



## Alex J. Summers Distinguished Merit Award 2007

Jim Wilkins



*H.* 'Dorothy Benedict

Good evening.

I am deeply honored to be the recipient of the 2007 Alex J. Summers Distinguished Merit Award. I would like to thank Doug Beilstein and the members of his committee for considering me for this very special award. As I reviewed the past recipients, I marveled at what terrific individuals have received it. I am privileged to have met all of the previous honorees, except for Frances Williams, who was honored posthumously.

It is a night of triple thrills to me. Foremost is to receive this award; second is to receive it in Indianapolis and to have both friends and family present, in the city that has become my hosta home away from home; and the last is to be the 25<sup>th</sup> recipient. By coincidence, this year is my 25<sup>th</sup> year as a member of The American Hosta Society. As you can see I have even colored my hair to match these silver anniversaries.

Last fall, I gave an after-dinner talk to the members of the Western New York Hosta Society on the occasion of its 10th anniversary. I also happened to be celebrating the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my birth. I was encouraged by my host, Mike Shadrack, to make that talk personal. I really appreciated his suggestion, as it helped me evaluate and better understand my love affair with hostas. So, as a card-carrying old foggy, I hope you will find it acceptable for me to review my 25 years in hostas. I am sure, like the recipients before me, you will see that it is much more about what hostas have done for me, rather than what I have done for hostas. I guess I should start with how I got interested in hostas in the first place. I grew up in a family that gardened. The earliest recollections I have of my childhood have to do with our World War II Victory Garden. My mother raised and sold shasta daisies; the family legend is that she paid for my birth with her daisy sales at the farmer's market. I guess that would truly make me a flower child.

In 1976, after serving in the U.S. Army, I built a home on 12 partially wooded acres. I fully intended to raise all of my food. {That was a time when many people wanted to be self-sufficient.) I planted many trees. After all, it was the nation's bicentennial and these would be commemorative trees. I was a member of the Men's Garden Club of Jackson and grew a variety of sunny ornamental plants. As I began to carve my way into the wooded part of my property, I realized I had a bad condition called shade.

I had started to grow primroses, and my interest in hostas had to do with those primroses. In 1978, there were only three Michigan members of the American Primrose Society: Clarence Owens and me, both from Jackson, and Herb Benedict from Hillsdale, about 30 miles south of Jackson. Herb had just won the hybridizer's award from the Society.

Clarence and I contacted Herb in the spring of 1978. On the first visit to his wonderful garden, Herb taught me how to make crosses and hybridize primroses. We made several visits that spring. Clarence and I visited Herb and his fabulous wife Dorothy several times the next spring; Dorothy was an outstanding plantswoman. We were invited to Dorothy's birthday party in July of 1979- It was the first time I had seen their summer garden. It was incredible. It was as though an entirely different garden had appeared. When I exclaimed, "Wow, what are those?," they answered, "Hostas!"

I was amazed to see a shade garden. It was the first I had seen. It gave me great hope for my increasingly shady yard, and had added appeal because I am a dermatologist. In the ensuing years, I spent many tours, both summer and winter, visiting the Benedicts. We talked about many things, but especially about: shade gardening and my hybridizing goals. I joined The American Hosta Society in 1982.

In 1983, I attended what was the last of the AHS mini-meetings. Before 1984 the now annual AHS Convention was held biannually and alternated with these so called mini-meetings. A mini-meeting was a day long meeting and the one I

attended in 1983 was held on Long Island. I was so excited to see all of the hostas I had been reading about. We visited Paul Aden's garden; I met Alex Summers, Paul Aden, Vic Santa Lucia and Ken Anderson. I had lunch at the table of Mildred Seaver. I wanted buy a hosta for the Benedicts and I was the high bidder on *Hosta* 'Sea Sprite'. Unfortunately this hosta was later believed to have a virus, but I don't think Herb ever held that against me. I came home hooked on hostas—not just the plants, but the people, the hosta people.

