



How to identify hostas Part 3

I have a huge blue/green/gold hosta with enormous leaves, what is it?

As with many hostas, it is difficult to be definitive about naming a plant simply by looking at a single leaf. The habit and size of the plant is important information in identifying it. There are many large-leaved hostas that only grow to a modest clump and there are some larger varieties that have relatively small leaves. In this issue of the newsletter, we focus on large leaved, giant hostas.



The photo above is of rain on a leaf of [*H. 'Seducer'*](#).

Where to start

The origins of many large-leaved hostas are difficult to establish definitively. Simplistically the issue lies with the wild populations of species they may originate from, and how they differ enormously in the wild, even within an individual planting.

It is very likely that modern large-leaved cultivars have multiple species from which they could have developed, which is probably why registrations often list parentage as unknown. As there is such variability among wild populations, it seems Victorian plant hunters often attributed quite different types as a single species. They may have been collected from the same spot but finding a representative example would have been a subjective process.

It is quite possible for many of these early introductions to exhibit characteristics which change as the plants mature. What we have become accustomed to as the characteristics for many of these species is due more to the isolation of specific botanical elements, which in turn allows a broad definition to be arrived at. In any

Large-leaved giant species

If, like me, you find you like specific characteristics in hostas, it is very interesting to work outwards from the different species to find common traits and then see how they have been used by breeders to create new cultivars. A knowledge of the different species is not only fascinating it can be extremely useful in identifying cultivars.

Large leaved, giant hostas tend to fall into three broad categories of characteristics covering three 'types' of species:

1. *H. sieboldiana* types, whose leaves exhibit lots of texture, are generally thick in substance, glaucous and matt. The flowers

case, these broad definitions are useful in so far as they can indicate characteristics that may help us identify unnamed large-leaved varieties.

If this is an area you would like to research further then I can point you to The American Hosta Society's education section, which is a terrific resource to delve into.

I hope I don't give any purists out there the vapours by saying, rather than getting bogged down in the species definitions, as interesting as it is, people usually just want a name they can work with. If we cannot be definitive about a cultivar we can usually give a few starting points for further research. For example, if we know a plant is exhibiting certain characteristics, we can suggest people can investigate a specific branch of the genus to find out more. See the side column for a coarse beginners guide to the giant, large-leaved species.



Hosta 'Empress Wu'

This is a relative newbie on the scene but has caused a sensation for the size of plant it promises. In our experience this cultivar can be a slow starter but once it gets to a certain point it fairly romps away. Interestingly it seems that the variegated forms are quicker to get going - see photo above of [H. 'Wunderbar'](#).

Naturally curious about its origins, I thought it looked like [H. montana f. macrophylla](#) in size, habit and leaf structure, if not colour. However, it originates from *H. sieboldiana*. It isn't until this cultivar matures that its parentage becomes more obvious as characteristics change. Immature *H. 'Empress Wu'* plants are quite glaucous, with thick, generally flat leaves and prominent veins. More mature specimens tend to be less glaucous and the thick leaves exhibit more texture. It is a great example of how a modern cultivar can exhibit characteristics of multiple species as it matures. Indeed, I find myself rather preferring the immature plant to the mature, which is no surprise as I have found many of my favourite varieties are *H. montana* types.

tend to be large, cluster forming, and held on strong scapes.

Cultivars with these characteristics have been extremely popular over the years. You may recall the Tardiana Group featured last month, which was bred from [H. sieboldiana 'Elegans'](#).

Most of the giant blue cultivars owe their parentage to *H. sieboldiana*, at least in part. Several exhibit traits from other species but generally the more corrugated the leaf, the more likely it has *H. sieboldiana* origins.

The image below is a favourite of mine, taken by Tim Saville a few years ago. He was kind enough to give me permission to use it and I have yet to find a better photo of [H. 'Frances Williams'](#) a classic sport from *H. 'Elegans'*. Over the years this cultivar has produced a lot of offspring which have become commercially available and popular.

It is worth checking the list of offspring, if you have a cultivar which is beautifully textured with excellent colour.



