

Hostas and other Shady Characters!

By David Dunn

Rideau Woodland Ramble

Merrickville, ON

In the deep dark corners of your garden, you can find some pretty shady characters! Hostas are a staple in this setting, but if you look carefully you will see some other interesting friends nearby.

Hostas are leafy lush perennials that generally thrive in shade to part sun. They are sought after for their leaves, and their ability to thrive in shade, although, every year there are new introductions whose flowers are extremely fragrant, adding to the mix. These plants come in tiny form, like **Hosta Blue Mouse Ears**, or **Hosta Tiny Tears**, to gigantic, such as **Hosta Blue Umbrellas**, **Hosta Sum and Substance**, or **Hosta Old Faithful**. They can be used as edgers, or as large specimens, taking a special place of prominence in the garden.



The most striking feature of Hostas are the dramatic range of colour variation, and leaf type. They range through greens, blues, gold, and variegated forms. The leaves can be puckered, wrinkled, shiny, smooth, heavily veined and so on. Their stems can be green, or red. It is this immense range that drives collectors crazy, and starts one on the quest to have all the latest Hosta in your collection. Hostas love rich soil and moist conditions. They do best in shade, but some can tolerate sun if given continuous access to moisture. One surprising fact is that certain Hosta that tolerate both sun and shade, look like completely different plants when put in shade or sun. Try **Hosta Paul's Glory**, or **Hosta June**. In each case they do well, but look very different, with creams and blues in the shade, and sharper contrast with gold in the sun. It is fun to experiment.

In a moist shady setting, Hosta, Ferns and Astilbe are a great combination, along with Heuchera, and various other woodland plants. Combinations of color and contrasting forms create real drama in the garden. Ferns can come in a surprisingly wide array. **Ostrich Ferns** are huge and lush adding an almost tropical feel to the garden. **Japanese Painted ferns** add a colour contrast

that is sometimes ghostly. The **Maidenhair Fern** is refined and lacelike, adding texture, while the **Autumn Fern** adds a bronze glow. Who new ferns were such interesting characters?



Heuchera also provide a range of colour and texture. While they flower, they are sought after for the impact of the leaf...adding a range of burgundy and red to the shade.....not the most retiring characters.

After you have populated your shady neighborhood with a cast of Hostas of all sizes, shapes and colours, and then broken up the “clique” with a few rowdy Ferns and showy Heuchera, you can begin to think of some of the other members of the family that will tolerate shade. Some grasses, such as **Northern Sea Oats**, and the **Japanese (golden) Hakonechloa** will do well in shade, as will some conifers. Add structure and impact with **Japanese Yew**, or a weeping **Hemlock**. Topping off the list of shady characters are a range of woodland plants, from **trillium**, **to winterberry** and more, add that final touch. The shady characters in our garden are the ones who bring it to life, give it mystery and surprise. So when you turn that dark corner, watch out for the surprising shady characters you may meet....they are all pretty interesting, and certainly all memorable!

Dave Dunn