

HOT HOSNAS

Growing Hybrid Hostas: Fox family turns hobby into a business



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Bob Fox gets up every morning to beat the bees, vying to be the first to get the pollen produced by his hostas in his garden in the area of Lowell known by Native Americans as Moon Island.

“I come out early to prepare the flowers, stripping the petals of pollen before the bees get to them,” says Fox, owner of Fox Hostas, which started as a hobby but got way out of control.

Fox uses the pollen to cross-pollinate hostas, creating hybridizations of these shade loving plants.

“Right now we have 1000 named varieties and probably 3000 seedlings of ours that are growing that we haven’t named yet,” he says, noting that they’ll eventually cull these seedlings, giving names to the ones that they will keep and continue growing.

It wasn’t always hosta central here at the Fox home.

“We cut a hole in the woods and put a house here back around 1987,” says Fox. “Then we decided to border the house with free hostas.”

It was his eldest son, Greg Fox, who turned hostas from a garden accessory to a dedicated hobby when he decided to plant a small hosta garden at his own home and, after running out of room, asked his dad if he could do another garden at his boyhood home. That was 12 years ago and in 2009, after retiring for a second time, Bob Fox decided to join his son in hybridizing hostas.

Though their farm is usually open by appointment (just call ahead or visit their Facebook page at www.facebook.com/pages/Fox-Hosta-Farm/181278258592646 for updates on openings), people now come from all over the United States to look and buy their hostas.

While many of us think of hostas as plants to stick in the shade (and yes, they usually do very well in the shadows), Fox says a tornado last year which destroyed several large trees, showed that some hostas can take the sun for about four hours or so a day.

“We worried at first that they would get too much sun,” he says. “But the golds and those with white centers need to have more light as they don’t have enough chlorophyll. The blues and deep greens don’t need much light and the emerald greens aren’t too fond of the sun at all.”

The Foxes also have collector's hostas--which Bob Fox describes as hostas which are hard if not impossible to get--such as Outrageous, Justice and Dragon Lady.

"If you get a collector's hosta, you can't sell it without permission from the person who gave or sold it to you," he says.

One of hostas at Fox Hosta Farm is so perfect for hybridization that the president of the American Hosta Society asked them for a plant. In trade, father and son received 38 other hostas.

"There's a lot of trading back and forth that goes on with hostas," he says.

"Hostas are invaluable when it comes to shade gardens," says Maureen Phillips, head of the Porter County Master Gardeners Association's committee for Publicity and Marketing, who notes she used to be less than selective—planting every "Tom, Dick and Harry" variety.

But that's changed.

"I've used blue, yellow—chartreuse--and variegated blue/yellow hostas for continuity and to 'echo' the color palette throughout the garden," says Phillips. "I use them in different places depending on the size, color, texture and leaf shape I think will work in the overall design. Plants that she uses H. 'Hadspen Blue,' H. sieboldiana 'Frances Williams,' which has large blue leaves with yellow margins and H. 'Gold Standard,' whose yellow leaves with dark-green margins she intersperses with astilbes (A. chinensis 'Visions' and A. arendsii 'Erica').

Another reason to like hostas?

"They're easy to propagate by division," says Phillips.

Info Box: Hosta Happenings

Hostas will be on display at several of the gardens on Porter County Garden Walk 2015 on Saturday, June 27, from 9:00 - 4:00. Tickets are on sale now. www.pcgarden.info/garden-walk

The Northwest Indiana Hosta Society (NWIHS) is having their annual Plant Sale & Hosta Auction which is open to the public on Sunday, June 28 at the Lake County Fairgrounds in Crown Point from 10 a.m. - 1 p.m., Auction at 12 p.m. Club members bring hostas and plants from their gardens.

www.americanhostasociety.org/Community/northwest_indiana_HS_2011.pdf

INFO BOX 2:

The Plant That Keeps Giving

Like daylilies, hostas multiply and can be divided on a regular basis and replanted in other garden spaces. The following method, recommended by the American Hosta Society at <http://hostalibrary.org/misc/div/>, also works for daylilies as well.

In the spring as the "horns" are emerging from winter dormancy, use a digging fork to loosen the clump you wish to divide. The fork enables you to preserve the root extensions.

Remove the entire clump and use a hose to wash away the soil and enable a clear view of the root structure.

Keep at least 3 horns per division; you may include more if you're working with a large clump. Pull or tease apart the roots.

Immediately plant the divisions in pots or in their new garden locations at their original depth. (Do not let the roots dry out.) Water well and continue to water until the plant is established in its new location -- about 6 weeks.