The Alex J Summers Distinguished Merit Award is given to a member of the Society in recognition of their having given outstanding service to the development of the genus Hosta, the Society, or both.

Larry Tucker is Honored

Amy Peterson
Oakdale, Minnesota

The Alex J. Summers Distinguished Merit Award was presented Saturday night to Larry Tucker for his outstanding service and development of the genus Hosta.

Larry has been an AHS member since 1994 and was the founding president for the Mid-South Hosta Society and ongoing hosta mentor. He is a proof editor for The Hosta Journal, was an AHS Board member from 2003-2007, revised the AHS brochure and is the Editor of The Hosta Adventure: A Grower’s Guide. He is a sought after public speaker, giving over 100 talks on hosta topics in many states in the Dixie region and beyond. A prolific author, his newsletter articles in the Hosta Trail are informative, timely and humorous. These have been compiled into the book Made in the Shade: More Confessions published in 2012 as a second edition. Revenue from the book supports the National Display Garden located in the Memphis Botanical Garden. Larry selected *H. ‘Elvis Lives’* as the Alex J. Summers Distinguished Merit Hosta.
Thank you so much! I’m humbled and honored that I was even considered for this award. All of my predecessors have shown that love of the Genus *Hosta*, membership in AHS and friendships in the gardening community are just part of the equation. Service to the Society and promotion of the plant are what really count! That’s what I do, but when Amy told me I was this year’s recipient of the Alex J. Summers award, I was speechless. Well, I’m not speechless tonight.

Like most of you, I’m not in the hosta business, but as a communicator I made it my business to share my passion for hostas. My first and forever love, Shari, will confirm that I’ve been committed to my endeavors, 50 years in the newspaper profession and 56 years in marriage. We have two daughters, Becky and Dede, plus four grandchildren, including one who didn’t fall far from the tree. She was editor-in-chief of her college newspaper. Some of our family members are trying to hide in this audience. A few once wondered why we vacation at conventions. Well, here we are, hobnobbing with other addicts.

When Shari and I downsized to a townhouse and patio garden two years ago, our girls heaped compliments on us for all of our good works. But they said it was time for us to slow down, cut back on activities, relax and enjoy life. Other than enjoying life, it didn’t happen. Becky told me, “Daddy, you don’t have any more mountains to climb.” Well, this is the pinnacle I never dreamed I’d reach. Now I know my father’s sense of achievement when he ascended the summit of every major mountain on the West Coast — before he was 21 and before I inherited his energy.

Hostas didn’t leap into my life unexpectedly. I knew they were special when I was courting Shari, well before AHS was founded. All of Shari’s uncles were nurserymen in Minnesota. And one of them grew hostas for Bachman’s, a major floral company in the Twin Cities. Many years later, I realized there was a hosta gene in my DNA. Certainly not from my parents, who didn’t know a hosta from a hostage. My dad, bless his soul, was a political science professor who started the Minnesota Democratic Farmer Labor Party with Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey. Shari likes to add that her father-in-law also taught Walter Mondale, but he didn’t teach him much.

My hosta adventure started 28 years ago, when I strayed out of the house to exercise my body and relax my brain. You’re looking at a mild-mannered Clark Kent who needed relief from stress as a nighttime editor. As it turned out, I stumbled into a mid-life crisis in the garden. Before I knew what hit me, I had developed a love affair with hostas. Better than chasing women, Shari said, so she put up with my passion and let me grow seedlings under lights in the basement, leading neighbors to believe I had an indoor pot farm. She also trusted me to mingle with garden club ladies. She even helped me create a hosta society in the Mid-South, which is in growing Zones 7 and 8. We have short / cool winters, hot / harsh summers and we’re prone to deluge or drought, so it’s no paradise for shade plants. Twenty years ago, Memphis was the southwestern frontier for hostas.

