

Hostas. How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. There's the foliage, then there's the foliage and lastly, there's the foliage. Hostas are a plant that would be considered quietly self confident with no need to be aggressive with flamboyant floral displays. Their flowers tend to be discreet and understated. However, because gardeners love color, either you dislike or are passionate about hostas. Judging from the numbers of this plant grown in Minnesota gardens, many of us like them a lot.

Hostas are also called plantain lilies and funkias; however, hosta is the proper name. They originated in Japan, China, and Korea and were imported first to Europe and later to America in the 1800's. There are now literally hundreds of species and thousands of cultivars from which to choose. Bloomers has an excellent selection of many different cultivars.

There are gardeners in our area who qualify as "experts" on growing hostas and it is from these people I have learned to appreciate the understated beauty of this plant. Gardeners like hostas, in large part, because they're easy to grow and come in a wide range of shapes, colors, sizes, and textures. The foliage may be a solid color or variegated with different combinations of blue, green, white, and gold. Additionally, hostas are low maintenance and widely available in nurseries.

Gardeners who dislike hostas do so because, rather than showy flowers, the plant's beauty lies in it's foliage. To appreciate foliage rather than showy flowers is a learned taste. However, a hosta bed still needs some TLC as an unkempt bed can look shabby with last years flower stalks protruding above the new foliage like sticks, giving a forlorn appearance.

Most hostas will grow in shade but do not thrive in constant deep shade of four hours or less of sun. Most still require about six hours of sun a day or where "filtered" or "dappled" shade is available for much of the day. However, if shade is the only option, the blue-leafed hostas do best. Blue hostas have a waxy coating on their leaves and require a shadier site to avoid leaf burn and bleaching from sunlight. As this coating washes off with rain during the growing season, the plant becomes more vulnerable to sun damage. Brown, scorched leaf surfaces or leaf tips is a symptom of sun injury. This can be partially alleviated by moving the plant to a shadier location or providing more water.

If you want to grow hostas in a sunny spot choose the yellow or “whiter-leafed” varieties in the plantaginea group. This group is also known for their fragrant flowers. Many of these types can be found at Bloomers. Some hostas exhibit color variability, changing color according to the amount and intensity of light exposure. Yellow and gold hostas will actually benefit from two to three hours of morning sun that helps to develop a richer leaf color.

Hostas prefer rich, moist soil that is high in organic matter and well drained with a somewhat neutral soil pH of 6.5 to 7.5. To fertilize, the University of Minnesota recommends using a 10-10-10 or similar percentage fertilizer once in the spring as the leaves are emerging and once more before flowering. However, local laws may prohibit the use of phosphorous; therefore, a 10-0-10 is suitable.

Hostas require an adequate supply of water because the leaves have a large surface area and transpire easily. A consistent moisture supply equivalent to an inch of water per week is considered best for hostas. Deeper water done with less frequency is better than frequent shallow applications that do not penetrate the root zone. Be mindful that rain in sufficient amounts does not always reach under building eaves or through a tree canopy. Hostas growing beneath shallow-rooted trees such as maples or spruce will require watering for establishment and frequently thereafter due to competition for moisture from the trees. Hostas in sunny locations also need additional water to compensate for warmer conditions and increased transpiration.

Organic mulches such as shredded bark, leaves or pine needles will help to conserve moisture. Apply mulch to a two to four inch layer after the soils warm in the spring but take care to keep mulch away from the plant’s central crown. As a bonus, mulch will help to suppress weed growth, keep soil temperature even, and eventually decompose to release nutrients into the soil.

Ideally hostas should be divided in the spring but realistically they can be divided almost any time during the growing season. I have divided hostas in late August, taking care to keep the divisions well watered. Many sources state the roots should be washed off but I have had good success by simply cutting crowns into as many pieces as feasible and replanting, soil and all.

The biggest pests in our area are snails (slugs) and deer. If snails are the culprit look for the “slime” trails in the garden bed. The snails themselves may be detected either in the daytime or at night by using a flashlight to look under leaves. There are several “suggested” means of control (some bordering on folklore) for snails such as slug pellets containing metaldehyde that is used commercially. However, this product is toxic to animals and birds. A product developed in 2000 contains iron phosphate and is less toxic. Copper strips may be used to surround plants and the use of gritty materials such as diatomaceous earth scattered on the soil surface is also used but with mixed results. One source recommended the use of ground up egg shells; however, this is also of dubious value. Then there is the tried and true beer method by which a pie plate or similar container is placed at ground level and filled with beer. Theoretically, the snails are attracted to the beer, crawl in and drown.

I have no good suggestions to control deer that consider hostas as an entrée. Deer repellents are sometimes effective but must be reapplied after every rain. An acquaintance suggested an exuberant dog that is unfriendly to deer also works well. Happy gardening!