



Hosta Virus X
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A few weeks ago I visited a friend's newly renovated garden that was included mass plantings of a hosta called 'Gold Standard'. I came face to face with a group of hostas that were unusual to say the least. These plants had been purchased from a credible nursery, planted and treated with loving care but they did not look like the Gold Standard that I have had growing in my garden for more than five years.

Unknowingly a dangerous virus now resides in her garden. Known as Hosta Virus X (HVX), it is the most common hosta virus. An infected plant may take years before exhibiting symptoms but it is permanent and will be with the plant until it dies. First identified in 1996, it is spreading around the world.

At this time HVX has only been found to infect hostas and all cultivars should be considered to be susceptible although it seems that some varieties are more likely to be contaminated. Some like Birchwood Parky's Gold, Blue Cadet, Gold Edger, Gold Standard, Golden Tiara, Royal Standard, So Sweet, Stiletto, Striptease and Sum and Substance have been identified as having a high percentage of infected plants in the marketplace. They should be closely inspected and investigated before purchase.

To confuse the issue, be aware that there are some varieties that actually do have some corrugation or figuring on the leaves that are not the result of the disease, for example, Embroidery, Independence or Savannah Supreme. It is important to know what a specific variety of hosta is supposed to look like.

Before the virus became well known, some plants that were actually contaminated were put on the market as being new varieties. If you see a hosta that looks suspicious when shopping in a nursery, inform the manager of your suspicions. If just one plant looks to be infected, do not buy any hostas from this batch, even another variety. Part of the problem is that many places just sell plants without being aware of the potential problem.

Infected plants may exhibit a number of different symptoms. Examples are leaf distortion, which may include thin and wrinkled or sunken areas, mottling, or darker coloured lines along the leaf veins. Sometimes the symptoms will disappear but be aware that these plants are still infected. All parts of the plant are affected, including the seeds.

Hostas that have been growing in your garden for a number of years are likely to be virus free but should still be inspected regularly. New additions should be observed from time to time as symptoms may take a few years to appear. Be aware that infected plants, even if they are not showing symptoms, are contagious.

This virus is transmitted when sap from an infected plant comes in contact with a healthy plant. Regular maintenance chores can transmit this disease throughout your garden. The simple act of deadheading (removal of the flower stocks,) dividing or removing unwanted leaves can mean the end of your hostas. Accidentally shearing them with a lawnmower or stepping on them can also cause a problem.

It is imperative to disinfect tools between plants. A solution of bleach and water is all that is necessary. It is also suggested that you wash your hands between plants.

At the end of the growing season, it is customary to remove the leaves from hostas once they turn colour and are no longer providing nourishment to the plant. Clean up of the area makes it less conducive to snails and slugs that would otherwise spend the winter with additional protection from the elements. Dawn Tack, of Gardens Plus, deals with many more hostas than the average gardener. She suggests waiting a few extra weeks in the fall until the leaves turn a bit mushy and then pulling them rather than cutting them. I tried this technique last fall and the cleanup went much more quickly than in past years without the potential of cross-contamination. The flower stocks are tougher to remove and will need to be cut but if you are willing to leave them until spring, they dry out, become brittle and snap right off. An added bonus is the possibility of finding hosta seedlings next season.

If you suspect that you have an infected plant, remove it immediately. Dig up as many roots as possible and do not plant another hosta in this spot until you are certain that all roots have rotted in the area. The plant may be left in the sun to dry out as the virus can only exist in living tissue or you can also dispose of it in the trash.

If you would like to get an opinion about whether the plant is actually diseased, pick a leaf and seal it in a plastic bag before taking it to a knowledgeable professional. Be sure to wash any sap that might be on your hands or on the bag. You should also know the name of the variety. There is a test for the virus and with careful stock management, it can be avoided by the nurseries.

I, for one, will continue to add to my collection. I have never seen a hosta I did not like and the positives of growing these wonderful plants far outweigh this problem. Be aware, inspect regularly and be prepared to take action. This is a good course of action whether dealing with HVX or any other disease or pest in your garden.

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