



**2008 Alex J. Summers  
Distinguished Merit Award**

**Don Dean**

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Distinguished Merit Hosta**

***H. 'Silver Bay'***



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This is truly an honor, albeit humbling and a bit daunting. I have sat in an audience like this one, watching my predecessors receive this award. Past winners have included several hosta gurus whom I had the good fortune of meeting when I joined the AHS in 1990 and later found were human, mere mortals like the rest of us. I watched with joy and pride as my mentors, colleagues and friends received this award. I continue to look to those recipients who are still with us for inspiration, knowledge, advice and leadership.

Those who know me know I am rarely short on words. This was not the case one evening while I was on the phone with Chuck Zdeb, finishing some business surrounding this year's awards. At the end of the conversation, Chuck informed me that I was this year's recipient of the Alex J. Summers Award. I was taken aback. Chuck must have thought the phone had been disconnected, until my excuses and "yeah, buts" emerged after a pause, assuring him I was still on the line. Somehow it was great to see others receive this award, but it was difficult to accept it for myself.

Chuck had other ideas. He told me I now had the responsibility of an acceptance speech. I wondered, what could I say? Then he added the second half of his assignment, which seemed even more difficult: I also had to select an Alex J. Summers Hosta of Distinction—and I had to do it within the next couple of days.

The first half of the assignment became clear and simple, once I got over myself. This award is not about me, nor any of its other recipients. It is about an attitude. All the winners, whether an AHS president or other organizational leader, hybridizer, scientist, editor or one of the ultimate ambassadors of hostas, have had an attitude that led them to give back something to the Society in return for the many things they have received through their involvement with it. It is an attitude of stepping up when a need arises, or often before it arises. It is a willingness to apply one's expertise where it can do some good or develop a new expertise that can be of use. It is not about awards.

I know that as much as I may give, there is so much more I have taken away from my involvement with the AHS. I encourage all of you to step up and try to give a bit back. We have a rather diverse group. The array of skills and talents within each individual sitting at the tables in this room is incredible. The future of this Society relies on tapping into those skills and talents.

I have been inspired by many of the Alex J. Summers Award recipients, but, truth be known, I also have been inspired continually by a multitude of the unsung heroes of this Society. I have been inspired by the person who volunteers to carry plants to the auction floor or be a clerk at the auction. I have been inspired by the member who gets a local newsletter assembled, the member who stamps the newsletters so the information can be mailed out and shared among us and by the person who has two divisions of a prized seedling and offers one of them up for auction.

I have been inspired by Connie Linder lugging a suitcase bigger than she is in order to raise funds for the society. And by the way she can take a man twice her size aside to convince him he needs to do a job he did not want to do, resulting in his walking away believing it was his idea! I have been inspired by Marvelous Marlys [Anderson], who each year digs into her collection with an enthusiasm so contagious that her friends are encouraged to donate for the first time. My list is endless.

The second part of Chuck's assignment, selecting a plant, was far more difficult than creating this speech. Do I select a classic I would grow in lieu of one of the most exciting new intros? A friend's plant? One of mine? During the 2000 convention, I had refused to place tags signifying award winners in my garden, since I believe attendees know what they like when they see it. What could my selection tell them now? I sought help from prior recipients by reading a few of their explanations on how they selected a plant.

Having criteria is the key, so I quickly developed a list. My selection must be important to me. It must be easily recognized. It must be an important breeder, since I am committed to making crosses to further our choices in plants. Finally, the plant must be available to gardeners, not only collectors.

My mind jumped to one of the most important plants to me. Two years after a misguided time in my life, when I could have used all the help possible to get my life on track, my grandmother had caught me alone. She gave me a long, deep hug, accompanied by the message that she had been praying for me. She said she was grateful her prayers had been answered, for she could see a change in my eyes. I decided that the first good yellow plant I hybridized and introduced following her death would be named in her honor.

Somehow Gladys did not seem like a great name for a hosta, but the alternative was a no-brainer; *Hosta* 'Faith' became that plant's name. *H.* 'Faith' certainly is of great importance to me and is a distinctive yellow once it reaches maturity, but it fell short on my other criteria.

I moved on to 'Urajiro Hachijo'. The list of its seedlings is impressive: *H.* 'Candy Dish', 'Marilyn Monroe', 'Pewterware', 'Titanium' and 'Ebony Towers', along with several more, both registered and not. It lends attributes to its progeny such as interesting leaf textures and form, colorful scapes and an unexpected ability to intensify blues. But distinctiveness, both in the eyes of general gardeners and skilled hosta collectors, is an issue. It was set aside.

My search continued. I have a long-time passion for blue hostas, and few have struck me as strongly as Herb Benedict's 'Purple Verticulated Elf'. The color is a deep, rich, purplish blue that holds up to heat into the late season. It is fertile both ways and yields great blue seedlings, often with flowers arranged 360° around the scape. Alas, it was only available for a brief period in small numbers and quickly sold out.

The next two plants I considered stopped me in my tracks when I initially saw them in 1992. The first was Steve Moldovan's 'Olive Branch', which is distinctive and readily available but not a particularly good breeder for me. The second was Steve's 'Silver Frost', which is a spectacular breeder for hybrids showing *H. sieboldiana* characteristics with improved color: blues that last well into the season. It is beautiful in its own right and stands apart from plants with similar leaf texture, form and color, especially when viewed in the late August garden. The problem was that Steve's plants are not registered and are rarely produced in quantity. He did not believe in tissue-culturing hostas, which means they are not readily available.

I still liked the idea of selecting a plant connected to Steve Moldovan. He was a hybridizer, period. He was quick to give back to those who shared his passion for hybridizing. He produced premium tall bearded irises for many years before switching to daylilies, making his largest breakthrough with the color pink in tetraploids. He also dabbled for years with hostas. I frequently would find a box at my door containing his latest daylily introductions, and he frequently found a box of hostas at his door. He is sorely missed by the plant world.

I was running out of time to make a decision. I looked for registered plants with a Moldovan plant as a parent. Rachel Soucek's 'Steve Moldovan' stood out as a double winner, both in color and name. *H.* 'Silver Frost' is one of its parents. But, again, its distribution and availability have been very limited to date.

I finally arrived at a blue that met all my criteria. It is a controlled cross. It is available and promises to have wider distribution, which will help expand recognition. One of its parents is Steve Moldovan's 'Silver Frost'. It is dear to me because it was one of my first seedlings to be released. I have selected *Hosta* 'Silver Bay' as this year's Alex J. Summers Hosta of Distinction.