

Hosta Garden – a Jewel in the Arboretum at the Central Experimental Farm

**by Brenda Lester
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Nestled under the trees on the hill beside the lake there is a hidden jewel in the Arboretum. As you pass through the arbour gateway between the two lookout areas on the Arboretum Circle, you enter an emerald world of terraced gardens holding almost 300 different varieties of hostas. If you visit at just the right time, you might even be serenaded by the music of the HMCS Carleton band wafting through the woods as you follow the groomed pathways through these green gardens.

Hostas are hardy, disease resistant perennials which grow in almost any conditions. However, these cultured, shade loving plants thrive and show at their best in the kind of dappled shade and moist soil found in the natural woodland environment of the Arboretum hillside. The 600 hostas growing there today found their ideal home through serendipity, the cooperative relationship between Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) and the Friends of the Farm (FCEF), and thousands of hours of volunteer labour.

In the late 1970s, hostas began arriving from China into the North American gardening market. Trevor Cole, then curator of the Dominion Arboretum of Canada, had a fondness for hostas and began planting them on the Central Experimental Farm. He was responsible for the numerous plantings of several varieties in the lath house, which was behind the CEF green houses, to test the hostas for hardiness, disease resistance and growth requirements. He also put many of them in the Macoun Garden for ornamentation. The plants thrived and proliferated, and many of the 'spare' plants became the basis for an informal 'hosta exchange' with Budd Gardens Perennials, a local garden centre specializing in hostas.

Then, in the late 1980s, the Friends of the Farm undertook a survey of the Arboretum to update the previous plan dating from about 1908. While working on the survey, an FCEF board member, George Vorauer and the Friends' Arboretum Team came upon an abandoned rock garden overgrown with weeds and shrubs. It was not difficult to convince Trevor Cole or then FCEF General Manager, Peter Elliott, that the unsightly area needed improvement, and that those 'spare' hostas that had been going to the compost pile (or the plant exchange) would be the perfect plantings for the location.

After Agriculture Canada senior executives approved the proposal for a formal hosta garden at the site, a garden plan was developed according to the FCEF survey grid. Over the next few years, in addition to providing materiel and equipment and making permanent staff available to work on the garden, AAFC hired college students to unearth and reset the existing rocks, terrace the hillside, and find and add new rocks transported (sometimes by horse drawn carts!) from local areas such as the Hogs Back Falls on the Rideau River (with the permission of the NCC,

Parks Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources). When there were no more rocks available, a joint AAFC/FCEF decision was made to finish the planned retaining walls using wood and railway ties. FCEF Green Thumb and Tree teams helped move rocks, create terraces, and fill pathways, but were mainly responsible for cleaning out the unwanted plant material, staking paths, and installing wooden path edges, railings, and retaining walls with donated materials from Cashway Lumber, Bytown Lumber, Lanark Cedar, Nicole D'Amour and Raymond Steele.

The first rock beds were completed in 1991 and immediately became the new home for hostas that were overflowing from the lath house. In 1994, AAFC decided to tear down the lath house and donate all the hostas in it to FCEF. The structure was not demolished immediately, and the FCEF Hosta Team tended their 'government' plants and added new ones in their original location while work continued on the new hillside garden. In 1996 the lath house was torn down, and AAFC staff and FCEF volunteers moved the entire collection of plants into the still-incomplete terraced beds of today's hosta garden. Finally, after 6 years of planning and construction requiring over 3,000 volunteer hours, substantial staff and material/equipment assistance from Agriculture Canada, generous corporate and individual material donations, and significant financial support, primarily from the Betty and Ralph Sparham Trust Fund, the Hosta Garden officially opened in 1997. The Arboretum's new gem contained 60 varieties of hostas peeking through the natural woodland like facets on an emerald in a cluster setting.

Soon after the opening of the hosta gardens, the FCEF hosta team heightened the terrace retaining walls and built up the soil level by almost 3 feet in most of the terraces. The terraces were too steep, and without any natural debris to catch and hold it on the ground cleared and groomed around the plantings, water tended to run off before moistening the soil. The new soil added to fill the beds and level the garden surfaces was heavily composted to hold water better and mimic the natural improvements which would have occurred from decomposing debris if it was left in the beds. Visitors to the garden will also notice the ends of large drainage tubes just breaking the soil surface near the trees in the upper terraces. These were inserted during the build up of the beds on the recommendation of an arborist. One end is placed near the surface (breathing) roots of the trees and the other at the soil surface to provide oxygen to the "buried" trees. Today they also serve as expressways and hidey-holes for the garden's resident chipmunks!

The hostas were severely affected by two consecutive, extremely dry Ottawa summers several years ago. To avoid further damage should similar weather conditions occur in the future, FCEF purchased a 200-gallon water tank for the site. The Arboretum and Ground staff of Agriculture Canada installed a security cage and tap on the tank, and continue to fill it with water at the request of the Hosta Team. The tank has proven to be an invaluable asset for the annual spring task of de-slugging and fertilizing the hostas. Ammonia is diluted with water (one part to ten) and sprinkled onto the spring hosta shoots and the ground around them. The process is repeated twice more at about two-week intervals to maximize its effectiveness. This not only fertilizes the

plants, but also destroys slug eggs and hinders adult development. Unfortunately ammonia does not deter the little mammals that like to munch an occasional hosta leaf.

The garden's sheltered location near the Arboretum road makes it an appealing "shopping area" for midnight gardeners. Since AAFC increased security patrols through the area, the number of plants lost has been reduced by more than 60% to about 30 plants per year. While this is still troubling, the fewer losses allow FCEF to spend more of its limited hosta budget (including money derived from the Ralph Sparham Trust fund) to increase both the overall number of plants and the number of varieties in the garden. We were also fortunate several years ago to have Canadian Tire and Loblaws donate a significant number of hostas to replace drought-damaged and stolen plants.

Hostas are virtually maintenance free, so the Hosta Team was able to complete most of their "chores", including raking the winter leaf fall, applying ammonia, and weeding the garden and pathways, before construction around the arboretum closed all access to the garden for a few months from July, 2009.

Come and visit this 'emerald isle' in the trees. Enjoy the cool retreat and check out these magnificent plants that range from the small 6-inch spreading hostas to the huge 3-foot high 'Sum and Substance'. Discover shades of green and colour variegations you won't believe. Stop and chat with the Hosta Team, or pause to listen to the Navy band. Don't miss the hidden jewel of the Arboretum!

Brenda Lester, August 2009

(Note that the Hosta Garden walls need rebuilding. FCEF and AAFC are reviewing options.)