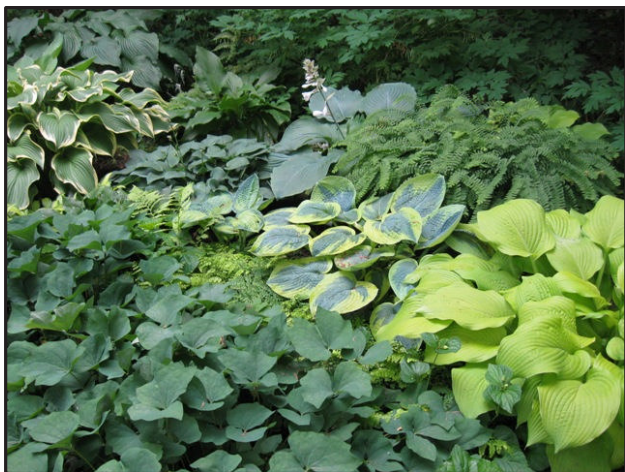


The Hosta Makers:

Don Dean

Insights into the motivations and methods of hosta hybridizers. by Reldon Ramsey

Don Dean of Ramsey, MN began hybridizing hostas in 1991 after collecting hostas for several years. Like many of us, he wanted more hostas than his budget would allow him to buy so his first hybridizing experience was growing seeds from open pollinated plants. After reading hosta registrations, he discovered that many cultivars were the result of a single cross or listed with unknown parentage. He knew he could achieve similar results, or better, if he controlled the crosses. Using Herb Benedict's method, he removed flower scapes in 1992, limiting the number of pollen donors in his garden while still letting the bees do the work. But by 1993, he wanted more direct control, and he began making manual crosses.



A pleasing mix of colors and textures in Don's garden.

Don credits Ken Anderson and Betty Peterson with fostering his appreciation of hosta characteristics. Hideko Gowan and Herb Benedict shared

their hybridizing knowledge with him, and Steve Moldovan shared his passion for hybridizing. Don gleaned all the information he could from AHS presentations and publications.

Don's early hybridizing experiences involved in-line breeding along with out-crosses, and back-crosses as he learned what worked well for him.



Along the way he discovered some of the predict-able outcomes, but also that *"the 'predictable' nearly always has an exception or two with this plant"*.

Don Dean welcoming guests to his garden at the 2010 AHS Convention.

His hybridizing goals are distinction; improved qualities within a class: color, form, substance – *"all the standards"*; long-lasting blues; *"color into the flower scapes where they can be appreciated while standing rather than prone on the ground"*.

Don's method of achieving his goals evolved, and over a five year period starting in 1998, he created breeding stock by crossing species hostas into his lines *"to stir the pot"*. To a lesser degree, it remains an ongoing part of his program. Hybrids combining traits of four or five species (some from a direct two species cross) have been used both as pod and pollen parents. Now he can emphasize the qualities of one species with back-crosses over several years. Additional crosses may involve siblings and cousins, 'selfing', or out-crosses to different lines. (continued on next page)

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Current breeding lines include crossing late-blooming species with blues, and adding purple and red pigments to the blues. These plants have late season growth so they continue creating new wax and remain blue until the end of the season. Other lines feature variegation and gold hostas with colored scapes. Pie-crusting margins, serrated edges, and waviness are being worked into all lines.

Depending on the goal for a cross usually less than 10% of germinated seedlings make it to an individual cell pot. Generally less than ten plants per cross are kept and planted in the ground for further evaluation the first year. Determining factors are shape, form, color, texture, and growth rate. He keeps those that do not fit the norm of the cross, and a couple that fit the typical



expected look. *“Often you get the majority of seedlings that look quite similar except when both (parents) have a very funky, diverse lineage. Then they can be all over the place.”*

Seedlings under evaluation in the Dean garden.

After three or four years of evaluation, plants are culled and then culled again in another two or three years. Fertility and the goals of the cross determine which plants make the cut and vary from one cross to the next. Seedlings from a cross are planted in rows adjacent to other crosses

involving the same pod parent for easier evaluation of the traits it passes on to its offspring.

One very good cross resulted in ‘perhaps’ six seedlings with good qualities kept. One is now registered, another is still under consideration, and a third has been kept because of seed set and good pollen. Don says that it is *“the best blue of the group, but not blue enough for me... yet. Perhaps next generation???”*



H. 'Frosted Dimples' in Don's garden.

Asked if he's ever surprised by a seedling that shows unexpected traits, Don replied, *“Reaching a goal and seeing a prediction ‘work’ is rewarding, but the surprises are what keep the intrigue about hosta running high! Absolutely.”* He cited as examples a seedling with intense color on the flower scape when neither parent exhibited much scape color, and another with an intensely pie-crusting edge when the parents only had slightly wavy edges. *“But the history of the parentage has it somewhere... the ‘stars’ (genes) aligned themselves.”*

Many things influence the names Don attaches to his seedlings. It can be the sound of the word or words in the name, and if they capture some of

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the plant's characteristics. Moods, feelings, and beliefs also play a part in selecting a name for a hosta, or the name may commemorate a friend or a person important in Don's life. Hosta 'Faith' was named in honor of Don's grandmother, Gladys, for her spiritual faith and her faith in him. New introduction, H. 'Her Eyes Were Blue', was selected by past AHS President, Mary Schwartzbauer, and named in memory of her mother.

At the AHS National Convention in St. Louis, MO, Don Dean was awarded the prestigious 2008 Alex J. Summers Distinguished Merit Award. Using recognizability, commercial availability, and importance to him both personally and as a breeding plant as his criteria, Don named H. 'Silver Bay' as his choice for the 2008 Alex J. Summers Distinguished Merit Hosta in his moving acceptance speech.

As of 2009, 44 of Don's hostas have been registered. The first was in 1996 when he co-registered H. 'Geneva Remembrance' with Gunther and Dean Stark. Don registered twelve hostas in 1999, several of which – H. 'Frosted Dimples', H. 'Pewterware', and H. 'Silver Bay' - are now considered hosta classics. Of that dozen, H. 'Bedazzled' and H. 'Fruit Punch' have only become commercially available in recent years. And H. 'Subterranean Pool' is still rare and highly sought after as evidenced by the 2010 AHS Online Auction when two separate offerings of originator stock from Don's garden sold for \$244 and \$227, respectively.

Don has eight (8) of the new hostas listed in Naylor Creek Nursery's 2011 catalog: H. 'Astral Bliss', H. 'Celtic Dancer', H. 'Enduring Beacon', H. 'Her Eyes Were Blue', H. 'Strawberry Parfait', H.

'Strawberry Surprise', H. 'Titanium', and H. 'Tupelo Honey'. In all, twenty hostas from Don's hybridizing program are available through Naylor Creek including both TC and OS forms of H. 'Titanium'. It was an attention-getter in several of the AHS National Convention gardens in the Twin Cities area this past summer. Don's elegant wooded garden combining both a traditional garden and seedlings under evaluation was a convention highlight.



A meandering path leading to Don's seedlings.

Don's additional comments on hybridizing:

"Do everything one can to be sure an intro is worthy of introducing. One dog released can ruin several great plants. Aim for an improvement with the intro otherwise keep it for one's own enjoyment. Register, register, register... Future breeders need something to reference otherwise they repeat our same blunders whereas with registration they may use our results and make greater strides forward with this plant. Hybridizing can be a one-time lucky seedling, but to get improvements and knowledge of the pathway there it takes years of persistence, careful observations, and sharing it with one another to allow others to take it even further!"