Sometimes the origin of a cultivar can surprise. I have popped a photo of [H. 'Seducer'](#) at the head of the newsletter to illustrate this

[Hosta 'Sum and Substance'](#)

This is a fabulous cultivar whose parentage is unknown. Looking at images of immature and mature plants it is another which exhibits characteristics from multiple species. Rather like *H. 'Empress Wu'* the leaves of the immature plant are flatter, with pronounced veins and a wonderful waxy sheen to the leaves, which would suggest a *H. nigrescens* type. Yet as the plant matures it develops more texture so there is definitely some *H. sieboldiana* influence there. The suggestion that it may have mixed [H. nigrescens](#) ['Elatior'](#) and *H. 'Bengee'* origins would seem logical as the former species is evident in the immature leaves and the latter has *H. sieboldiana* origins through [H. 'Tokudama'](#).

A lot of the sports from *H. 'Sum and Substance'* also exhibit the same huge, luxuriously waxy, giant leaves and are very easy to spot once you become familiar with them - see photo below of [Hosta 'Winter Snow'](#).

A long established, mature plant of *H. 'Sum and Substance'* can leave you guessing until you take a closer look at the leaf substance.



[Hosta fluctuans](#)

This species is very similar to *H. nigrescens* but with wavy margins to the leaves and a more spreading habit. Although *H. 'Krossa Regal'* is a seedling of *H. nigrescens*, it looks like it may have *H. fluctuans* in its parentage too. The leaves and habit of *H. 'Krossa Regal'* definitely seem to be a beautiful cross between the two species. It's no wonder the experts have had a hard time trying to be more definitive about hosta origins.

I mention this particular species as *H. fluctuans* Variegated was subsequently named [H. 'Sagae'](#), due to where it was discovered in Japan. *Hosta 'Sagae'* is one of the most elegant cultivars in habit. It has very flat, waxy, thick leaves and a fine yellow margin to the glaucous leaf centre. It produced one of the most popular cultivars to be introduced in the giant category, [H. 'Liberty'](#). This sport exhibits fabulously showy wide gold margins in the spring, which fade to creamy white later in the season. There are several sports from *H. 'Sagae'* which all have margins of various depth and colour

point. *Hosta 'Seducer'* come from a cultivar called [H. 'Dorothy Benedict'](#), which in turn is an offspring of *H. 'Frances Williams'*. Unlike its parent,

H. 'Dorothy Benedict' is a problematic plant to grow as it wants to revert/sport from its streaky variegation too readily. However, it has been used to breed some beautiful cultivars and *H. 'Seducer'* is one. We added it to our National Collection a year or two after I featured the story of *H. 'Dorothy Benedict'* in our newsletter, which is why it didn't make the list.

2. [H. montana](#) types, whose leaves are flatter but still thick in substance. They tend to have pronounced veins and often a satin sheen on very neat leaves (see photo below). These types tend to be among the early risers in spring with [H. montana](#) ['Aureomarginata'](#) and [H. 'First Love'](#) racing each other to be first way ahead of all the others.



Hosta montana types tend to be less prolifically flowering with smaller flowers on top of long arching scapes.

The image below is of the flowers of [H. 'Arctic Blast'](#), a cultivar whose parentage goes back to *H. montana*. The flowers on this cultivar are stunning and quite a development from the species.

and, if you visit the nursery in early spring, they are obvious as early risers. They vary in performance, but *H.* 'Liberty' has proven the largest, most reliable grower of the lot in our experience.



Almost all of the species and cultivars listed we hold in our National Collection, and many have been featured in previous newsletters over the years. You can find these in our [newsletter archive](#) if you would like to find out more. I haven't linked directly to them as they will probably be updated in the future - this genus doesn't stand still!

If you have a large leaved giant variety, you wish to identify, then it would be a good idea to look at lists of the species mentioned here on a resource such as the [Hosta Library](#). Each hosta information page has a link to the plant details in the top left-hand corner of the page, and a list of offspring with a leaf colour code beside it.

There is also a species update from W. George Schmid, which will show you just how simplified I have made the subject in this newsletter!

Once again, I would like to recommend using the [Hosta Register](#) and [Hosta Library](#) to find out more.

Next month Lenore and I look into the power of hostas if you are gardening on a budget.

Speak soon

Team Mickfield Hostas

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3. *H. nigrescens* types, whose leaves are perhaps a mid-point in texture and colour from the previous two types. They have an almost waxy substance to the leaves and tend to have an elegant and upright habit with longer petioles and tall flower scapes. Perhaps the most popular of the *H. nigrescens* types is *H.* 'Krossa Regal', which is also very elegant in form. However, I feel it may also have some *H. fluctuans* origins too - see the main body of the newsletter.

