

# ORIENTAL PERENNIAL SPINACH

## ギボウシ

Stephen Barstow introduces a common garden plant that is enjoyed in the Eastern kitchen and does well in the shade of the forest garden



Left: Hosta shoots in the author's garden in mid-May.



Below: Harvested Hostons (Urui in Japan).

I live at a latitude of 64.5°N in Norway. Here, traditional spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*) is almost impossible to grow as it quickly bolts. In PM52 I profiled Caucasian Spinach – *Hablitzia* which does grow well for me here.

The genus hosta appear in late spring, which is four to six weeks after Caucasian Spinach and is ready to harvest more or less as soon as the *Hablitzia* harvest is over – so it is an ideal complement to my unusual perennial spinach.

### THE GENUS HOSTA

The genus hosta consists of some 45 species of clump forming perennials from Japan, Korea, China and eastern Russia, previously classified in the lily family (they were previously known as plantain lilies), but are now placed in the agave family (*Agavaceae*). Their natural habitat is along rocky streams, in woodland and also in more open habitats such as alpine meadows. They are very hardy and can be grown throughout north western Europe, even in the far north of

Norway. As the natural habitat indicates, hostas are shade-tolerant and as we will see, perfect for the edible forest garden.

Hostas were introduced to Europe as ornamentals in the 1700s and are today one of the most popular garden plants and also one of the best known families used in the woodland garden, in particular the larger species which act effectively to suppress weeds. They are mainly grown as foliage plants, with a large range in leaf size, shape, colour (from green to yellow to grey blue) and many different variegated forms are also available. With an estimated 5,000 or more cultivars there are an enormous number of varieties to choose from. The latest UK based *RHS Plant Finder* ([www.rhs.org.uk/plants/index.asp](http://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/index.asp)) lists no fewer than 1,550 varieties of hosta available currently in British nurseries!

### GROWING

Hostas are easily propagated by division in late summer and spring, and they can also be raised from





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**Left:**  
Vegetable in spring, foliage plant in summer and ornamental flower in autumn – makes the Hosta a perfect plant.

neither bitter or fibrous.

You can take all the shoots from a plant and it will quickly shoot again and still manage to flower later in the season. In fact some hosta gardeners will deliberately mow their hostas for the new leaves. Apart from *Hosta sieboldiana* 'Elegans', I used the yellow variegated *Hosta montana* 'Aureomarginata' and *Hosta fortunei*.

In the mountain villages of Northern Japan, hostas (giboshi in Japan) are grown both as a cash crop and also for home consumption. *Hosta sieboldiana* varieties are used. It is mainly the young leaf stems (petioles) which are harvested and these are sold in Japan in vegetable shops as 'urui'. I call them hostons due to their resemblance to chicory shoots or chicons (Belgian endive). It is mainly the larger species, although smaller species such as *Hosta sieboldii*, are also used. They are mostly cooked, but can also be eaten raw in salad. The simplest way to prepare urui is either sautéed in butter or oil, or parboiled and dressed with a nut oil/butter (peanut or sesame), vinegar, salt and sugar (served as a warm side dish).

seed, although cultivars will not necessarily come true. It will take several years from seed before plants are ready for harvest, however. The main problem with their cultivation is that slugs are also partial to a hosta salad, although in my climate this is only a problem in late summer. I make a slug trap by breaking off a few leaves of the largest species and placing them around the hostas and other susceptible plants. Then I regularly collect the slugs that congregate underneath.

#### EDIBILITY

Over the years, I have planted various hostas in my edible garden, both cultivars and a growing number of wild varieties, the latter mostly seed propagated. In his book, *Plants For A Future*, Ken Fern wrote that he had only tried two species and that they are 'somewhat fibrous but have a sweet flavour'. Similarly, the genus hosta as a whole is given the lowest usefulness rating on the on-line Plants For A Future database

([www.pfaf.org](http://www.pfaf.org)). *Cornucopia II*, a comprehensive sourcebook of edible plants, only has one entry, for the species *Hosta longipes*, stating that 'the sourish leaves are cooked and eaten. In Korea they are used for namul, a side dish commonly seasoned with soy sauce and toasted sesame oil'.

Later, on searching the internet, I learnt that *Hosta sieboldiana* was cultivated in mountain villages in Japan and sold as a cash crop. Another website ([www.hostas.com/articles/hostas/edible/hosta\\_cookery.html](http://www.hostas.com/articles/hostas/edible/hosta_cookery.html)) describes making cream of hosta soup and 'hostakopita', the latter inspired by the Greek spanakopita (spinach pie), using hosta leaves rather than spinach!

