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G98-1361 Hostas

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Hostas

This NebGuide discusses selecting, growing and caring for hosta.

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Hosta Selection

As landscapes mature, shaded areas develop. An excellent perennial plant for shade is hosta, also called plantain lily. Originally from the Orient, hosta, a herbaceous perennial, is grown for its attractive foliage. Some recent cultivars also have attractive and/or fragrant flowers. Because hosta's foliage dies to the ground at 28° F or below, it does not provide winter display; however, it combines well with the summer appearance of landscape plants that do provide winter interest.

Hostas vary in height from 2 inches to 4 feet tall. They have tubular or trumpet-like flowers of white, lavender, blue, bluish bicolors and purple. Foliage colors are green, yellow, white and blue, and center or edge variegation is common. Leaf texture ranges from smooth to crinkled or seersucker, and surface ranges from dull to glossy. Hostas with glossy leaves appear richer in color than the dull-leaved varieties. Leaf shapes vary from rounded to oval, heart-shaped to strap-like. The leaf may be flat, wavy-edged or somewhat contorted. Immature or juvenile hostas do not exhibit adult leaf shape or color; adult foliage characteristics develop three or more years after planting.

Depending on both cultivar and site, most hostas spread slowly by underground stems. Some cultivars have horizontal, above-ground stems which make them useful as ground covers. While site and maintenance practices affect mature height and spread, proper location and care can make hosta a long-lived and valuable landscape plant.

Site Requirements

For best performance, plant hostas in well-drained, slightly acidic, soil. Once established, hostas are drought tolerant, but they require regular moisture for best appearance and size. To improve the soil's water and oxygen-holding capacity, add organic matter one-third by volume. Spade or rototill organic matter to an 8-inch depth. Avoid planting hostas in a poorly drained location. Root and crown rot are prevalent in hostas planted in such sites.

In Nebraska's climate, hostas grow best in shade, although some cultivars such as 'Sum and Substance', 'Honeybells', 'Lancifolia' and 'Green Wedge' will tolerate partial sun. While there are exceptions, yellow-foliaged cultivars are usually more tolerant of sun exposure; blue-foliaged cultivars prefer shade. Sun-tolerant cultivars receiving some morning sun will produce more flowers than plants in all-day shade.

Select a site that receives some wind protection as low humidity wind causes leaf browning or desiccation. Most cultivars will be damaged by winds in excess of 35 mph. While most plants will recover from wind damage, leaves developing after damage occurs aren't as attractive as the initial foliage. In addition to wind and hail protection, a site also should have good air circulation.

Starting and Growing Hostas

Plant, transplant and divide hostas in spring or late summer. Although it is not necessary to divide hostas, doing so increases plant numbers. Divide hostas either in spring or toward the end of summer, after the end of bloom and summer heat. Dividing hostas may be done in two ways, using clean, sharp tools:

1. cut into the plant to slice away a section of a clump, being sure to include roots or
2. lift the whole hosta, including the roots, from the ground and divide the clump into separate plants.

Keep the plant and its roots moist. Dig a hole as deep as the root ball and one-and-a-half times as wide. Place the hosta into the hole with the crown at soil level and add soil as needed. Do not bury the crown.

After summer transplanting, at least one growing season must pass before active above-ground growth will resume.

Because most hostas are native to habitat with 50 inches or more of rain per year, supplemental irrigation is necessary. Drip, soaker hose or a similar system is preferred to avoid wetting the foliage, reduce foliar disease problems and maintain color intensity of blue foliaged cultivars.

Don't apply excessive amounts of nitrogen fertilizer. No more than one-eighth pound of actual nitrogen is needed for a 125-square-foot bed of hostas. High nitrogen applications result in soft foliage which readily wilts and is subject to foliar diseases. High nitrogen also diminishes the intensity of the variegated pattern. If fertilizer is needed, apply a slow-release fertilizer just as growth begins in spring.

In early summer, apply a loose, noncompacting mulch to inhibit weed growth, reduce water loss and lessen soil compaction. Mulch should be about 1 inch deep. A thicker layer of mulch is likely to promote slug populations. Water in the mornings so the mulch surfaces dry before evening, and occasionally rake the mulch to improve air movement.

In the winter, mulch protects the site from repeated freezing and thawing. A winter mulch also protects newly planted hostas. Before spring's new growth, remove the winter mulch along with leaf debris.

Hostas in the Landscape

Hostas are versatile in the landscape. Low-growing hostas can be placed at the front of a planting bed to form a distinct unifying edge. Their low growth habit, combined with their ability to spread, makes them a good groundcover selection. Taller hostas can be used as a backdrop for short shrubs and flowers.

Hostas are an excellent way to help direct viewers' attention to specific landscape features. For example, hostas placed near a garden or building entrance can strongly accent and draw attention to the area. This effect is especially noticeable if they are placed in front of small-leaved plants. Scattered use of brightly-colored or unusual hostas, however, can draw attention away from other important landscape features, decreasing the orderliness in the landscape.

Hostas also can be used to influence viewers' perceptions of the size of outdoor spaces. In landscapes where the plants are placed near the viewer and small-leaved plants are used in the background, the background appears more distant. Conversely, hostas viewed in the background of a landscape with small-leaved plants in the foreground tend to make the landscape seem smaller.

Cultivar Information

Each cultivar provides its own characteristic size, ability to spread, color and leaf pattern and tolerance to sun exposure. Carefully match these characteristics with your site and purpose. Because new cultivars are introduced each year, there are many available selections. The following plant list is as a general guide to hosta cultivars.

Small hostas, adaptable to shallow soils:

H. 'Chartreuse Wiggles';

H. venusta 'Variegata'

Edgers, low vigorous horizontal growth (reduce edging time):

H. 'Blue Wedgewood';

H. Ginko Craig

Ground cover, above-ground or shallow horizontal stems that allow plants to rapidly populate an area:

H. 'Ground Master';

H. 'Ventricosa Aureomarginata'

Background, large plants with lush exotic tropical appearance:

H. 'Big Mama'

Specimen plants:

H. 'Wide Brim';

H. 'Fragrant Bouquet'

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