




Preparing Hostas for the Winter By Diane McClymont-Peace

Popularity of Hostas

In the Ottawa area, hostas are popular, hardy perennials. Their popularity is due to their tropical-looking foliage; their variety of sizes, colour, shapes and leaf textures, their ability to look attractive through most of the growing season; and their ability to thrive in a variety of habitats including deep shade. They are also popular because they require little care. They do not require deadheading, pruning or frequent dividing and some can live for at least 30 years. General care includes obtaining health and disease-free plants, feeding with natural fertilizers (compost), generous watering during dry periods, and controlling for slugs and earwigs, etc.

	
	Mulch 5-7 cm. will help protect hostas from mice/moles

Winter Protection

Host leaves are susceptible to frost. If you want to keep the leaves attractive through the first frosts, they can be covered with foam, burlap, inverted pots or bushel baskets, depending on their size. Eventually they will succumb to the cold weather. It is the gardener's personal choice whether to remove the leaves frost-damaged or not. The flowering stems should be put off, if not already done. They will decompose in place and provide some winter protection for the crown. On the other hand they provide shelter for slugs and other pests so if these organisms are a problem it is advisable to remove them for composting. If they are diseased, for example with foliar nematodes, the leaves should be discarded. Hostas need water so if the fall has been dry it is important to water to ensure they are not water stressed.

It is advisable to cover the plants with mulch for the winter because the amount of snow cover is becoming more unreliable. Straw or coca mulch has been noted to diminish slugs and not to

break down as quickly as other mulches. Others like shredded hardwood for its moisture retaining abilities. Shredded leaves are also beneficial if there is not a problem with slugs. Mulching is also helpful in protecting some hostas which heave out of the ground during freezing and in the spring when there are late frosts. Mulching also protects hostas from being eaten by mice and/or moles but if these animals are a problem, the hosta crowns can be covered with fire wire mesh or pots with small holes for drainage. The thickness of mulching is important. It should be less than 5-7 cm. If thicker, voles can tunnel and created further damage to the crowns and roots.

Winter Care for Hostas in Planters

Even though some hostas can survive in zone three conditions, it is advisable to lift the plants from containers and plant in beds for the winter. Treat the transplants in the same way as winter care for bedding plants as above.

Division

Hostas can be divided or replanted at any time including the fall, however, the plant survival is more successful when divisions or replantings are done in the spring before substantial growth has occurred. For division, dig out the entire plant and divide by cutting the roots where there are natural divides with a clean sharp knife. It is recommended to disinfect the knife before and after each cut with alcohol or 10% bleach. The cut surfaces can also be washed with bleach to ensure no contamination. Prepare the new planting site with good compost, water well and plant the divisions at the same level. Ensure the new planting are well-watered until freeze-up. By practicing these simple tips on dividing hostas, you soon will have a beautiful hosta garden.