we do not add mulch in fall. Since temperatures typically remain below freezing throughout winter (below 0 degrees C), there is little need to protect from a freeze-thaw effect. If possible we clean out heavy oak leaves before it snows, to save extra work in the spring. We also bring all our containers into the garage for the winter to protect them from extreme cold. Hostas require a dormancy period of several weeks

Tip 3: Avoid sheltering your pots in dense shrubbery

Even if this presents the best place for you to provide shelter for your pots, don't forget it is also providing shelter for pests. As we seldom experience prolonged cold spells in the UK, pest hibernation patterns are also less predictable and you may find your pots becoming the home for all manner of pests. They would just love the friable, beautifully mixed soil you have used in your pot and welcome the onsite food source you have planted in it.

Tip 4: Shelter your plant containers

Although your plants are likely to cope with hard frosts, your container may not. We have grown hostas in all manner of containers over time, many of which claim to be frost-proof but seldom are.

Our parent plants are all in plastic pots but even these can perish over time, so bear this in mind and move your containers to the shelter of a wall, fence, or tree during dormancy.

Tip 5: Don't over-winter your hostas in a garage, cold frame or greenhouse

The main reason for this is to take advantage of cold spells. Hostas like a defined winter, and to be frozen solid for a good period of time during dormancy. Preventing this from happening doesn't serve the plant well and it won't result in the best performance in the following season. You also need to remember to periodically water the pots to avoid them becoming too dry.

Container soil can warm up, and freeze, much more quickly as it is a much smaller area under the influence of the weather. This is why it is generally best to keep them outside where they are subject to the ambient weather conditions of the garden, rather than in an artificial environment.

This last point nicely highlights how relatively mild our winters tend to be, unlike over in Maine. For our hostas to experience a proper cold spell we need to leave them out over winter rather than having to move them into the relative warmth of a garage or cold frame.

If it looks like we were going to have a prolonged, intensely cold spell of weather, and it is too late to move your pots, you can simulate the insulating effects of a snow cover with an old duvet staked down over the pots.

at 40 degrees F (4 degrees C) or lower, and our heated garage remains cool enough to provide a good winter place for them. We also spray castor oil on all our hosta beds in the fall to discourage voles. Fortunately we have not had a vole problem in our garden, and we want to keep it that way!

Although we do scramble to get things done at the end of the season, I think of fall as a time to enjoy the beautiful color and regroup from our busy gardening summer.

All the best, Lenore



Changing colours of autumn

Some hosta cultivars save their very best for the end of the season. The photo above is of [*H.* 'Lady Isobel Barnett'](#) and it shares similar characteristics of many offspring of [*H.* 'Sum and Substance'](#) (below)



The leaf colours intensify towards the end of the season, rather than fading away.

Throw a plastic sheet over the top to prevent the duvet from leeching wet into the pots and leave it in place until the thaw. Remove it as soon as possible to allow the pots to return to the ambient temperature of the garden and allow them to benefit from rainfall, light, etc.



Anyway, this is all rather in advance of the need to act and enjoying the colours of autumn is the perfect way to end the hosta season.

Hostas turn autumnal in many different ways, with some varieties fading gently as the leaves become exhausted from their work over the season, such as [H. 'A Many-splendored Thing'](#) (above) and [H. 'The King'](#) (in the side column).

Some varieties exhibit a 'last hurrah', becoming more intensely coloured prior to losing their pigments. This intensification of colour is due to the disappearance of the surface 'bloom' of the leaves, which happens as the leaves age during the season. Many 'blue' varieties end the season looking green as the true colour of the leaf is revealed underneath the bloom. Blue varieties which maintain their bloom often seem to turn autumnal as if rusting, with dramatic oranges and golds.

Although we are enjoying the leaves as they turn, sending out mail order plants results in the leaves dying back quicker whilst in transit. Therefore, most of our plants will now be sent out minus their leaves. We will continue to send out mail orders until the frosts arrive.

Next month we share the latest news on our arboretum, reservoir and garden plans.

Speak soon,

Team Mickfield Hostas



Hosta 'Beauty Substance'

Another sport of *H. 'Sum and Substance'* looking glorious.



Hosta 'The King'

As a rule, cultivars with a thicker substance tend to fade more slowly and can often exhibit more colourful streaking during the autumn before dying back.

Some cultivars, which turn all green (viridescent) by the end of the season can sometimes surprise and this year [H. 'War Paint'](#) is still looking quite variegated, which we are putting down to a duller season. I have seen lots of fabulous photos of this cultivar recently still looking strongly variegated. I have also seen new growth, on other viridescent cultivars, exhibiting strong variegation this year.



Hosta 'War Paint'