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Happy Hostas

By Tammy Borden ©

Like many gardeners, I have a fascination with hostas. It began nearly twenty years ago when my husband and I bought our first home with a small yard encased by towering pines that shaded each nook and cranny of our small lot. Back then, I more or less settled for hostas because garden centers offered so little in the way of plants that thrived in the shade. But through the years, I've come to love them more than any other plant in my garden.

I have gone through many phases. For a time, I sought plants with the largest possible leaves to make an instant bold statement. Then, there was the variegated phase, on to the crinkled leaf phase. I also came to appreciate their flowers, which put me on a mission to find the most fragrant and showiest display (My pick for the best flowers – The variety, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, has large 3" tubular lily-like flowers that smell incredible). My latest fascination is the gold-leafed varieties, which I've come to appreciate for the bright, cheery splash they add to those dark corners. *On Stage* and *Sea Fire* are my favorites... this week.

For those who share my passion for hostas, we long for them to be as impressive as possible. While hostas are relatively easy to grow, there are some tips and techniques that can allow your plants to thrive and reach their fullest potential.

Determining Location

In general, most hosta varieties like a shady spot in your garden. But just like the sun, shade can vary in intensity too. Hostas prefer dappled shade rather than a dense canopy of shade. For example, the filtered light offered by a high canopy of trees is much more suitable than the dark recesses of a low growing evergreen. Some varieties actually prefer some sun, but never the blazing heat of afternoon sun. Some examples that can handle morning sun are the impressive *Sum and Substance*, *On Stage* and *Gold Standard*. A touch of sun allows their beautiful coloration to fully develop. Another consideration when sighting your hosta is the exposure to wind. Because they have such a large leaf surface, hostas are more readily subject to scorching and drying out in an unprotected area. So consider placing your hostas in a sheltered location. This can be done with an existing tree line, companion plantings of shrubs or tall perennials and other natural or man-made wind breaks. Lastly, you may need to consider how much your hosta will have to compete with shallow-rooted trees or shrubs. If you dig your planting hole and discover a mass of competing roots, consider another location for your hosta and choose to plant more shallow rooted, shade loving plants there, like lamium or ferns.

Soil Preparation

This is where the most care must be taken if you want a lush hosta. Hostas grow best in a rich soil with a pH of about 6. If your soil is somewhere around that pH, you should be fine. Soil should be moist, but well drained. The best way to achieve the ideal soil condition is to add generous amounts of organic matter when preparing your site. Work in plenty of compost, rotted manure and peat moss. If you have clay soil, consider adding some coarse grit to help aerate the soil. Dig your hole deeper than the root ball and mix organic matter several inches beneath the roots as well.

The size of the hole you prepare is also important. If you're growing a large hosta like Blue Mammoth, don't just dig a hole a foot wide with enough room to fit the root ball in. It's actually recommended that you dig your hole as wide as the mature plant will be. For some hostas, that may mean a hole as wide as three feet! For some instances, this simply isn't possible. But when it is, make the effort and you'll be rewarded in the end.

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Planting

Now that your hole is prepared, firm the soil in the bottom tightly to eliminate air pockets. Soil that is too loose will have a tendency to sink over time. When planting a hosta grown in a pot, you will often find that the roots are enmeshed at the bottom. Gently tease them apart and cut away any damaged or dead roots. Once it is placed in the hole, be sure it is set at the same level it came in the pot. If set too deep, it will inhibit their growth. If set too shallow, the crown can become damaged. Add soil to the hole in layers, firming it as you go. Once finished, water it in well and continue to keep it well-watered for the first couple months until it is established.

Mulching & Feeding

Help your hostas maintain moisture with a 2-3" coating of mulch around the crown of the plant. This may include various organic materials, leaf mold or bark mulch. Do not, however, cover the crown because it can cause problems with rotting. Smaller varieties of hosta should have a thinner layer of mulch. Because you properly prepared your site with rich organic materials, your hosta already has a jump start in the fertilizer department. But the reality is, hostas are big feeders, and they will benefit from supplemental fertilizers. You would think since they are mostly grown for their foliage that you would want high nitrogen. However, hostas do best with a more balanced fertilizer containing equal parts of nitrogen, potash and phosphorus. Too much nitrogen can stimulate too much growth, encouraging hostas to have lush, but soft, sappy foliage that is attractive to slugs and susceptible to wind damage. Fertilization is best when applied in spring and summer.

Watering

Like most plants, it's best to water hostas in the morning, directly to the root base. If you water at night, it may provide an atmosphere that is attractive to slugs, which enjoy wet environments. Avoid alternating extremes of wetness and dryness. It seems obvious, but the larger the plant, the more moisture it will need. Because you properly prepared your site with adequate organic material, your soil should retain moisture, yet be well drained.

Transplanting

If you find that an established hosta is struggling to thrive, feel free to dig it up and transplant it. This is best done in the spring as the shoots are emerging, or in fall as the leaves are dying back. But truth be told, I've transplanted sizable hostas in the middle of summer on a cool day with great success, as long as I've kept them well watered and they spent minimal time with exposed roots. My rule... if a hosta's not happy, move it. It will thank you in the long run.

Following these tips should promise to provide happy, healthy hostas in your yard!