

Growing Hostas

Hostas are extremely popular, hardy herbaceous perennials grown primarily for their beautiful foliage. They are easy to grow, shade-tolerant, low-maintenance plants. A hosta plant generally reaches full maturity in 4–8 years, and its size depends on the cultivar. All hostas bloom in summer with spikes of lavender to white, lily-like flowers, which can be quite showy.

Hostas grow best in an exposure with morning sun and afternoon shade. Some cultivars will tolerate some afternoon sun, although plants grown in full afternoon sun (especially variegated plants) will show signs of marginal burning on leaves in the summer months. In general, the blue-leafed hostas require shade, while the gold, yellow, and white-leafed hostas can tolerate more sun. Fragrant hostas grow best with 5–6 hours of daily sun. Morning sun with some early afternoon sun helps the fragrant blossom to develop.

Hostas will grow best in rich organic soil that is well drained, has a slightly acidic pH, and is enriched both with nutrients and organic matter. When making a new hosta bed, cultivate to a depth of 12–16 inches. Apply 6 inches of organic matter and till it into the new bed. The planting hole should be dug at least a foot deep. Most hosta roots will grow and spread horizontally, so a large, wide hole is best. Place the plant in the hole at the same level as it grew in the container. The area where the leaves and roots meet should be at ground level. Water the plants well following planting.

When fertilizing, follow label directions carefully for the application rates of each type of fertilizer. Be careful not to apply fertilizer on top of or on the new growth, eyes, or leaves of the plant. All fertilizer applications should be discontinued by late July. Many gardens do not need additional fertilizer if a soil test shows the soil has sufficient amounts of the necessary nutrients. In this case, an addition of compost over the bed once a year, applied in the fall, is usually sufficient.

Water is important for optimal growth. A minimum of an inch of water each week is recommended, and can come from rain, irrigation, or hand watering. A deep watering will ensure good root development.

Propagation of hostas is easily achieved by dividing existing plants. Spring is the easiest time to divide plants because new shoots are only a few inches high and the leaves have not expanded. Keep newly divided plants well watered for the first two weeks, especially if there is a period of drought. Some of the larger leaves on a division may be cut back to reduce water loss. Frequent division of a clump will restrict plant and leaf size, and keep it from developing to its desirable mature features.

Slugs and snails are the most common pest of hostas. Deer can eat all your hosta plants in one evening, leaving just the stalks standing. Rabbits, squirrels, and voles also do damage to hostas. Refer to the Web site below for information on deterring these pests. Viruses are of concern and are an emerging and important issue in growing hostas. Symptoms include an irregular mottling of the foliage, yellow ringspots, or small yellow dots or flecks on the leaves. If a virus is present, the plant(s) should be discarded and tools used in the hosta planting should be disinfected. Other problems may show up as chemical damage, cold or frost damage, sunburn, and "melting out" of the leaf. These problems are not infectious.