



2009 Alex J. Summers Distinguished Merit Award Mary Schwartzbauer

2009 Alex J. Summers Distinguished Merit Hosta

H. 'Her Eyes Were Blue'



Thank you so much.

I don't feel worthy, but I do know that I have always tried to do the best I could for the betterment of the AHS and its membership, as well as encourage a positive and sharing environment between the AHS and the local and regional societies. Although the "Affiliation" idea was not accepted during my tenure, I hope we can still arrive at that in the future.

My one regret is that I would have liked to continue on as President for another term, as it does take a while to get things done and I would have liked to see some of the issues we were working on through to fruition. But my mother's health was starting to fail and I felt that I would be preoccupied with her care. If I couldn't give 100%, then it would be best to step down, since the AHS deserves a leadership that can give its all. Luckily, we have a great President in Tom Micheletti, who was able to grab the reins and quickly get the Web site issues that we had been working on resolved. He is tackling several other issues now. Thank you, Tom, for your leadership and for continuing to move us forward.

Although this is an incredible Award, I feel I have already gotten my reward. I stated when I was President, and I'll repeat it now, that to be a member of this Society is great; to be an active and contributing member is beyond that. You get so much more in return than you can ever give and the feeling is wonderful. Besides the feelings of accomplishment, value to others and self worth, you find yourself in situations that allow and sometimes *require* you to grow as an individual, to hone your skills as a team

member and to go beyond personal ideas and think about what is best for the Society and its members as a whole.

To travel this journey with members from many walks of life and different parts of the country is an interesting and exciting experience. It also can be a challenge at times, but that too can make us stronger in the end. It also can be a very powerful personal journey as you grow and identify and refine your own organizational and leadership style and skills. I encourage you all to become more involved—it is an invaluable experience and one I will always cherish.

Jim Wilkins said it first and I cannot agree more: You join the society for the plant; you stay because of the people. That is what I cherish most of all. I value each and every member for your excitement, your knowledge and willingness to share it with others, your contributions and involvement, but mostly for your friendship. I cannot tell you how much this Society and you as members mean to me and I thank you very much.

So the next part of this Award is to select a Hosta of Merit. I had two ways I could go with this. One would be a very easy decision for me and the other would be very difficult.

To look at all the hostas that have received this acknowledgment before and then to consider all the species, varieties and cultivars we have now—it would be very difficult to pick just one that had all the criteria you had established for your selection. It is possible, but it would take quite some time and would be very difficult indeed.

The other option, the easy one for me, also proved difficult because it is a very personal choice and I struggled with the question: "Is this too intimate?" "Too selfish?" I am very willing to share the story, but how would this be received by all of you?

I called my friend Don Dean to ask his opinion and he said, "You know, it's a personal decision for every recipient. Kevin Vaughn, for example, selected a plant that was a very good breeder for him because his hybridizing was extremely important to him." This plant gave him some incredible plants. Don cited examples from other recipients as well. It seemed he was right—the decision is always personal—and perhaps this is the true "award" or "reward" in all of this, that you have earned the right to be able to share a bit of yourself and what makes all of this so important to you.

And so, I chose the easy decision for myself and I ask for a little patience as I tell my story. It may seem a bit out of place in the beginning, but I think in the end it will be clear and hopefully you will embrace my choice. I'm not a hybridizer or a nurseryman, or a botanist or horticulturalist. I'm just a member whose greatest joy in all of this is having found the true meaning of the "Friendship Plant."

Her eyes were blue.

My mother, Marguerite Ashton, was a victim of dementia and she died last year. She was my closest and dearest friend and I loved her enormously. She grew up in Sleepy Eye, a small farming town in south central Minnesota. She was the oldest of four and the most adventurous and fearless. She was also the most giving. She left her small town and traveled alone up to the big city of St. Paul and became a Registered Nurse. Then, again alone, she joined the Navy and served her country in World War II. That was quite an accomplishment for a female in those days.

Her eyes were blue and she saw through them her purpose, which was to be of service to others. And so she continued her nursing career for almost 50 years. But the greatest thing about her was that she was totally selfless and was a friend to everyone she met. She did not care of material things. What she valued most was people—and she let all the people in her life know their value to her.

Growing up, I witnessed the little kids, the teenagers and the adults alike all going out of their way to stop and visit with my mom. She had a keen, sharp sense of humor and brought a smile to everyone's face. She always had a smile on her own face as well. All of us love our mothers, but it took little reflection on my part to realize that *everyone* loved mine. I came to realize also that it was because *she* valued *them*—the adult, the child and the teenager all. And she showed them through her actions that she valued and honored them all. She was truly a friend to all she met. Whenever she spoke with someone, she was totally engaged. She made you feel that you were the most important person in the world, because at that moment, you were. It is really difficult in the time allotted tonight to fully express just how deeply she affected so many lives. Perhaps I never can. She was truly a kind, tender and gentle soul.

Her eyes were blue.

I shared these reflections and more at her funeral. Connie Linder and Kim Larsen, two of my closest hosta friends, whom many of you know, were in attendance. I'm not sure if they were moved by the fact that my mom exemplified what being a friend was, or if they saw the extreme pain their friend was in, or a combination of both, but Connie called me about a week after her funeral to tell me that she and Kim had been in contact with Don Dean and they had decided they should name a hosta after my mom.

Well, those of you who know me can imagine how I cried over that! In the spring, I went out to Don's to select a hosta. Don is a great hosta hybridizer who is very select about what he introduces and waits years to make sure the hosta will perform well and has something to offer the hosta world. I knew that whatever I selected would prove to be a very worthy hosta indeed.

Don wanted to know if it was something that I wanted just for myself or if it would go into wide distribution. I decided without hesitation that she should be in everyone's garden. Any other criteria? Yes, it should be blue, as is was her favorite color as well as the color of her kind eyes, and heart-shaped for obvious reasons.

Thankfully, Don has a great "blue" program. We looked at a lot of plants that day and there were a few contenders but nothing really hit me. Then we went across the driveway to this small oval area, and sitting in the middle, slightly elevated—there she was. She spoke to me. She wasn't huge or attention seeking; that wasn't my mom, but something drew you to her none the less. She was medium-sized, a different shade of blue than the others, slightly ruffled edge, and she seemed to smile. She was a friendly hosta.

Don contacted Gary and Jack at Naylor Creek Nursery and they liked her, too. A plant readily available to all would normally be a criterion for this Award, so she is currently in production and will be available in 2010.

Now I want to be clear that, although the story is of my mom, the real meaning I want you all to take away is that the whole reason this plant "is" at all is due to the *friendship* of hosta people. Dorothy Benedict coined the term *The Friendship Plant*. She was so right and we can never thank her enough.

That hosta friends saw another hosta friend in pain and joined together to lift her up, through this gift, in her time of despair is a true act of friendship. To name the gift for someone whose whole purpose and meaning in life was to be of service and a friend to others is extraordinary. That is what this Society does to people- it is not just the plant. It is the community of friends, the spirit of sharing and caring the plant has helped create.

I want to thank Connie, Kim, Don, Gary and Jack for their gift to me of friendship—for it truly is a gift. I am so privileged and so very humbled. There are not words enough.

It is my hope that this plant, *Hosta 'Her Eyes Were Blue'*, will someday be in every hosta garden. That it serves as the symbol of The Friendship Plant. That its "merit" is just that. For it was truly given and received in the spirit of friendship.

Her eyes were blue.