

# PLAYING HOST TO HOSTAS

An inspired garden in Hampshire is home to around 1,300 different *Hosta*, displayed with great panache in carefully-themed areas. Phil Clayton enjoys this fully-packed collection, and new ways of housing it. Photography by Neil Hepworth

**MOST GARDENERS HAVE** tried their hand at growing hostas; blemish-free plants of late spring have such an air of cool, succulent abundance. Who could resist a leafy mound of gold centred blue-green edged *Hosta* 'June', variegated *H.* 'Night before Christmas', or the huge, soft green to chartreuse pads of *H.* 'Sum and Substance'? These popular plants are a few of the thousands of selections of *Hosta*, many of which originate in the USA, where fascination with them is apparently never ending.

Hosta enthusiasts are not confined to the far side of the pond. Avid hosta collectors June Colley and her partner John have amassed some 1,300 at their home near Linford in Hampshire, many grown in the ground of their 675sq m (½ acre) garden, others in containers.

June's love of hostas began in 1995. 'I bought *Hosta undulata* at a car boot sale and liked it so much I looked out for

others. I found *Hosta* 'Frances Williams' and then came across *Hosta* 'June', which I had to have.' This love of hostas grew; soon the couple were attending conventions in the States and learning how to landscape with hostas.

## Foliage effect

Their house is named 'Narra' after a tropical tree (*Pterocarpus indicus*) June is familiar with, as she hails from the Philippines, which may explain her love for the lush foliage of hostas. 'I love foliage plants; hostas provide such a prolific range of shapes, colours and texture,' she says. June has an interest in hosta flowers, or more precisely their perfume (her job is Technology Manager for a perfumery company) and she has around 100 hostas with scented flowers. Meanwhile John, who is retired, is editor of *The British Hosta and Hemerocallis Society Bulletin*. ►



GARDENSPROFILE

Hostas fill every part of the garden



*Hosta* 'Love Pat'



June and John in the 'hosta library'



*Hosta* 'Stained Glass'



## GREEN HAVEN

The Islamic Garden at Narra (above) was created after a trip to the Alhambra palaces in Spain; it is the most formally styled part of the garden and features many of June and John's favourite hostas.

The view of the Waterfall and Stream Garden (left) from John's balcony shows how large-leaved hostas and other lush foliage plants predominate

GARDENPROFILE

When the couple moved to Narra in 1998, the house had been the site of a doctor’s surgery. ‘It’s hard to believe the garden was a car park,’ says John. He is right: now from the road there is no mistaking that this is the home of plant enthusiasts. The front garden and gravelled drive explode with plants, many of which are in pots; hostas of course, but also collections of brightly hued *Hemerocallis* (daylilies), *Alstroemeria*, lilies, cannas and *Hedychium*, as well as clipped box and *Hebe*, which bring a semblance of order to the proceedings – though it is hard to see where the potted plants end and borders begin.

An informal path winds through it all and there are many fine planting combinations. In one corner, purple *Clematis* ‘Jackmanii’ scrambles through golden-leaved *Acer shirasawanum* ‘Aureum’ and an *Argyrocystis battandieri* (pineapple broom). Elsewhere are bamboos, a large-leaved evergreen loquat tree (*Eriobotrya japonica*), pink-and-white variegated *Acer negundo* ‘Fleming’ and a huge soft mound of white-flowered *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’.

Cultural innovations

And everywhere are hostas. One of June’s favourites, *H.* ‘Stained Glass’, is a glowing mound of large, round, lightly puckered leaves, green at the edges but gold with green streaks in the centre. Others include *H.* ‘Metallica’ with leaves of a good, rich green; *H.* ‘First Frost’ with blue and yellow variegated foliage; and vast *H.* ‘War Paint’, with huge, pointed yellow pie-crust leaves (crimped margins), each with a dark green edge.