In 1985, I attended my first national convention, was in Chesterland, Ohio. I attended with fellow Jackson physician, Gil Jones. It also was the first of many hosta activities for Herb and Dorothy. I met, among others, Pete Ruh, Jim Cooper, Kevin Vaughn, Olive Langdon, Mark Zilis, Henry Ross and Bill and Eleanor Lachman. The scientific session was a spirited discussion about tissue culture and whether gold sports of 'Frances Williams' were all the same. Mark Zilis also expressed his belief that the improvement in hostas would not come from tissue culture, but from hybridizing. I agreed and my interest in hybridizing hostas began.

For many years I had started my annuals and vegetables under lights in the basement. Since I was accustomed to growing my seeds under lights, I grew my hosta seeds in the basement too. Some of my lights were old and often would not cycle back on. So I just left them on 24 hours per day. I had calculated that the added electricity used would be cheaper than new lights. The seedlings under 24-hour light grew faster, larger and often bloomed their very first season. When the results were duplicated the next year, I reported about accelerated growth in hostas in *The Hosta Journal*. My very first hosta article was the result of an accident—and being cheap.

My second AHS Convention was in Columbus, Ohio, in 1986. There I met Van and Shirley Wade, Bob Olson, Bob Solberg and Warren Pollock. In the enthusiasm that attends such meetings, Gil Jones and I agreed to host the 1991 AHS convention in Jackson. We thought five years would give us time to grow our gardens and restart the Michigan Hosta Society for much-needed support. By the time the 1986 Convention concluded, our date already had been moved up to 1988. So Gil and I had just two years to get things organized. Panic time!

That very summer we resurrected the Michigan Hosta Society and talked Pauline Banyai into becoming its president. Home computing was a new phenomenon, and being the nerd that I am, I had an Apple lie. My computing skills were greatly accelerated by that convention. All the published materials were done on that trusty relic.

One of the interesting aspects of this convention was that Walters Gardens in Zeeland, Michigan, was starting to sell field-grown plants that had been propagated by tissue culture. While today this is a standard nursery practice, it was cutting-edge in 1987. John Walters had always been insistent that plants his nursery sold should be true to type. C. H. Falstad invited Gil and me to walk the growing fields and cull any divisions that were sports. We were like kids in a candy shop. Because of that visit, our convention featured the first look at tissue-culture sports such as 'Northern Halo', 'Northern Lights' and 'Regal Splendor'.

Walters quickly learned that these sports would be hot items among hostaphiles. Meanwhile, Gil and I found that putting together a convention with only two years of lead time was a frightening thing. {I will always be indebted to Warren Pollock for his guidance.} After it was over, Gil and I wrote the first convention handbook to help plan future conventions. And my developing computer skills led to jobs as Michigan Hosta Society treasurer and newsletter editor. Thus began a fulfilling career in the organizational aspects of my hobby.

In 1989, I was asked to come onto the AHS board as publicity chairman. When a vacancy opened, I became regional director for Region 4. Regionalization of The American Hosta Society was a new development and I was never clear what Regions were for. But I did organize a summer garden tour for the Region in Michigan City, Indiana. We hosted the first winter meeting in Holland, Michigan, which attracted many people from outside of Region 4. This meeting was moved the next year to Chicago, to equalize the driving distances for the Minnesota and Michigan contingents. The winter scientific meeting is now wonderfully run by the Northern Illinois Hosta Society.

Soon after my appointment as regional director, I received a testy letter from the Indianapolis Hosta Society's president, Sandy Straka, with some issues about and ideas for the Region. Soon thereafter, I became vice president of The American Hosta Society, where one of my responsibilities was to head up the Regions of the AHS. I appointed Ms. Straka to become the director of Region 4. Our Region sprang to life and we just celebrated the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sandy's baby, The Hosta College. As an aside, I married Sandy, and this past Valentine's Day we celebrated our 10th wedding anniversary. Yet another thing that makes me very indebted to hostas.

In my real life, I am a physician. As such, I am a scientist, observer and teacher, and I love my patients. As I reflected about what hostas have done for me, I found that I received joy from the same sorts of activities in hostas.

