

March 2021



### *How we became hooked on hostas...*

Our collection of hostas was a passion for both Yvonne and Robin, though they came at the subject from different directions: Yvonne is a collector, driven to add to her list of plants, of many genera, but especially hostas. Robin became an enthusiast off the back of Yvonne's interest in the genus, motivated to turn the hobby into a business.

#### **So how did it start?**

In 1981, Yvonne visited her old school chum who had recently returned to the UK after several years living in the USA. On her return she moved to St Neots (Cambridgeshire) and in her garden she found a mature clump of [H. 'Halcyon'](#), from which she split a piece for Yvonne. This gift marked the start of Yvonne's hosta obsession.



*H. 'Halcyon'*

The plant that started a 40-year collecting habit. It's no surprise Yvonne fell in love with this cultivar as there is much to recommend it.

In the early 1980s there were very few hostas available and those that were, were often plain leaved varieties. This was just before micro-propagation techniques created the explosion of sports we now have available. It was also the time before the Internet, so tracking down new varieties and seeking information about the genus involved quite a lot of detective work. Sourcing new varieties to add to her collection became a bit of a quest.

#### **Hosta triangle**

We are still puzzled why, in the driest part of the UK, three hostas specialists started up around the same time, coming at the subject from very different backgrounds. Although we began collecting hostas from 1981, we didn't start Mickfield Hostas until 1992 and we started exhibiting in 1993.

A few miles north of our nursery is the village of Hoxne, on the border with Norfolk, and home to Goldbrook Plants, which was established in 1983 by Sandra Bond. Sandra was a keen propagator and breeder of hostas but perhaps more widely known for her wonderful Chelsea displays of miniature varieties.



*Nursery news*

As I write this newsletter, there are still a few pockets of snow lingering in ditches and sheltered spots despite several days of very spring like weather. Although we don't usually have much snow these winters, we had sufficient to stress the ancient net cover on our first collection tunnel. Roy had to take a knife to it

Only two miles north, on the same road as our nursery, was Park Green Nurseries established in 1985 by Richard and Mary Ford. The Fords made a name of themselves through hostas but were not exclusively a hosta based nursery, offering all sorts of other plants and sundries.

We all exchanged hostas with each other in the early days and got to know Roger and Ann Bowden in Devon, Diana Grenfell in Hampshire, June Colley and John Baker, also in Hampshire, and Una Dunnett in Worcestershire, among many others. We also had Beth Chatto and Adrian and Alan Bloom at Bressingham Gardens to call on locally, which was a good start.

### Where next?

It became apparent quite quickly that the best source of new varieties was to be found in the US among the [American Hosta Society \(AHS\)](#), which we joined in the spring of 1986. We promote the organisation to anyone with a keen interest in hostas as there is such a wealth of information to be shared. Indeed, the latest issue of the AHS Journal features an article about *H. 'Halcyon'* and the remarkable contribution of Eric Smith, a UK breeder, to the genus. Written by Mike Shadrack and June Colley, if it doesn't whet your appetite to explore this branch of the genus then I don't know what would. Delicious photos abound in the Journal, especially after the annual Conventions, when gardens of the host state open up their magnificent acres for inspection.

[The 2021 National Convention](#) is now open for registration:



### American connections

Robin and Yvonne's early forays resulted in making contact with Peter and Jean Ruh from Chesterland, Ohio in 1989. Peter and Jean held a beautiful collection of over 2,000 different varieties and were meticulous with regard to cataloguing their plants. Regular correspondence

to stop the weight bending the framework of the tunnel. He was largely successful with only five uprights requiring attention.

The snow was just freezing in situ and he couldn't do the usual trick of flipping the snow out of the net with a broom.

The net cover is overdue replacing but it will have to wait its turn as tunnel two has started to divest itself of the poly cover over the winter. We have had some harsh winds in East Anglia over the past few month, which has stressed the polythene to its limits. Roy is currently stripping back all the shading and net sections before we remove the polythene and replace the wood ready to re-cover the tunnel in horticultural net.

There is always something needing attention!



Rather typically most of the damage occurred over the miniature and small varieties so Roy and I spent a couple of days removing the worse of the snow, prior to the thaw, to avoid waterlogging the pots. It's a good job hostas are hardy, this should have given them a good dose of cold to re-set their clocks.

Usually hostas respond well to a proper cold spell and emerge more brilliant in the spring. Fingers crossed we don't get another cold spell to

throughout the 1980s and 1990s usually centred on getting hold of specific Tardianas, the group name for the offspring developed from Eric Smith's original crossing of *H. sieboldiana* and *H. 'Tardiflora'*. Over the next decade Robin and Yvonne ordered something of everything Peter had available and towards the end of the 1990s they had to look elsewhere to satisfy their collection habit. This was when they started ordering from Shady Oaks in Minnesota. At that time they were also ordering sales stock to help bolster their own divisions as interest grew in the UK.

### **Dutch connections**

In 1993 a young Dutchman and his father introduced themselves at the nursery. If Yvonne and Robin were enthusiasts then Marco Fransen could be called an uber-enthusiast and he returned several times over the next few years on collecting forays throughout the UK, occasionally camping at our nursery as a handy base close to the ferry terminals to Holland.

