

December 2023



Preparing for winter

Although there is a lot of work at this time of year, it is lovely to be surrounded by the rich warm colours of autumn before the trees shed the last of their leaves...



Clearing up

I know it's dull but it is worth every bit of effort to clear up at the end of a season.

This is the time of year when we need to ensure the plants are all accounted for, and prepped for winter.

Containerised hostas need to be removed from their water trays and have their dead leaves removed. At the same time we clean the surfaces they sit on. Moving everything can be a pain but it is good practice to prevent a build-up of soil and debris underneath the pots. It is also a great opportunity to hunt down pests planning to hibernate in the vicinity. It got me thinking about routine maintenance of all the spaces at the nursery and how it is a great way to stay on top of pest problems.

Most of us can be guilty of only worrying about damage to our plants when they are on show during the season but so much can be done out of season to help mitigate this damage that I thought it a good idea to revisit this subject with Lenore this month.

Unfortunately, poor Lenore and Tom have had quite a year but I will let her explain:

Greetings Hosta Gardeners,

This past gardening season began as expected, with eager anticipation and with beautiful hostas returning like old friends.

Deadlines

On top of all the usual pre-Christmas craziness, we have an additional set of requirements for the business.

National Collection annual report

Every year we are required to report on our [Plant Heritage National Collection](#) in terms of gains, losses, publicity, notable events and any issues we may have faced. The deadline for these reports is December.

This requires us to check everything is present and correct, which is really difficult if you can't get to the pots for dead foliage. We need to clear everything up so we can stock take the collection and report the results. There is no short cut to this work but reporting has become much easier as we can simply export the data from the Plant Heritage Persephony database at the click of a button.



Then it turned to chaos.

We had a parade of animals through our garden, some harmless and others quite destructive. Our outdoor cameras filmed a gopher, a cute little skunk, raccoons, and even a marten, in addition to the typical squirrels and chipmunks. It also filmed a group of five deer returning regularly to feast on our hostas.

The deer began their destruction earlier than usual, treating our garden as their salad bar. We followed every deer-prevention strategy we knew, as well as every new strategy recommended to us by research and by gardening friends. Despite many hours and a good amount of money devoted to deer prevention, we couldn't stop them.



Our gopher set up house in one of our large garden beds. We did not find damage to any hostas, but we did find large mounds of dirt all over the bed. Honestly, we were so busy fighting other pests that we didn't have time to remove the messy mounds. Tom sprayed castor oil in the area and we believe our furry friend has moved on.

We dealt with a variety of smaller creatures as well. First on the scene was an invasion of brown-tail moth caterpillars. These

We keep this database updated alongside our own archives as a record others can access.

RHS Plant Finder

We also have to update our list of plants in the [RHS Plant Finder](#) by 31st December, which requires a full stock take to be undertaken beforehand. This is the only way we know what we have left at the end of the season, ahead of winter.

Unfortunately, we do suffer occasional problems over winter, which means we may have plants listed for sale which we cannot supply but this doesn't happen often. It is stressed that we should only list plants we will have for sale

and so our plant list is a

conservative review of our sales stock given how temperamental some cultivars can be.

Our actual sales stock will start to be augmented through root division of parent plants from April onwards so it is always a good idea to contact us if you are looking for something we list in our collection but do not list for sale and we can advise.

Over wintering potted hostas

I have seen all manner of advice dished out over what to do with containerised hostas during dormancy and have experimented with them all. I have come to the very logical conclusion that, in the UK, they are fine to be left outside.

After all you wouldn't consider lifting ground grown hostas and they do benefit from a defined winter period.

If you move them into a greenhouse, cold frame or garage

caterpillars release toxic hairs that cause severe poison-ivy-like rashes. Tom and I experienced several nasty rashes while gardening early in the season.

Soon we had an onslaught of snails and slugs. We tried organic protective strategies here too, which had some results, but did not stop the severe damage to our hostas.

Finally, I noticed a particular type of leaf damage on several hostas in an isolated side bed. Suspecting foliar nematodes, I reluctantly destroyed four mature, beautiful but damaged hostas.



