

Groundcovery Companions

by Steve Kelley Long Lake, Minnesota

Comes a time in every hosta fancier's life when the urge strikes to reach beyond our favorite plant and add a bit more variety to the garden. That ever-expanding collection of hostas that has been a joy and a delight suddenly—or not so suddenly, perhaps—leaves you wanting more. More color, more zest, more variety in texture and form.

I'll be the first to suggest that a grand sweep of hostas can be a magnificent sight indeed. How often I have spent an early morning stroll through our hosta beds, swooning over the big, bold, graceful *Hosta* 'Niagara Falls' combined with a mature clump of 'Regal Splendor' or 'Sagae', with maybe a bit of 'June' or 'Robert Frost' thrown in for interest. You've all seen and admired such a vignette.

But, admit it now, enamored as we all are of hostas, don't you think a garden of "nothing but" can end up looking like a patch of, well, hostas? As you know, hosta leaf shapes follow pretty much the same pattern, hosta forms are pretty much alike, hosta flowers can be either here or there. I admit, leaf color presents a bit of diversity, but you can still count on greens, blues, yellows and whites, in some not very diverse combinations.

After years of touring gardens of the doyens (and the doyennes) of the hosta kingdom, I couldn't help but be impressed by what I saw. The genius these gardeners possessed was a flair for putting plants together in a pleasing arrangement that propelled the garden above the status of a mere collection of plants. After a while, this lesson began to



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Thalictrum kiusianum (Kyushu meadow rue), one of the author's favorite petite hosta companions.

sink in. I had to open up our hosta garden to the possibility of diversity. That meant spreading out the hostas and creating space for...what?

I liked the idea of adding shade-loving perennials such as snakeroot, turtlehead, baneberry, ferns and monkshood. All the usual suspects. These are all tall plants and would likely be considered for the back of the border. But what about the fore-

ground? Poring through memories, I recalled, among others, the garden of Russ O'Harra in Des Moines. On reflection, aren't we fortunate to have had the welcoming spirit of so many keen hostarians, who have generously opened up their gardens to visitors over the years?

To be continued in an upcoming issue of *The Hosta Journal*.