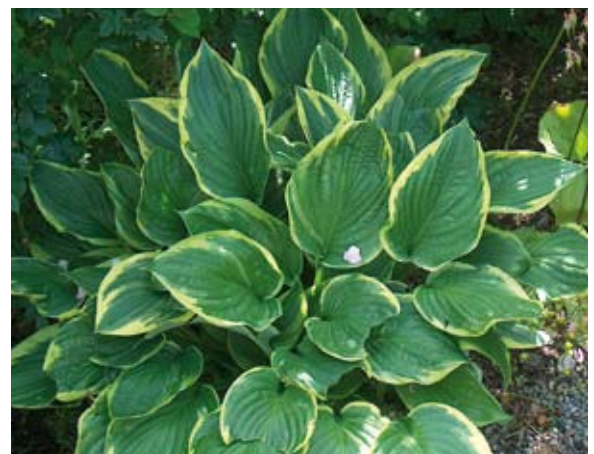
#### HARVESTING & EATING

Hostas are ready to harvest here around the middle of May, and I finally got round to experimenting with them on 25th May 2006. I thought that I had probably left it a bit late and expected the leaves to be fibrous and bitter, but when tasted raw they were

**Right:**  
Greek hosta pie (Hostakopita).



**Below:**  
*Hosta montana* 'Aureo-marginata'.







**Left:** First steps in making Nori-Maki-Sushi, the dried hostons have been boiled and marinated in a soy sauce mix.

Hosta has also been used in sushi. In spring 2007, I tried one of these recipes. First, the dried hostons are boiled and then marinated in soy sauce, salt and (optionally) sugar mix and are used as the centre filling for Nori-Maki-Sushi (this is the now familiar sushi wrapped in nori, the seaweed related to Welsh laver). The various stages are shown on this page. In another recipe, hosta leaves are used instead of nori as the outer casing for rice made with purple perilla (shiso) leaves (called shisogiboshi-sushi).

Urui can also be used dipped in tempura (a batter made of wheat flour and egg), fried, then dipped in soy sauce before serving. It has also been used in Shabu-Shabu, a fondue-like dish. Urui is also stir-fried with abura age (fried tofu). Hostas have also been considered to be the best wild vegetables for pickling and have also been preserved by drying.

One of the most popular ornamental hostas today is called 'Sagae'. This is a large-leaved variegated form of the variety *Hosta fluctuans*. It was apparently found amongst cultivated hostas being grown for food in the garden of a resident of Sagae City, located inland on the main island in Japan, Honshu. The gardener potted it up as he liked it and grew it in his front garden until a passing nursery man noticed it! Hosta 'Sagae' has now pride of place at the entrance to my garden.

Urui is often collected from

the wild in Japan. There are, however, occasional cases of mistaken identity leading to poisoning as hosta leaves can be mistaken for the leaves of False hellebore (*Veratrum* spp.), although it is not difficult to tell the difference. This could also be a problem in a garden setting, so please be absolutely sure you have hosta in front of you.

#### VEGETABLE HOSTAS

There is an enormous range of hostas out there, ready to be tasted by all you temperate and even sub-arctic forest gardeners, a form of gardening that seems to be ideally suited for this hardy



**Above:** Assembling Nori-Maki-Sushi filled with marinated urui.

**Right:** Nori-Maki-Sushi ready to serve.

plant. I have read that different types of urui are recognised in Japan, although I have so far not found what species are involved or what the special characteristics of the varieties are. It is likely that there will be quite a variation in taste. On Japanese websites I've seen mention of leaves being bitter (at least when raw) and one even mentions a faint taste of leeks. Perhaps I've just been lucky in the cultivars and species I've tasted so far?

If you want to try hosta for food and don't already have a plant, I would suggest that you try one of the large-leaved *Hosta sieboldiana* cultivars, such as

'Elegans', 'Big Daddy' and 'Blue Umbrella'. You can check the species of many cultivars (if known) on the MyHosta database <http://myhostas.net/>.

Incidentally, do you know who has the most productive forest garden in the UK? Answer at the end of the article.<sup>1</sup>

#### HOSTING A HOSTA EXPERIMENT

Hosta seems an almost perfect permaculture/forest garden plant – productive, tasty and a beautiful ornamental later in the season when in full flower. Hopefully this article has inspired all that get this far to eat their hostas next spring. It would be excellent if together we could increase our knowledge on the edibility of hostas. Therefore, I would like to 'host' a hosta experiment next spring. Just send me an email if you'd like to take part. All that is necessary is that you have access to a harvestable hosta and a spirit of adventure. I'll send you instructions and a questionnaire and the results will be published in PM 🌱

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*Plants for a Future* by Ken Fern, £19.95 from The Green Shopping Catalogue.

<sup>1</sup> Prince Charles! He holds the National Collection of large and giant leaved hosta in a naturalistic setting at Highfield. Perhaps someone should tell him...

