

## Hostas in Australia

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### INTRODUCTION

I first became interested in the genus *Hosta* after I visited England in 1977 and saw large specimen plants displayed at the Chelsea Flower Show and in many gardens that I visited. This interest remained dormant until 1978 when, on becoming a member of the I.P.P.S. at the Hobart conference, I saw a display of *Hosta* plants in the Hobart Botanic Gardens conservatory. This rekindled my interest, and on my return to Melbourne I began searching for hosta plants. I managed to obtain plants from various nurseries and slowly built up a collection of the cultivars then available. These included *H. sieboldiana*, *H. crispula*, *H. ventricosa*, *H. fortunei* var. *albopicta*, *H. fortunei* Aurea, *H. plantaginea* 'Grandiflora', *H. undulata*, *H. ventricosa* 'Aureo-maculata', and *H. undulata* var. *univittata*.

In the beginning, it was difficult to find collectors or growers. In fact, it was even difficult to find people that knew what a hosta was. This dearth of information has been partially overcome by articles in gardening periodicals and by small promotions of hosta by those interested in this genus. It was on meeting Ruth Tindale, who had a collection of hosta in her garden at Sherbrooke, that my collection really began to burgeon. Ruth was a member of the American Hosta Society and was at that stage importing seed from America. As I had access to heated glasshouses and propagation facilities, I was given some of this seed to sow and from the myriad of seedlings I was able to select some hostas with different leaf shapes and some with golden and variegated leaves. These seedlings were an improvement on the available cultivars in that the colour was retained right throughout the growing season.

In recent years a seed firm in Melbourne has been importing flasks of tissue-cultured cultivars from England and this has seen an upsurge in the cultivars available. There are at least two other people importing hosta plants into Australia and these plants are slowly becoming available to the public.

### PROPAGATION METHODS

The methods of propagating hosta are: seed, division, and tissue culture. I don't intend to discuss propagation by tissue culture, other than to say, that to the best of my knowledge, there is nobody actually producing them by tissue culture in Australia. The plants that are available for sale in this country are from overseas sources and are only being deflasked here and grown on. This importation has allowed many of the new cultivars to become available in this country.

**Seed.** Hosta propagation from seed is easy. The seed germinates readily and generally produces an abundance of plants. However, hostas cross breed freely and the resulting plants should be considered hybrids, and should not, even if they appear similar, be labelled with the name of the parent plant. The only species which comes true from seed is *H. ventricosa*.

The breeding of *Hosta* is a fascinating hobby. However, most of the plants produced will not be sufficiently different from existing cultivars and should be ruthlessly

rogued out, and the effort channelled into growing on the crosses which have been selected as showing promise. In selecting promising crosses, the grower should consider leaf colour, shape, leaf markings, habit, and vigour. I suggest that all seedlings should be grown for at least two seasons before discarding any of them.

When growing hostas from seed, the seed is collected as the pods start to turn yellow in autumn. The pods should be labelled and left to dry in paper bags until the pods split and shed the seed. The seed is sown immediately after cleaning into trays containing pasteurised potting mix topped with a mix of 1 peat moss : 1 vermiculite (v/v), watered in, placed into a heated glasshouse, and the trays covered with a pane of white painted glass. The seed usually germinates within 3 weeks and germination is generally close to 100%. When the seedlings have reached the four-leaf stage, they are pricked off into 2-in. tubes of a good quality potting mix, and kept growing in the glasshouse during the winter period. They should be fertilised monthly with a liquid fertiliser or alternatively top dressed with a controlled-release fertiliser. In mid-spring the plants should be moved from the glasshouse into a shadehouse and kept growing through until the autumn, when they will go into winter dormancy. The hostas are potted into 6-in. pots in spring of the second year for growing on and assessment. Those seedlings with potential are retained and the rest discarded.

**Division.** Vegetative propagation of hostas is usually by division in early spring, but they can also be divided when the plant is in full growth.

Hosta plants in the ground can be divided simply by using a sharp spade and cutting a wedge out of the plant. This wedge can either be replanted as a whole or divided into smaller pieces.

Hostas grown in pots are best divided prior to the beginning of growth in spring. The roots of the plants are vigorous and matted and a large knife or even a meat cleaver or tomahawk is needed to divide the plants.

Trying to produce hosta cultivars by division is a slow process and I am now trying the "Ross method" of propagation. This method of propagation is best carried out in spring or even early summer when the plant is in active growth. A thin sharp knife is inserted into the stem just above the basal plate and the knife is pushed down through the plate into the roots. Another cut can be made at right angles to the first cut. The damaged tissue will mend by callousing and a new growth bud should form which will develop into a new division. I feel that this method should only be carried out every second year to allow the plant to recover and build up its reserves of energy.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I feel that as hostas provide colour and interest for at least 6 months of the year in the shady areas of the garden, that there will be a growing demand for new *Hosta* cultivars.