



## We apologise for the timing of this newsletter

Yes, we agree we could have waited before covering a depressing subject such as Virus X in hostas.

If the global economic downturn does nothing else, it should serve to remind us that for every positive there is always a negative. Likewise in gardening, and although we often say that hostas are bombproof, they are susceptible to more damaging things than snail attacks...

## What is Virus X in hostas?

Discovered by Dr. Lockhart of the University of Minnesota in the mid 1990s, Virus X in Hostas or HVX, as we shall refer to it from now on, attacks the plant creating quite unusual leaf discolouration and distortions. When a plant starts to exhibit visible symptoms of HVX the damage looks distinctive but HVX can stay dormant in a plant for years before any damage shows. There is a wealth of information on the Internet that shows examples of what to look for - we have selected a few resources for you to follow up in the [side column of the newsletter](#).

It isn't clear where HVX started and although it seems to be more of a problem in the USA it is obviously something we cannot afford to be complacent about in the UK. HVX isn't the only cause of sick looking leaves but it is the most important cause to be aware of because it can spread and there is no cure.

### So what do you need to do?

If your plant looks like it may have HVX the only way to deal with it is to destroy it as HVX needs living tissue to survive. This is easy to do with a pot planted hosta but if you suspect a ground planted hosta of infection then you need to ensure you remove all the roots too.

### Non-HVX problems Don't mistake weather-related damage for evidence of the virus.

This year we suffered a late spring that fluctuated in temperature quite radically. This resulted in damage to the cell layer of the leaves rather like bruising. During the course of the season this bruising begins to look like rust spots. Cold rain and hail in particular can do this type of damage.

### So how can I tell if the damage is weather-related?

We suggest that you use a clean knife to remove any affected leaves and dispose of them by burning or via a municipal garden waste facility (clean your hands and the knife before doing this to any of your other plants just in case you are dealing with a case of HVX) - whatever you do, don't throw them in the compost bin as the tissue must be destroyed. Newly emerging leaves should be free from the damage providing no further weather damage occurs during the season.

### What do we do about HVX?

The vast majority of hostas available on the market are grown in huge numbers, mainly through tissue culture and not all are grown by organisations who actually specialise in the genus. As hosta specialists we certainly cannot afford to take any unnecessary risks. The majority of our sales plants are root-divisions so we have to take special precautions when we propagate. We always clean the entire plant, and our cutting equipment, in treated water prior to splitting. Indeed we do the same

## Do I need to be worried?

There are some quite alarmist reports available about this condition but we recommend a balanced perspective.

Do be selective when searching for information on this subject and bear in mind the source - to some HVX is an obsession. We recommend the best precaution you can take is to buy your plants from hosta specialists who are happy to tell you about what steps they take to ensure your plants have the best possible start.

Bear in mind that farmers and growers have had to handle the introduction of so-called deadly plant viruses for centuries and invariably there are ways to control these and to mitigate the worst effects.

**We now live with a whole range of plant conditions** and part of gardening is learning how to deal with them.

Many of the discussion threads read prior to writing this newsletter indicate that people are buying their plants from

thing to pre-treated plants prior to sending them out as bare-rooted orders. If we spot anything that looks a little odd our first move is to isolate it. We have destroyed a number of individual plants over the years that we suspected might be exhibiting symptoms of a virus and isolated all the others of that variety. During isolation we check the plants for any other exhibiting the characteristics of the destroyed plant but have yet to destroy an entire variety.



**Our collection** provides us with a ready reference for any potential problem that might be identified in our sales plants. Collection plants are also pot grown and are physically separated from the sales plants in their own tunnels.

Although we cannot afford to fund research into whether our methods of growing hostas actually help prevent the spread of HVX, we do feel we are helping to combat the spread of this disease in a number of ways, including growing all our sale plants plants in pots on raised benches in poly-tunnels.

Whether the plants originate from our own collection stock or are bought in as divisions or tissue-cultured plants (from reputable suppliers) they are all treated with the utmost care. All bought in plants are treated and re-potted in our own soil mix before being added to our tunnel stock. In essence all our plants are physically isolated from each other so if we suspect any form of problem it is a simple matter for us to isolate the plants further by removing them to another part of the nursery where we can monitor further and destroy if necessary.

#### **Tell us**

As a small business we engage with our customers and invite feedback - we want to know if you suspect a problem with your hosta. Indeed, we have dealt with more queries than usual this year but are confident the weather was the culprit in every case. If we are not convinced of this then we do have the opportunity to have the plants tested so we can be sure we are not risking the further spread of HVX, or any yet to be identified virus problem.

#### **Be aware of HVX**

**Keep an eye out for symptoms but don't become obsessed.**

Gardening is a learning process and that is what makes it so fascinating. We like to think that as gardeners we share a more thoughtful and 'down to earth' attitude about most things so recommend you do too. You cannot afford to ignore HVX but you can do something about it so be positive and remember that sacrificing the odd plant will free up space for something else in the garden.

#### **PSST... are there any HVX-resistant varieties?**

Some breeders of hostas make claims as to the resistance of their new introduction to HVX in much the same way as they claim resistance to pests, etc.

Our approach is to treat all hostas as susceptible to HVX in the same way that a pest will attack a plant if it can find no better source of food. *H. 'Sagae'* is supposedly showing signs of being resistant but the 'Mickfield Hostas jury' is still out on the subject.

**Next month:** We return to the subject of pest control...

outlets that simply pass on large quantities of plants to the public without any real knowledge of the damage they might be doing in spreading HVX.

They probably don't even know the basics about the genus that might lead them to consider their stock may be infected. In many cases people received their plants already looking sick, so why were they sent out in the first place?

Obviously you need to beware of retailers that sell cheaply and in volume - check them out before you commit yourself. As is often the case you get what you pay for.

#### **Find out more**

If you wish to find out more about HVX then we recommend the following links:

**The Hosta Library** has a succinct set of pages concerning HVX, which include lots of useful images of infected hostas so you can see what to look out for.

If you are interested in the original research that led to the identification of HVX then you can read the full text of Dr Lockhart's paper via the ISHS Acta Horticulturae website.

Dr Lockhart is currently heading up a 2-year research project (funded by the American Hosta Society) into HVX and the results of this work will be published on the **AHS website** - read the latest about progress here.

The advice and opinions contained within this monthly newsletter have been formed over more than 30 years of experience with the Hosta genus. We are constantly learning and refining that knowledge and would welcome any suggestions that readers of this newsletter would like to make so please [contact us](#).

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