

Eunice Fisher Distinguished Hybridizer Merit Award



Robert M. Solberg

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H. 'Ginsu Knife'



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First, let me say that I feel incredibly honored to receive this award and join the company of Mildred Seaver and Mary Chastain, the first two winners of the Eunice Fisher Hybridizer Award. It makes it even more meaningful to me that Mildred and Mary were on the committee that made this selection, I have the greatest respect for both of them. I would also like to thank the American Hosta Society and applaud their promotion of hosta hybridizing through this award. Finally, I would like to convey my appreciation to all those of you that have grown my hostas all these years and have told me how much enjoyment they have given you. That is the highest praise a hybridizer can receive. As many of you know, I believe that the best new hostas should be available to every gardener, everywhere, not to just a select few, and have always marketed my plants in that way.

I have always had an intellectual interest in genetics. I remember being fascinated by Mendel's peas in 9th grade biology and curly-winged fruit flies in graduate school. I am one of those parents that try to figure out which traits of my children came from me and which from their mother. Jenny is her father's daughter, Michael, his mother's son and Nathan is a good F1 hybrid.

I am however not a seed grower. Give me a small plant and I will make it grow but I have no green thumb when it comes to germinating seeds. I have to thank my wife Nancy for babying many of them for me as well as a host of past employees, and most recently Simpson Eason.

As I have said before, the idea of hybridizing hostas came more out of necessity than a desire to understand hosta genetics, however. Twenty or more years ago, there was a group of hosta hybridizers lead by Kevin Vaughn, that would sit in the back of the convention bus and tell about their new seedlings and their most recent crosses. They were all trying to figure out hosta genetics a little at a time. To have a voice in these discussions, I realized that I needed to have some seedlings of my own to describe to everyone else. I went home that summer and went to work. (By the way, I sowed those first seeds directly in the ground!)

My hybridizing philosophy, then as now, is two pronged. First, have a goal. Don't just grow seeds. Make crosses and try to make a new hosta. The goal should be easily attainable, at least in your own mind, in one cross or two. I started with an easy, one cross goal of turning green hostas into gold. Hosta alchemy.

The other part of my hybridizing philosophy, and the best advice I can give to any new or old hosta hybridizer is, "Be different!" Don't use the same three variegated breeding plants that everyone else uses. Being different will produce different, more unique hostas, better hostas.

Having a nursery full of plants to use in hybridizing and living in North Carolina, hostas frequently rebloom for me. I decided to be different and try to cross late flowering hostas with early flowering hostas. It worked well for Eric Smith and the “Tardianas”, why not me. That first cross was between late flowering *Hosta kikutii* and a reblooming ‘August Moon’, something different! My goal was simple enough, a yellow *kikutii*. The next couple of summers, I had lots to share in the back of the bus about the varying leaf shapes and bloom times of those seedlings as they matured.

Since then I have crossed ‘Shining Tot’ with *Hosta venusta* and ‘Lemon Lime’ to produce ‘Cody’ and ‘Shiny Penny’ and its sport, ‘Cracker Crumbs’. I also crossed ‘Sweet Susan’ with a late flowering ‘Tokudama Aureonebulosa’ to produce ‘Sweet Sunshine’, that looks all the world like a ‘Tokudama’ but has fragrant flowers and grows with vigor. Currently, I have my own Eric Smithian hosta group, three generations of what I call, “Longianas”, *Hosta longipes* in the form of ‘One Man’s Treasure’ crossed with *Hosta sieboldiana*. ‘Summer Squall’, ‘Sun Shower’, ‘Thunderboomer’ and the rest will be available in a couple of years. By the way, I did get a yellow *kikutii* from that first cross I made, and probably in retrospect I should have named it. It didn’t grow very well and wasn’t very pretty and eventually I guess it just wasted away.

This all brings me to the most difficult part of hosta hybridizing, selecting hostas for the garden and for the compost pile. Frequently it is faults that doom a new hosta seedling, floppy scapes, or worse floppy petioles. Some are slug bait, some rot, and others are not resistant to fungal diseases. Some just do not meet the goal. Inevitably, if my hybridizing goal is a gold hosta, all the green seedlings will be forced to die young as deer food. Throwing away beautiful hostas that are just a slight step below your best ones, is the greatest pain of all.

Enough of all this doom and gloom, I am really a very positive person these days. Let turn this around and fill the glass half full. What then, makes a great hosta? We have all heard about the 20 foot rule, or 50 foot rule, or whatever it is. A great hosta should be distinct from a distance, from well across the garden, like ‘June’. I do not disagree with this but a great hosta should look interesting upon closer inspection also. It should have certain subtle accessories that excite the eye. For me it should also be a new genetic combination, not just an improvement, like a bluer form of ‘Elegans’, or one with more substance. Good looks are important, too. It should be “cute” like ‘Blue Mouse Ears’ or “beautiful” like ‘Sagae’. It should also look like a hosta and not be too weird, although I fear weird may be the next hot hosta trend. Look at all the excitement about ‘Praying Hands’. Believe it or not, it was almost the Hosta of the Year for 2010.

A great hosta must also grow! I put this very high on my list of necessary traits. Then, it needs a good name. A bad name can destroy a great hosta. A great name can make an average hosta marketable, but never great. A great hosta needs to be marketed well so that it will be widely grown. For me, one of my greatest thrills is to see my hostas grown, much better than I ever could, in gardens all across the country. In the end, a hosta becomes great when it is widely grown and becomes a household name, like ‘Sum and Substance’ or my ‘Guacamole’.

When asked to choose one of my seedlings for this award, I immediately knew which one it had to be. I did go through the list of all my introductions and eliminate them one by one over a couple of days but it always had to be ‘Ginsu Knife’. ‘Ginsu Knife’ is a seedling from those back of the bus days. It is a hybrid of ‘Iron Gate Supreme’ and ‘Green Fountain’ and is all that I hoped for when I made the cross and so much more. It has the upright, flowing habit of ‘Green Fountain’, and the fragrant flowers and bright variegation of ‘Iron Gate Supreme’. I never dreamed it would have those beautifully ruffled petioles and those killer serrate leaf margins that make it a perennial Best of Show winner. It is distinct at a distance and unbelievably interesting up close. It is delicate but grows very well. Unfortunately, it is very reluctant to set seed. The good Lord must have broken the mold when He sent ‘Ginsu Knife’ down to me.

Again, I am surprised and very honored to receive this award. With this recognition, I must admit that I feel added pressure to live up to this great honor. I know at least in the short term, the best is yet to come. My quest for the “red” hosta will continue with renewed enthusiasm and as I like to say when people ask when it will be here, it is always just one more cross away.

Thanks again!