The areas of garden at the sides of the house are little more than passageways, yet are planted as lushly as elsewhere. It becomes clear as you proceed that there are distinct, themed areas, all built by John. Passing down one side, the exotic Oriental feel is enhanced by a legged-up *Fatsia japonica* shading a collection of ferns around a trickling bamboo fountain. Here, too, is John’s solution to providing extra growing space: his ‘hosta library’ (see box, below)

He also is quite proud of the wooden balcony he designed and had built in 2007; it offers views of the rear garden and meadows beyond; in autumn it is resplendent with a fiery *Vitis coignetiae*. Below, in the Waterfall and Stream Garden, large-leaved hostas and other lush plants thrive. ‘The back was once a lawn, but we dug it up to form the beds, which grew as we obtained more hostas,’ says John.

By the stream, which leads from a pool, fed by a waterfall with three cascades, grows aptly named *Hosta* ‘Niagara Falls’ with large, heart-shaped, pleated green leaves forming a clump 1.2m (48in) across, and *H.* ‘Yellow River’ with gold-edged, green foliage. Also here is *H.* ‘Dream Weaver’, 90cm (3ft) across with blue-green foliage, each puckered leaf with a cream centre. Standing out nearby are elegant *H.* ‘Frosted Jade’, its sea-green leaves edged narrowly with white, and a huge plant of familiar *H.* ‘Sum and Substance’. Above, bold foliage abounds on bananas, tree ferns and palms. John has erected here more free-standing hanging hosta stands to partition other areas of the garden.



TIPS FOR TOP HOSTAS

June’s hostas are remarkably healthy and free from mollusc damage

- June and John practice good garden hygiene, removing any debris where slugs and snails may hide. They scatter slug pellets in early spring before plants leaf up, and have also found it beneficial to treat plants with a garlic wash.
- Try hanging potted hostas: choose somewhere cool and sheltered. In the Philippines plants are hung up to keep them away from predators – it seems to work in the UK too.
- Feed hostas in spring with slow-release fertiliser, then after flowering with a liquid food to promote new leaves and root growth in autumn.

June’s favourite selections:

*Hosta* ‘Niagara Falls’  
*Hosta* ‘Devon Green’  
*Hosta* ‘Stained Glass’  
*Hosta* ‘Sageae’



Flowers of *Hosta* ‘Alpine Dream’



‘HOSTA LIBRARY’

The narrow corridors of garden on both sides of June and John’s house are home to hundreds of hostas (left). House walls are fitted with racks holding hanging pots, in three or four ranks, which are connected to an irrigation system. This gives extra growing space well away from hungry molluscs, and allows easy inspection of plants. John and June refer to this rather effective way of growing plants as their ‘hosta library’.

Islamic inspiration

The most impressively designed area is the Islamic Garden, with fountain, tile-lined pool and summerhouse. ‘I’ve always had an interest in water features but, after visiting the Alhambra palaces in Spain, we wanted an Islamic garden with a fountain,’ says John. This bold statement, reached through an arch set with hanging hostas, is an effective departure from the rest of the garden, separated on one side by fruit trees. The paving and sober planting offers a rest from the horticultural intoxication

elsewhere. Clipped evergreens dominate, with pots of hostas, such as appealingly sombre *H.* ‘Devon Green’. They look surprisingly at home.

Despite tricks used to grow as many hostas as possible, June and John are running out of space. Her attention is now turning to small and mini hostas, of which she has around 100. ‘One of my favourites is *H.* ‘Blue Mouse Ears’; it is strong and fairly slug resistant,’ says June. She is planning to soon begin hybridizing and will try to develop new corrugated and pie-crust hostas

with good substance. John has already had fine results with new selections obtained through random pollination, but there is still one perennial problem: finding yet more space. ■

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**Open:** under National Gardens Scheme (listed in *Yellow Book 2011* as Hanging Hosta Garden) by appointment

LUSH AND LUXURIANT

The front garden (above) overflows with exuberance; hostas, daylilies and all manner of plants, some potted, others planted