The University of Maine plant laboratory confirmed my diagnosis of foliar nematodes, a hosta grower's worst enemy. These are microscopic worms that feed on the leaves of many different plant species, increasing rapidly and eventually killing the plant. Wet conditions facilitate the spread of these nematodes from one plant to another, especially if they are fewer than twelve inches apart. There is no effective way to destroy the nematodes. I can only hope my remaining hostas will be safe.

As the deer continued to feed, by August nearly every one of our more than 300 hostas was gone. We ended the season discouraged, exhausted, and quite ready to give up the fight. But as gardeners do, next year we will begin anew, possibly with a newly-installed, very expensive fence. That, of course, will address only one of our pest issues.

Our winter in Maine last year was warmer than usual, with decreased snowpack. The increasingly warmer weather favors the survival of our white-tailed deer, as well as many insect populations. Our summer was one of the rainiest on record, with 22 days of rain in June, and overall summer precipitation 125% to 200% above normal across the state. Hostas like water, but so do some of their predators.

Climate change has created ongoing challenges for gardeners.

you will need to ensure they do not dry out. Dehydrated roots will struggle when spring arrives and the plants need to take on lots of water as they emerge.

Moving the pots into the shelter of a wall or fence and perhaps chocking them at a slight angle so water cannot pool on the soil surface will help protect the crown if we have a wet winter.

Good and bad nematodes

Nematodes are another problem altogether, and not one I was really aware of until speaking to Lenore. I know nematodes are a useful biological control for snails and vine weevil but the conditions for using them are quite specific. They are also an expensive treatment when you are looking at treating an entire nursery.

Alongside beneficial types of entomopathogenic nematode are parasitic ones that can cause disease and damage to plants and animals. There is a great deal of research being done about ways to combat the damaging nematodes, including using soil-based bacteria and fungi, which would be another form of biological control. This research will prove essential to the production of food, especially in light of the changing climate, and such advances would help protect ornamental plants too.

Given the fact that less is known about these organisms than is known, I will continue to be wary about the use of biological controls in attempts to mitigate damage.

The sight of a rabbit with myxomatosis is enough to make

Those of us who love gardening will continue to learn, and hopefully will adapt to those challenges.

Best to all,
Lenore

As Lenore highlights, pests come in all shapes and sizes. We have had our ground grown hostas cut off in their prime by deer and so are getting desperate to get ourselves fenced in, if only the weather would oblige.

We seem to be having less of a mouse problem now we are no longer using polythene to cover our tunnels. There is much less shelter for them to make use of so they are less likely to camp out in our pots over winter. The same could be said for vine weevil, which breed all year round but don't seem to like wet conditions. Also, they rely on dense foliage to go undetected so the more room we are able to give everything, the less damage we get. We are also able to spot that damage and find the culprits more easily. That also goes for snails, which are still the number one pest when it comes to hostas. However, they are somewhat predictable, and more so at this time of year when they seem to congregate in clusters wherever they feel they might be left undisturbed. Turning over trays and moving pots is a great way to find them during the winter. They can be found all over the place as they are not having to hide from hot days. They tend not to stray so far and the simple act of moving things around in the nursery can unearth them easily. It is also a great time to spot slug and snail eggs so you get the chance to stop even more future damage.

All gardening is a battle with nature and some years are more successful than others. Hope you all have a peaceful and restful Christmas, recharging those batteries ahead of the 2024 season.

All the best,

Team Mickfield Hostas

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anyone question the efficacy of biological controls, especially in light of how a virus can 'jump' species. Hopefully continued research will come up with more effective controls.

A kinder death?

I am always getting asked about what to do with a snail when I find one. I tend to get a mixed reaction to my response of a quick death underneath my boot. They seem to be quite happy to let them drown in beer, foam up in salt or dissolve from the inside out with pellets - what a slow and tortuous death.

Whilst I can affect a form of quick death to the pests that bother my nursery and garden, I will do so.

Also, snails are useful in the garden, so setting out to destroy so many through the use of biological controls seems to be taking a sledgehammer to the proverbial nut, and could possibly result in problems elsewhere in ecosystem. Snail damage is a sign you have an overpopulation so you only need to kill a certain number to maintain a healthy balance.