



Identifying hostas Part 5

This month we look at small and miniature varieties, which together make up just under a quarter of our National Collection, and tend to be overshadowed by their larger relatives.

Unless there is a distinctively different leaf shape or colour, it can be difficult to be definitive with an identification of small cultivars as there are so many similar plain leaved varieties in existence.

Small and miniature cultivars

The most obvious place to start with identifying these varieties is size. We state that any hosta under 12" (30cm), in height is a small and miniature cultivars under 6" (15cm) in height.

There are only a handful of small species from which this category of hostas has been developed, some have been more prolific than others, and more suited to the production of cultivars which stay limited in size. There are two species in particular which have produced cultivars suitable for growing in UK gardens:

- [*Hosta nakaiana*](#)
- [*Hosta venusta*](#)

Hosta nakaiana

This species has an open mound of small heart-shaped leaves on slender petioles, producing arching cascades of leaves, generally becoming denser as they mature.



Popular examples of *H. nakaiana* offspring are: [*H. 'Apple Green'*](#), [*H. 'Candy Hearts'*](#), [*H. 'Drummer Boy'*](#), [*H. 'Peter Pan'*](#) and [*H. 'Valentine Lace'*](#). You can find a full list on the Hosta Library.

Subsequent generations and types include garden worthy cultivars such as [*H. 'Tango'*](#) (see side column), [*H. 'Goldrush'*](#) (below), [*H.*](#)

Classifying hostas

It can be problematic to categorise small hostas and agree on what should determine small, miniature or dwarf classifications.

Our classification – see opposite – differs from the American Hosta Society (AHS) definition for miniature as having leaves of 4² inches or less in size.



The AHS cite [*H. 'Blue Mouse Ears'*](#) (above) as the definitive miniature despite the fact that a fully mature plant can reach around 10-11". Because the leaves remain small, it often needs explaining how large the plant can get.

In our experience the variegated forms of *H. 'Blue Mouse Ears'*, the 'mouse' series, seldom reach the

[‘Harry van Trier’](#) (side column), [H. ‘Lemon Lime’](#) and the ‘Tiara’ series of hostas – see [June 2010 newsletter](#).



Hosta venusta

This species has a dense mound of very small, pointed leaves with few veins and purple flowers. Offspring of *H. venusta* often have darker lavender or purple flowers.



Popular examples of *H. venusta* offspring are: [H. ‘Gold Drop’](#) (see [January 2015 newsletter](#)), [H. ‘Hush Puppie’](#), [H. ‘Paradise Puppet’](#) (below) and [H. ‘Tom Thumb’](#). There are numerous offspring listed on the Hosta Library. However, many are not commercially available and can be very tricky to grow.



same dimensions as the parent. We feel we should put all the variegated ‘mice’ into the miniature category and leave the parent in the small.

Overall, we prefer to look at the plant mound size rather than the leaf size as it helps makes it easier for customers to relate their choice of hosta to other plantings. Also we abandoned the term ‘dwarf’ simply because of the disagreement over whether it should be smaller or larger than miniature!

Although some miniatures would do well as ground cover, they would get lost in a typical garden. We feel they are better suited to being container grown, and perhaps elevated, so you can appreciate their beauty without having to get on your hands and knees.

In contrast many small cultivars are really good plants for the garden, many will spread to a decent width without getting too tall. This makes them an excellent choice for a mixed border, especially when you are looking at mixing leaf textures and forms.

[H. ‘Harry van Trier’](#)



They can be used to great effect as part of an under planting story, to add scale to a scheme, so don’t dismiss them when considering what to plant in larger spaces. Obviously they come into their own

If you think of particular small cultivars you have come across, it is likely you could trace their origins back to either of these two species. Beyond those are other notable sources of small cultivars.

***Hosta* 'Blue Cadet'**

This cultivar originated from a seedling of [H. 'Tokudama'](#), which is a smaller form of [H. 'Elegans'](#) with more rounded leaves of a tough texture. *Hosta* 'Tokudama' is notoriously slow to grow but it has been used as a parent to produce stronger progeny. Among the offspring is [H. 'Blue Cadet'](#), a much smaller plant than the others but is perhaps one of the most prolifically sold small blue hostas in the UK over the years. It is an incredibly reliable grower with neat, heart shaped leaves and has produced a selection of influential offspring including [H. 'Blue Mouse Ears'](#), perhaps the most popular small blue to have hit the market in recent years – see side column. This cultivar, and its offspring have easily identifiable round leaves of thick substance – almost like a succulent in look and feel.

