

August 2021



### *To chop or not to chop, that is the question...*

Hosta are predominantly grown for their foliage, which gives a wonderfully long season of glory in the garden. The flowers are a short-lived bonus, so for many people they are less of a factor in their choice of cultivar but that attitude seems to be changing...



#### **Reflecting change**

As flower colour has become a more important consideration to many customers, I designed our [search page](#) to help them determine which cultivars to go for. However, flower colour can be as tricky to determine as dominant leaf colour.

Hosta leaves are usually their most vibrant in May and June. Young growth tends to be less defined in colour and older leaves tend to start fading in intensity. Many cultivars change colour during the season too, which can make them more vibrant either in the early spring or late summer. This makes it problematic to pick a dominant leaf colour to refer to. The same can also be said for the flowers. Some cultivars have dramatic, deeply coloured buds, which open out to very pale flowers. Some offer dramatic flowers from less promising buds and the infinite number of shades between white and purple has to be seen to be believed. The weather can also have quite an impact on the flower colour and development too.

As with all hosta characteristics, they can be quite variable, so please remember this and don't be surprised if you find your plant isn't exactly performing as expected every year.

#### **Should I cut flowers off or leave them?**

This is very much a matter of personal choice so perhaps looking at some of the pros and cons might help you to



*Celebrating hosta flowers*

The following photos are random flowers taken this week from the collection tunnels and nursery garden to illustrate some of the variety of forms.

The flower in the photo above comes from [H. 'Abba Irresistible'](#).



decide.

#### Letting your hostas flower is good because they:

- help improve the diversity of the insect life of your garden
- help support a declining bee population
- they look pretty, if only briefly and there is a huge range of flower types in the hosta world - see the photos in the side column
- encourage the plant to develop naturally. However, dead-heading is a good idea to avoid leaf damage from decaying flowers becoming stuck to them
- can produce unintentional seedlings
- allow pollen to be gathered for breeding purposes

#### Removing the flowers as they appear helps:

- avoid the plant using a lot of stored so helping it mature more quickly
- prematurely flowering plants recover quickly. See plant survival notes below
- trick the plant into a lengthier season. We found that removing the flowers from our collection plants would encourage them to continue leaf production for longer into the autumn. This was very useful when we used to do late season shows requiring a display.
- avoid the risk of unintended seedlings
- avoid detracting from the foliage if that is what you want to see in your garden
- get you into trouble with pollen collectors!

#### What do we do?

Now we have the freedom of not having to stage flower show displays we can allow our plants to more or less do their own thing throughout the season. Therefore, our collection plants are allowed to flower and then we dead-head.

Our sales plants are allowed to flower and are then dead-headed.

Flowers on our stock plants are removed if we are growing the plants on from small divisions, to help encourage them to grow.

#### Plant survival

Flowers are the means by which a plant reproduces in the wild. Plants usually flower at a specific time of the year. The flowering period can be influenced by the weather, but only

[Hosta 'Old Glory'](#) in flower. A good example of trying to pick a dominant colour. This cultivar is registered as having purple flowers but on closer inspection it is purple striped rather than a solid purple.



[Hosta 'Arctic Blast'](#)

This cultivar has spectacular flower scapes, tall and elegant with a graduated set of flowers off spaced nodes.



[Hosta 'Blue Mouse Ears'](#)

The 'mouse' series of cultivars have very distinctive densely clustered flowers, which often look like mini hyacinths. The beauty of these particular flowers is they look in scale with the plant and are quite prolific.

marginally. Therefore, if a plant flowers very early in the season, especially if the flower is sent up without surrounding foliage appearing, it can be a sign that the plant is trying to survive and needs attention.

Quite often, especially in container grown hostas, this is a sign the plant has root problems. Remove the plant from its container and see what is happening. More often than not the plant needs dividing. Remove the flower scapes to encourage all the stored energy to be diverted to leaf production.

The flowering of the hostas has become more important to us over the years as we do all we can to encourage insect diversity at the nursery. In an effort to stop insect damage to our hostas in the poly tunnels we put up insect strips as an experiment a few years ago. We were horrified how indiscriminate this method was in trapping just about everything except birds. But it was a great way for us to appreciate the changes we needed to make to our undercover plants to enable insects and plants to live harmoniously. In fact it has informed our decision to not cover the ends of any of the tunnels when we re-cover. With the new net cover on tunnel 2 we have noticed how much insect life can freely move around and not get trapped, so Roy has decided to leave the ends open and will be attaching the net inside rather than to the new steel work he designed.