Though I started my first hosta garden in 1988, I didn’t join The American Hosta Society until 1994. Three years later, when Shari and I attended our first national convention in Indianapolis, the seed was planted and I outlined plans for a Mid-South club. In two years, our seedling society had close to 300 members. As founding
president, my major goals were (1) to rotate an annual community hosta sale and garden tour around different neighborhoods, (2) to invite nationally known speakers to the Mid-South so we could learn from the best, and (3) to use proceeds to establish a public hosta garden in Memphis. Every spring we sell more than a thousand hostas in 3-4 hours to pay for speakers. In 2006, AHS certified our project as a National Display Garden. I’m indebted to you because much of what we were able to accomplish on the local level came from what we learned in partnership with AHS. To maintain our hosta garden in perpetuity, we established an endowment fund. For 10 years, I gave my *Made in the Shade* book proceeds and speaking honoraria to fill that fund. Expenses for the AHS garden are now covered by earned interest.

I’m happy to share much of the local society’s success with Christine Gang, garden columnist for the Memphis newspaper. We’re extremely fortunate because she has faithfully previewed our club’s activities and helped build our reputation as the hosta source. As members of the Garden Writers of America, she and I were on the same wavelength. I must admit I edited her column for 20 years, so I had a publicity pipeline, but I also held the awesome power of being able to hit the delete key. Rather than ruin our relationship, I exercised great restraint.

While some of you in the plant world have been involved in taxonomy, my scientific bent has been etymology, the study of words — not entomology, the study of insects. In my library of a thousand dictionaries, I’ve found great pleasure enlightening others about words, particularly how they originated and how they relate to each other. For example, I’ve always gardened without gloves because I like the *tactile* sensation of soil and plants. I also see *tangible* evidence that my programs attract people to our club. TACTILE is the sense of touch and TANGIBLE means capable of being touched. They sprang from the same Latin root. Here’s another peek into my warped mind. I’m irritated by redundancies, such as a *25-foot-long hose*. There’s no need to explain that a hose is long. I also rail against thoughtless misuse and misspelling of words. Like a weather story that reported *hail-size golf balls*. Just imagine that pounding your garden! And then I read some idiot’s classified ad trying to sell *hostile lilies*. I already had enough trouble with certain cultivars!

I decided early-on that entertainment might be the most effective approach to educating folks about my favorite plant. We all have gardening episodes that are frustrating. And we all have joys that we want to share. But there also are quirky and goofy moments. So my writing and speaking have combined wit and wisdom in personal terms. In newsletter columns, books and *Hosta Journal* articles, my intent has been to inject a little humor and add a little levity. Life is a snore if you can’t laugh at yourself. So, enjoy the serious side of hostas, but have fun in the garden!

I had never been comfortable as a public speaker, but armed with hosta knowledge, I discovered my role as an ambassador for the “Friendship Plant.” Over the past 25 years, I’ve presented more than 120 hosta programs to garden clubs, plant societies and horticulture shows from Atlanta to Chicago. It has given me great satisfaction to teach gardeners how to select the hardiest hostas, how to plant and maintain them, and how to recognize and control pests. Once I have my audience captivated, I direct them to the benefits of membership in local, regional and national hosta societies. I can’t do this forever, but I know many of you can succeed me. I challenge you to stretch yourself, seek your dreams, find your voice, share your knowledge and grow your life.

Here is where I tip my hat to supporters and mentors . . .

First, of course, is Shari. Perennial partners receive too little credit. They stand by you through thick and thin, they provide welcome advice, they are sounding boards for many of your grand plans or ill-conceived ideas, they proofread what you write to save you from embarrassment — and they check your sanity at the door as you head out to yet another hosta activity. Shari has a memorable motto that’s imprinted in my mind: “*A nagging wife will save your life.*”

I’m thankful for all that I learned during four years on the AHS Executive Board. Kevin Walek recruited me to succeed him as Publications Vice President. Suspiciously, once he did that, I won a convention drawing for a
complete set of Hosta Journals. When I retired from newspapers in 2003, I moved into the AHS Publications job. Bob Olson already had me in harness as an author and editor. I like to tell friends that I once knew every member of this society by name. Of course, that was when I was compiling the Membership Directory. More recently, my favorite contributions have been sharing personal views on hosta gardening. Also proofreading, editing, tweaking and sometimes recasting articles to help make the Journal one of the world’s finest horticultural publications. I must say, I’ve been blessed to work with design guru Janet Mills. One of my most satisfying roles was editor of The Hosta Adventure eight years ago. Now I’m pleased to report that Janet and I are collaborating on a third edition of this popular Garden Guide.