Over the years Marco became our trusted source of plants and he supported us when our 1999 consignment of sales plants from Shady Oaks was poisoned by some peat substitute we bought from our usual supplier. Not only was that whole consignment poisoned, everything we potted on that autumn was also affected. Only a handful of the plants we bought over that autumn survived. This left us facing the 2000 season without the quantities we needed to service the shows. Marco stepped in and supplied us with everything he could spare so we were able to keep going – what a friend.

### **Getting diverted**

The decision Yvonne and Robin made to start exhibiting in 1993 soon became a way of life, which was necessary to continue building the business. The downside to the exhibiting was less time spent at the nursery during the season. As with any hobby that turns into a business, the reason for interest soon becomes eclipsed by the need to make money. You end up not doing the things that interested you in the first place. In the early days of exhibiting Robin and Yvonne rarely spent any time at the nursery, returning to re-stock and swap out parent plants for displays.

Robin and Yvonne had an open invitation to visit Peter and Jean Ruh but they never made it over. Unforeseen events, and the pressures of the show season, meant they could only do so out of season, missing all the opportunities to visit the wonderful gardens. They managed

hold them back as we can't wait to see the shoots all poking through.



### ***Nursery Opening***

It also looks as though we will be able to open the nursery from 12th April, which we will do by appointment only to start with. Please do call or [email us](#) in advance to arrange a convenient day so we can ensure you have a safe and enjoyable visit.

If all continues to look well we are hoping to return to opening long weekends during May, June and July. Although we have lots of space for several visitors at any one time it would still be a good idea to register your intention to visit with us prior to the day so we can ensure we are not overwhelmed.

We are a working nursery so expect to see all sorts of work in progress, which we are always happy to show you if you are interested.



### ***2021 Show Season***

It appears there may be something looking like a show season for 2021 but events are likely to be scaled back, and pushed back to later in the year.

Rather encouragingly [our calendar](#) has a smattering of plant fairs given the green light to happen. Obviously these are all much smaller

numerous trips over to see Marco as it is so easy from our part of the world to nip across to Holland.

It was such a shame Robin and Yvonne never managed to get to an AHS Convention, the next best thing was receiving the AHS Journal coverage of the events complete with photos of mouth-watering gardens that looked impossibly lush.

### **My interest in hostas**

I am often asked 'why hostas?' and for me, their appeal grew over time. I have never been a collector of anything really, least of all plants but it is really hard to ignore the impact of hostas, especially when used to great effect in a garden or edging a pathway. In May 1988 I was over in Washington DC to give a paper at a conference at Georgetown University. I stayed on the edge of Georgetown and walking to the University each day involved passing down wonderfully picturesque streets lined with hostas. What a sight it was with the cherry blossom still out. It left a lasting impression of seeing these beautiful plants in the flesh, or should that be leaf? Exhibiting is one thing but you can never do the plants justice in such a confined space so my desire is to exhibit them permanently here at the nursery in more imaginative ways.

### **Getting started**

The advent of the Internet and the ability to research subjects easily has bought the joy of collecting to a wider audience and has ensured knowledge continues to be shared. Modern collecting has been made so much easier when you are only a few clicks away from brilliant resources to aid your search, such as Plant Heritage.

We are so far removed from the pioneering days of the Victorian collectors but there are still remote regions of the world yet to be explored. As far as hostas are concerned the trick is finding the older cultivars when so many modern cultivars have been introduced that overshadow them. However, as long as Mickfield Hostas exists we will continue to promote the older cultivars and try our best to ensure they continue to have a place in peoples' gardens in the future.

### **Your stories**

To wrap up, I spoke recently to Warren Pollock from the American Hosta Society as he is also interested in what gets people interested in hostas and liked the idea of 'Hooked on Hostas' as a theme. Please do [get in touch with me](#) if you have an interesting story about how you got into hostas. Let me know if you are happy to have your story used and do let me know what it is you really love about them, you can get

events than the flower shows we have attended in the past but small is beautiful in this strange new world. We are certainly looking forward to getting out and about again and it is worth keeping an eye on this page as there might be some more dates coming up.



### *Plant Heritage*

As I think I have probably mentioned already, I come from a research background and one of the many delights of working with [Plant Heritage](#) is the investigative work required to identify the origins of old cultivars and it creates intriguing stories of plantsmen and women, many of whom were (and probably still are!) quite eccentric characters.

I love investigating all aspects of subjects I enjoy, not just hostas, so I enjoy hearing about what my fellow Plant Heritage collection holders are up to. I strongly recommend looking into the work of this great organisation if you too share this interest – there is so much excellent work going on.

One question I now have on my mind is how a mature clump of *H. 'Halcyon'* was to be found in a St Neots garden in 1981. Who planted it and where did it come from? As a mature clump it would have had to have been in the garden for at least 4 years. It is entirely possible this was one of the original plants Eric Smith was responsible for introducing to the public.

as poetic as you like - let your enthusiasm flow.

Don't forget to start protecting your plants against pests now the weather is warming up - visit our [FAQ page](#) for more details.

Speak soon,

**Team Mickfield Hostas**

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If you would like to know more about the Tardiana Group of hostas we produced an introduction to the range in the [July 2007 newsletter](#). It could do with updating as the offspring of the Group has continued to grow in number so perhaps that's an idea for later in the year.