

‘Solar Flare’: hosta with the mosta

by Suzanne Hively
Plain Dealer Garden Editor
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‘Solar Flare,’ a hosta growing at Gardenview Horticultural Park in Strongsville, commands attention because of its large pale golden leaves and kelly green veins.

It is the largest of the golden-leaf hostas, standing three feet high and expanding to a diameter of six feet.

Individual leaves are 14 inches wide and 18 to 20 inches long on two-foot stems.

To make the plant more intriguing, the leaves start out as chartreuse in the springtime, changing to the lemony-yellow later in the summer.

Hostas are known to love shade, but ‘Solar Flare’ thrives on sunshine. Grown in the shade, its leaves won’t attain their best golden color.

On the other hand, excessive sunshine in a hot, dry summer such as this one can bleach the leaves, said Henry Ross, who hybridized ‘Solar Flare’ 15 years ago. He grows his ‘Solar Flares’ in full sunlight but said, “I don’t recommend full sun in the heat of summer. Ideally, they should have morning sun and some shade in the afternoon.”

Ross, founder of Gardenview Horticultural Park, said that ‘Solar Flare’ was an open pollinated hybrid of golden *sieboldiana*. He is not sure of the exact parentage, but its small white flowers are what makes him believe that it is *H. sieboldiana*. “I’ve been sowing ‘zillions’ of seeds,” he said, “then picking out the seeds from the yellow-leaf plants (for further propagation) and throwing out the seeds from the green ones.”

‘Solar Flare’ received a patent two years ago. It is the only hosta to have a plant patent. “Everyone who ever saw it wanted it,” Ross said, “but I told them I would not release it until I got a patent.”

Getting a patent is an expensive, complicated process that takes about 18 months, Ross said. The cost can be anywhere from \$3,000 to \$5,000, with most of it going to lawyer fees.

“No one ever bothers with it (a patent) because it’s just too expensive,” said Ross, “but it gives you control over the plant for 17 years.”

The reason Ross was eager to patent the ‘Solar Flare’ is because he will channel royalties from its sales into an endowment fund he wants to establish to perpetuate Gardenview for future generations to enjoy.

Over the years, Ross has received patents on three other plants he hybridized. All are crab apple trees.

Malus 'Coral Cascade,' a weeping crab apple characterized by its pea-sized orange berries, was awarded a patent last year. Patents have expired on two other cultivars.

'Coral Cascade' will be introduced by Klehm Nursery in Barrington, Ill., in the fall.

As for 'Solar Flare,' admirers will not have to wait any longer to obtain plants for themselves. Both Klehm Nursery and Wayside Gardens in Hodges, S.C., are offering 'Solar Flare' at \$28.

Tissue culture, a method of producing a plant from a few cells in a sterile flask, was used by the commercial nurseries to quickly multiply the stock of 'Solar Flare,' said Ross.

Hostas, sometimes known as plantain lily or funkia, are grown for their great variety of color and texture in foliage. The flowers are usually insignificant.

The foliage provides a magnificent display beginning in late spring, reaches its peak in summer and continues through autumn.

But don't count on hostas for winter interest. Once the leaves die, the plant disappears from sight until spring.

Hostas can be planted in late summer, early autumn or early spring. Removing the flower spikes will help these plants become established more quickly.

Hostas are easygoing plants that will thrive where others would balk. However, for optimum performance, hostas like a moist, fertile soil and some shade. Ideally, the soil should be just a touch on the acid side of neutral, or a pH of about 6.

Hostas can be propagated by seed or by dividing mature clumps. Knowing that hostas naturally produce buds at the base of the crown, Ross found that he could speed the propagation process by making a cut where the bud merges with the hosta rootstock. A second cut is made at right angles to the first.

A callus, which forms over the damaged tissue, stimulates the production of growth buds of a new plant.

Most pests and diseases overlook hostas, but slugs find them irresistible. To wash down their meal of foliage, they also enjoy a sip of beer, which is usually their fatal mistake. They fall into the small containers of beer and drown.

The containers should be deep enough that the slugs cannot climb out. An inch or two is sufficient. Often gardeners will sink the containers so that

the top is level with the surface of the soil to make it easier for the slugs to enter, but not exit.

A natural way of keeping the slug population down is to eliminate from the garden places where they can hide, such as plant debris, rocks or boards. They take cover in the daytime or in cold weather and feed at night.

Some devious gardeners have been known to provide shelter, such as a flowerpot near a slug trail. Each morning, the trap is overturned and the sleeping slugs destroyed.

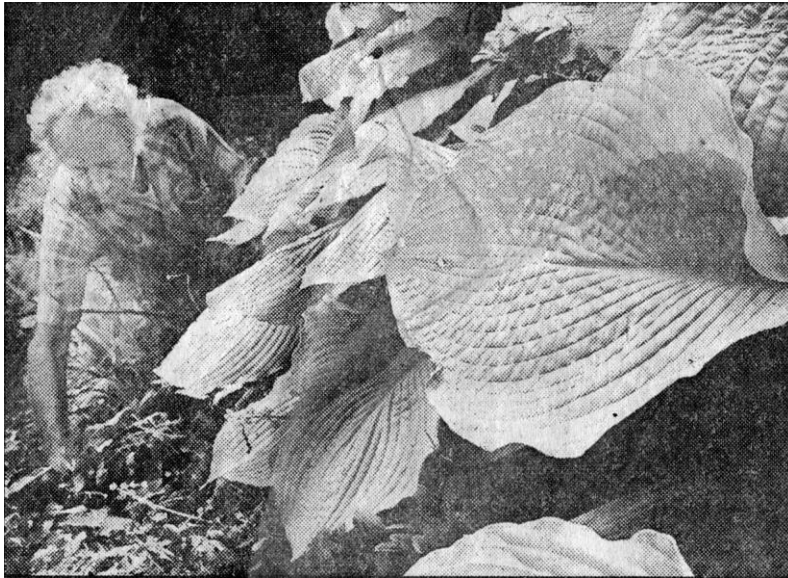
Still other desperate gardeners pour salt or boiling water on the slugs. The problem here is to keep the hot water and salt away from the plants to prevent their destruction.

Tepid water won't do; slugs just crawl away. Slugs "drowned" in beer have been known to revive themselves without apparent harm and continue feasting on a favorite plant.

Pesticides such as methiocarb, metaldehyde and carbaryl can also be used to rid the garden of slugs.

Klehm Nursery is at Route 5, Box 197, Penny Rd., Barrington, Ill. 60010

Wayside Nursery is at 1 Garden Lane, Hodges, S.C. 29695



Henry Ross of Gardenview Horticultural Park in Strongsville hybridized and patented the golden-leaf hosta, "Solar Flare."

PD photo by Brynne Shaw