The red stemmed version of *H. Blue Cadet* is called [H. 'Red Cadet'](#) (see photo below) and is technically a miniature. I like to use this cultivar in a hanging basket as the leaves are almost turquoise on top of deep red stems – very striking:



Hosta 'Blue Cadet' has also produced [H. 'Gold Edger'](#), which has produced a charming series of offspring – see our [September 2011 newsletter](#). Their densely packed, compact habits are terrific for edging and creating low mounds of interesting colours.

My favourite sport of *H. 'Blue Cadet'* is [H. 'Toy Soldier'](#), which straddles the small-medium category. The variegation is subtle but a great choice if you are looking for a plant which can be used as a foil for more colourful planting and you don't want to use a plain leaved cultivar. I have used it so many times in displays

when space is limited and you can often reimagine a grander planting scheme using smaller plants.

H. 'Tango'



There is a great variety of plain and variegated leaves in the small category and every colour in the hosta spectrum. The miniature category tends to be more limited in variety with new cultivars appearing very infrequently.

You can experiment with restricting the growth of your plant by planting it in an undersized container – see our [July 2008 newsletter](#).

***Hosta* 'Slim and Trim'**



One of the best growing miniature blue hostas to have been introduced in recent years is [H. 'Slim and Trim'](#). This little beauty looks great from the moment it emerges right through to the end of the season and is a cultivar I have used extensively in displays and in combination plantings for customers. It shows distinct characteristics of *H. venusta* in leaf shape and plant habit. However, it actually comes from *H. 'Dorset Blue'*

because you can sit it next to anything and it will look fabulous:



Tardiana Grex

The process of producing this series of hostas has resulted in several small progeny, which have successfully produced new generations of small cultivars. I covered the Tardiana Group in the [October 2022 issue](#) of the newsletter. They are a very popular and distinct series of cultivars dominated by blue leaves of terrific substance. When you become accustomed to the characteristics of the Tardiana hostas you can spot them easily and hazard a guess of their relationship, if not the exact name. The smallest of the Tardiana Group is [H. 'Blue Moon'](#), which has produced several small cultivars such as [H. 'Cherub'](#) and [H. 'Moon River'](#). [Hosta 'Dorset Blue'](#), another Tardiana, has also been responsible of a number of offspring – see the side column.

Once again, if you are finding it problematic to identify your small cultivar then a great place to start is the Hosta Library. Once you have some specifics about the plant you can delve into its potential origins to help narrow down the search for a name. Hopefully I will have given you enough pointers to begin your search. I am planning to display quite a lot of small cultivars at the Suffolk Show and Hyde Hall Flower Show this season so if you are struggling by all means pop along and ask some questions – take some photos of your plants if you are hoping for an identification. [Next month we look forward to the promise of spring both here and in the US with Lenore.](#)

Team Mickfield Hostas

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(a Tardiana Group hosta) via [H. 'Purple Verticulated Elf'](#). The giveaway is the intense blue of the leaves and the thicker substance. Indeed, it is an incredibly robust hosta for its size.

Interestingly, [H. 'Dorset Blue'](#) has also produced three of our favourite small cultivars: [H. 'Everlasting Love'](#), [H. 'Warwick Comet'](#) and [H. 'Wolverine'](#), all of which lie on the border of small-medium in size.

Different leaf shapes

There are some quite distinctly different small cultivars around such as [H. 'Quill'](#) (below), [H. 'Dragon Tails'](#) and [H. 'Tongue Twister'](#), which are quite easy to identify due to their individuality.



Different variegation

There are some small cultivars with quite striking variegation, such as the offspring of [H. 'Striptease'](#), with their leaf inside a leaf variegation. If your plant is variegated in this way you can start by looking up the progeny of [H. 'Striptease'](#) on the Hosta Library.