Dixie directors Toni Wright, Claudia Walker, Mike Chambers and Judy Burns inspired me and helped march the Mid-South into the new millennium. I might be singing solo if it weren’t for the Mississippi Mafia. Yes, Minnesotans, there’s a Mississippi Mafia, notably Gloria Green, Berta Morgan, Jean Norris and Cheryl Lockhart. They, and Mike, played major roles in three local Dixie conventions, the first of which I coordinated with an all-star cast featuring Mary Chastain, George Schmid, Bob Solberg, Bill Rosten, Kevin Walek, Jim Wilkins and (fanfare, please) Shari Tucker. We were stunned by the huge turnout because it was barely two weeks after 9/11. Shari is a Minnesota Norwegian with Southern hospitality, so she insisted on hosting an after-convention brunch for the speakers. I was mortified, however, when they toured my “dead” garden in late September.

Speaking of the Minnesota Mafia . . . and I should because I grew up in Minnesota . . . Shari and I were awakened by the doorbell early one morning in 2012. Shari answered it and was greeted by three cheerful chanters: “We’re here for the garden tour!” Mary Schwartzbauer, Kim Larsen and Bob Olson were on their way to the AHS convention in Nashville and couldn’t resist a surprise visit. Still sleepy, all I heard was: “Larry, get your butt out of bed!” For 90 minutes, Shari and I were pajama party hosts in the garden. Kim asked if I had “bonsaied” the same hostas that she grows to perfection in her northern garden. She may have been getting even for an earlier speaking engagement in Memphis, when our equipment failed to translate her digital program. Without pictures, she described her 25 favorite hostas in detail. When I said “You’re a real trouper,” she responded, “No, I’m a real talker.” Such is the joy of associating with hosta friends. Even in adversity, they soldier on.

If you love to travel like the Tuckers, you often find that the world is smaller than you once thought and people know your friends. When we were in Amsterdam for Floriade, the international garden show, we met Arie van Vliet, founder of The Netherlands Hosta Society. His first question was “Do you know Warren Pollock?” “Of course,” we said, “everyone knows Warren!” And when we were cruising Loch Ness in Scotland, looking for the monster, we met a Canadian couple. I told them of our visit with Margot and Udo Dargatz in the little-known crossroads community of Appin, Ontario. Our new acquaintances said: “We sold them the property for their nursery.”

It’s amazing how we’re connected. Take a moment and picture yourself as a favorite hosta, then think how you and other favorites come together at this convention. That’s what makes our once-a-year gathering “a garden of friends.” So I’m asking you to use whatever tools and influence you have to keep this garden flourishing.

When I realized I must select a distinguished merit hosta to go with this grand award, my mind flew immediately to the perfect choice. Shari agreed that “It’s a no-brainer.” However, several other favorites were deserving of consideration. I love old-timers that perform well no matter what conditions they endure. One has always been a dense mounding hosta with hundreds of heart-shaped leaves, Florence Shaw’s ‘Birchwood Parky’s Gold’. I love its symmetry and mid-season lavender flowers. One year, when I trimmed its bloom scapes, I counted 55. Another finalist in my garden is Tony Avent’s ‘Potomac Pride’, a dark-green, big-leaved classic with purple flowers. It just keeps growing and growing and growing. All of the hostas in my garden are in blue-glazed containers. Well, I’ve run out of pots big enough to hold this beast.
So, here’s the story of my Distinguished Merit Hosta. Twenty years ago, this handsome hunk was delivered to my doorstep. I couldn’t have received a better Father’s Day gift from our youngest daughter, who next month will celebrate her 50th birthday. Dede insisted on special handling and special delivery, so she talked directly to Tony at Plant Delights. This hosta is distinguished because it has weathered every imaginable test in Memphis — deluge, drought, freeze, heat, hail, even a 100-mile-per-hour inland hurricane — and it just keeps coming back for more, shaking its blue-suede leaves. Let there be no doubt, ‘ELVIS LIVES’ in Memphis.

Before leaving, I’d like to thank every one of our friends in The American Hosta Society, but that would take all night. So, I’ll conclude with my signature farewell . . . HOSTA LA VISTA!