I started writing my observations for *The Hosta Journal* and for newsletters. This led to the opportunity for me to speak to garden groups around the country about hostas and other shade plants, about landscaping and about hybridizing. I sometimes felt like I was the Forrest Gump of hostas. One thing led to another, without any prior agenda. The speaking to garden groups rekindled a lifelong, but dormant, interest in photography. Soon, I was teaching about garden photography at the Hosta College, and more recently about digital imaging.

I would like to tell you that the past 25 years were just as I had envisioned and planned, but they were | not. Maybe now I have become an old fogey, but once a nerd, always a nerd. I spend increasing time on the computer. My computer is my darkroom, my word processor, my presentation package, my label maker and often the source of hosta information and plant material. My computer has gotten faster and its memory is incredible, but my memory is not what it was. So while I can remember to say it, I want you all to know how much Sandy and I have missed coming to the AHS Convention the past four years. The Lord willing, we do not plan to miss again.

Back to my story. Twenty-five years ago the inheritance of streaked variegation had recently been elucidated by Kevin Vaughn. His investigation demonstrated that a streaked pod parent was required for streaking to be expressed in the progeny. I should have read his wonderful articles before I started hybridizing. For two years I grew hundreds of seedlings of 'Frances Williams' and did not produce a single variegated hosta. I ordered all of the back issues of *The Hosta Journal* and read Kevin's fine articles and found out why! Today, I could go on the Internet and have an instant answer, but 25 years ago we had a single *Hosta Journal* each year.

I began to study genetics and breeding. Genetics had changed in the years since I had studied it in medical school, and I had never studied plant genetics. In 1986, Herb Benedict reported on the instability of streaked hostas in an article called "Taming the Wild Ones." He reported his observations that streaked hostas "sorted-out" to four stable forms—marginal variegated, center variegated and two non-variegated solid colors, either the streaked color or the background color. This phenomenon was dubbed by Warren Pollock as "The Benedict Cross."

One of my breeding goals was to breed a plant like the then-favorite hosta, 'Frances Williams'. I wanted to develop a hosta that was originally variegated, but unlike 'Frances Williams' had tall bloomscapes and did not show burning on the edge. I finally understood that I needed to make my crosses with streaked hostas as the maternal part of the cross. When I started to hybridize, the only widely available streaked plants were 'Beatrice', 'Yellow Splash' and 'Neat Splash'. All had very poor substance.

In the early 1980s, Herb Benedict had noticed a single streak in the leaf of a seedling of 'Francis Williams' that had been self-pollinated. What is little-known is that the cross was made by Dorothy following Herb's instructions because Herb was ill and out of commission for a few weeks. The streaked *H. sieboldiana*-type hosta he found developed more streaking in subsequent years. It had excellent substance. Herb not only shared seeds from it with me, but also a division of this slow-growing breeder. It was a boost for my hybridizing program and became the basis of it.

I mentioned earlier that much of the joy I have had from hostas was not planned. This was not true for my breeding program; most of my crosses were planned. A major goal of my breeding program was to produce large, estate-type hostas. The bigger the better! As you know, today the rage is for the miniature hostas. So much for my abilities as a planner. It is a good thing I am not a financial analyst or an estate planner.

I did, however, take part in inside trading of a special kind. In the days before the World Wide Web, plant societies had round robins. Round robins were sort of like chat rooms by snail mail. I formed and ran a hosta hybridizer's robin. This later morphed into the hybridizer's group and was ably run by the late Ed Elslager. In these activities, hybridizers traded information, seeds and plants. Now that is my kind of inside trading.

Herb was generous with his seeds and seedlings. He shared his streaked breeder and seeds from it with many hybridizers around this country and around the world. Herb and Dorothy had no children; he regarded his seedlings as his children. His streaked *H. sieboldiana*-type breeder was a terrific maternal parent for many of his seedlings, and he named the mother of his hosta children in honor of his wife. I am excited to select *Hosta* 'Dorothy Benedict' as the Alex J. Summers Distinguished Merit Hosta