

Hosta Takeover

In just ten years, Ed and Verna Streeter have turned their backyard hillside into a secret garden of hostas and other shade-loving perennials.

by Douglas Jones

photographs by Madeline Johnston


Just driving by their home on Singer Lake Road near Baroda, Mich.—a few miles west of Andrews campus—you'd never know there's a secret garden of shade-loving plants and flowers in Edward and Verna Streeter's backyard. Over 700 clumps of hostas (more than 200 varieties at last count) create a breathtaking sight every summer.

Now retired from the Andrews faculty and staff, Ed and Verna put in eight-hour days in the early summer, grooming their secret garden of hostas—perennial plants big on dramatic foliage ranging from sunny golds and chartreuse to variegated mixes of white and deep blue-green. Their work has paid off. Their backyard has been the setting for four weddings, local garden tours (600 guests from nearby Lincoln Township ambled the shady pathways not so long ago), various newspaper stories, and *Taunton's Kitchen Garden* maga-

zine this summer is doing a feature on the Streeters' kitchen garden.

Ed, professor emeritus of educational administration and supervision in the School of Education, on a recent walk-through of the gardens, pointed out that their garden is made up of a dozen "rooms," or self-contained spaces. From the front yard guests can saunter around the side of the house and move down a shady path dubbed "Hosta Way," or climb the stairs down the bank while looking out at the sunny kitchen plot and beyond to the sparkling water of Singer Lake.

The Streeters have christened their backyard getaway Verna's Greenery. Verna, who served as secretary to the dean of graduate studies from Gordon Madgwick to Delmer Davis, says she got started gardening long ago when she was a child in Australia: "My grandmother had a wonderful garden!" And Ed traces his gardening

A photograph of a garden featuring a series of wooden steps descending a hillside. The steps are made of weathered wooden planks and are surrounded by various plants. On the left, there are large green hostas and ferns. On the right, there are yellow daylilies and red impatiens. The background is filled with more greenery and a wooden fence.

Wooden steps determine the path
down the Streeters' backyard hillside
filled with hostas, daylilies, ferns and
impatiens.



start back to his youth in India. They've travelled the world traipsing around gardens. Most recently they visited gardens in England and name Powis Gardens there Britain's most spectacular.

Ed and Verna, both members of the Michigan Hosta Society, speak knowingly of their hosta specimens. "Sum and Substance is the largest of the plants," they explain about a stunning gold-hued plant. The yellowish-tinted hosta leaves are due to more sunlight, while the more bluish-colored plants are those found deeper in the shade. "They all like an acid soil," Ed mentioned, "and slugs and snails are their enemies." There are about 1700 varieties of hostas, which are sometimes called plantain lilies.

Hosta names like *August Moon*, *Wrinkles and Crinkles* and *Golden Tiara* are spoken affectionately by both Ed and Verna, and you can tell that they are on intimate terms with their plants. They should be; throughout the summer each of them works in the gardens from three to four hours a day.

Clockwise from below: Pink astilbe accents the hosta garden. The mammoth leaves of *H. 'Great Expectations'* show the variegation many hosta collectors prize. The Streeters' kitchen garden flourishes in the full sun. Verna and Ed relax in one of their garden "rooms." Facing page, clockwise from top: Variegated hosta stand out from blue hydrangea and pink impatiens. *H. 'Francee.'* Good fences make good neighbors; the Streeters keep their next-door neighbors supplied with hostas and astilbes. A shady nook features ferns, impatiens and an ornamental frog's splash of water.





Hostas are not the only favored plants in the Streeter garden; however, they outnumber all the other species in the secret garden. The lush green foliage of hostas and ferns is heightened by the showy color of day lilies or by the soft pastels of astilbe and hydrangea. Around the stream and waterfall you'll also find impatiens ranging from delicate pinks to fiery reds. And occasionally a rose floats above the sea of hosta.

Hostas, named for the Austrian botanist Nicolaus Host, are indigenous to Japan and North Korea, and they require six weeks of dormancy in winter's cold. They're easy to divide, say the Streeters. "You can move and share them very easily."

Hostas sprout in early April, sending up "horns" of delicate silver green that will unfurl to produce spectacular leaves. Some varieties' leaves take on a pillowed, or quilted, look, while others are smooth and shiny.

The month of June is prime time for hostas; then in July or August they put out a tall spire of small, bell-like flowers—ranging from delicate blue-violet to white. Late in the heat of summer, the hosta will turn a golden hue; and with the first frost in the fall, the hosta will die back for its dormant period.

The Streeters look for bargains when it comes to acquiring new varieties. Ed says that locally Brookside Nursery in St. Joseph is a good place to start to look. But he favors wholesalers like Twixwood Nursery in Berrien Springs, Walters Gardens in Zeeland, Mich., and DeGroot Nurseries in Coloma, Mich.

Both Ed and Verna say that the best authority on hostas is Diana Grenfell, whom they met in Great Britain. They recommend her two books—*The Gardener's Guide to Growing Hostas* (1996) and *Hosta: The Flowering Foliage Plant* (1990)—to gardeners curious about their shade-loving favorite.

If you have questions about shade gardening, Ed says he'll be happy to respond if you want to e-mail him at <streeter@andrews.edu>. But good luck catching him before he goes out to the garden!

Some Streeter favorites, top to bottom:
H. plantaginea produces large, shiny leaves throughout the summer. Stunning variegated foliage is expected from *H. sieboldiana* 'Frances Williams.' *H. 'Wrinkles and Crinkles'* produces showy white flowers earlier in the season than some other hostas.



Douglas Jones is editor of FOCUS, and his backyard is filled with hostas. Madeline Johnston is an avid photographer who has recently had her work published in the April 1998 issue of Popular Photography.