Doing this will also allow the plants to experience less temperature differential between being under cover and outside. This year has been rather tricky with the high humidity under plastic so tunnels 1 and 3 have portholes cut along the sides to enable airflow. Tunnel 2 (the middle of the stock tunnels) used to be the worse tunnel for insect damage as the airflow was the most compromised. The heat and cold used to be the most extreme and scorching of leaves was by far the worse in that tunnel too. This year the net cover has transformed the situation so we have got the covers for tunnels 1 and 3 on order.

Anyway, that's enough about us, Lenore has been investigating attitudes to hosta flowers in Maine and offers the following insights on the subject, together with some beautiful photos:



[Hosta 'Church Mouse'](#)

Another 'mouse' with a densely packed flower head.



[Hosta 'Midnight Ride'](#)

This particular cultivar has flowers that tilt upright rather than hang, they stand quite high above the leaf mound and are very striking.



[Hosta 'Titanic'](#) in bud

*Hosta 'Titanic'* is a sport of [H. 'Sum and Substance'](#) and the buds and flowers of this branch of the genus are quite distinctive.

*Hosta 'Powder Blue'*



Hello Gardeners,

Hosta flowers present complicated choices. I wanted to learn more about people's views on managing flowers, so I raised the issue with many Maine hosta gardeners over the past several weeks.

I learned that people here tend to feel strongly about hosta flowers, no matter what their particular opinion. Some people prefer the uncluttered beauty of hosta foliage, and cut all scapes as they emerge. Most, however, allow the flowers to bloom, appreciating their beauty and variety, as well as the fragrance of the later-blooming *plantaginea* descendants. Some emphasized the flowers' benefit to pollinators (who currently are endangered in the U.S., decreasing at the rate of one-third each year). Some people enjoy most hosta flowers but prefer to cut a few they consider less attractive, or they may cut emerging scapes to provide more energy for the plant.

American Hosta Society members have a growing appreciation for hosta flowers. Mark Zilis, one of the most respected U.S. hosta hybridizers, addressed the issue of flowers in his well-known book, [The Hostapedia](#) (2009, A & Z Nursery, Inc.). Zilis recalls that hosta flowers were once denigrated, but this is no longer the case. He says, "Times have changed and hosta flowers are now evaluated for their ornamental merit." He notes that some hybridizers now breed hostas specifically for flower performance. Indeed, some recent hosta varieties produce remarkable flowers.

As for seed pods, many people cut the flower scapes after blooming, either to improve appearance, to spare the plant from producing unnecessary seeds, or to prevent seedlings



[Hosta 'Winter Snow'](#) gradually opening. Another sport of [H. 'Sum and Substance'](#) showing very similar buds and flower structure.

### **Flowers from Lenore's garden**

The following photos are from Lenore's garden and linked to more information if we hold them in our collection:

[Hosta 'Dancing Queen'](#)



[Hosta 'Bressingham Blue'](#)

Many of the *H. sieboldiana* originating cultivars share magnificent flowers, often very large with multiple blooms. *H. 'Powder Blue'* (at the start of Lenore's piece) has those characteristics too.

from appearing in their gardens. Others enjoy finding volunteer seedlings. Some gardeners save hosta seeds for hybridizing. They collect and plant seeds, some open-pollinated and some intentionally pollinated. In tours of collectors' gardens across the country I have seen many unknown seedlings growing happily among other well-known hostas.

Personally, I love the beauty and variety of both hosta buds and flowers, as well as the fragrance of *plantaginea* varieties. I strongly wish to help pollinators. I like finding seedlings in the garden but I do cut many of the spent flower scapes. And finally, I enjoy filling vases with fresh hosta flowers, from June through September!

Best to all,  
Lenore

I hope you enjoyed this flower fest, from both sides of the Atlantic. The best is yet to come as many fragrant varieties start to exhibit during August and September. I hope to have a few with me at the [Hyde Hall Flower Show](#) next week. We will also be at the [Norfolk Plant Heritage Plant Sale](#) at Hethersett on Bank Holiday Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> August - this is a great plant lovers' event, well worth attending.

Speak soon,  
**Team Mickfield Hostas**

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[Hosta 'Brother Stefan'](#) in bud

At this stage the flowers look like they might have a blue tinge.



[Hosta 'Brother Stefan'](#) in flower,

showing off how white the blooms are despite the more colourful buds.

Finally an apology for not having done a video lately, we have been rather stretched at the nursery, but in a good way. I plan to capture a video of progress for next month.