

HOT HOSTAS

Hosta 'Empress Wu'

The New Benchmark in Big

by Rob Mortko Olathe, Kansas

It was a chance meeting in so many ways. Brian Skaggs and Virginia Mitchell were both degreed horticulturists, working for the same national nursery chain, but in different regions. By chance, they found themselves working a booth together at AmeriFlora, an international horticultural exhibition held in Columbus, Ohio, in 1992. That chance meeting planted a number of seeds—both literally and figuratively. Brian and Virginia are now better known as Mr. and Mrs. Skaggs. And it so happened that the adjacent booth was run by The American Hosta Society.

Just a few years later Brian and Virginia were already hybridizing hostas and growing seedlings. They later cofounded FOoSE, the Fraternal Order of the Seedy Fellows. (See the column on *Hosta* 'Hacksaw' in the *Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 2, p. 49 for more information on this hybridizing group.)

In 1996, Brian and Virginia planted some seeds from an open-pollinated hosta, 'Big John'. (The seeds were most likely selfed, given the distance between 'Big John' and other hostas in the garden). Six years later, one of the surviving 'Big John' seedlings measured 47½ inches in height and 96 inches in width, with 32 eyes in the clump! The broadly oblong-ovate leaves averaged 18 inches wide by 21 inches long.



Brian Skaggs, dwarfed by *H.* 'Empress Wu'.

VIRGINIA SKAGGS

The foliage is a bluish green color early, changing to a medium to dark green by early summer, with moderate corrugation and good substance. Even growing in full sun in Indiana, this seedling has not burned when given adequate water. The early summer flowers are near-white with a pale lavender mid-petal stripe. The scapes extend just a few inches above the top of the upright, vase-shaped clump.

This seedling was named 'Xanadu Empress Wu', now shortened to 'Empress Wu'. In case you're wondering, 'Empress Wu' was named in honor of arguably the most powerful and influential woman in world history. She was the only female emperor ever in

China, reigning for half a century during the Tang Dynasty at the height of China's cultural diversity in the 7th century A.D.

If you want to create a big hosta hybrid, 'Big John' is a good place to start. In *The Hosta Handbook* (published in 2000), Mark Zilis describes 'Big John' as "synonymous with huge in hostas. Not only does the mound of foliage become massive, but the individual leaves are the largest of any hosta, narrowly beating out 'Sum and Substance' for that honor. The record-breaking 21- by 16 ¾-inch leaf was measured in 1998 in Clarence Owens' original clump during the AHS Convention. Since then no leaf that I have measured (probably more than 5,000) has exceeded those

dimensions.” Mark lists an average clump size for ‘Big John’ at 32 inches high by 72 inches wide.

H. ‘Big John’ is in turn a seedling of ‘Mira’, which is a cultivar form of *H. sieboldiana* from Japan. Originally listed as *H. sieboldiana* var. *mira* (Maekawa), W. George Schmid reduced this species variety to a cultivar in his monograph *The Genus Hosta—Giboshi Zoku*, published in 1991. In any event, there is a strong *H. sieboldiana* genetic presence in the hosta cultivars ‘Mira’, ‘Big John’ and now ‘Empress Wu’.

In many ways ‘Empress Wu’ looks just like ‘Big John’—only on steroids. In addition to size, however, it also has some other interesting differences. *H.* ‘Empress Wu’ continuously sends up scapes for nearly two months, with an overall bloom time approaching three months. Blooming typically starts in late May, almost a month before ‘Big John’.

Brian and Virginia donated a division of ‘Empress Wu’ to the 2004 AHS Online Auction. The winning bid was \$505.00, the highest single bid that year. (Here’s a bit of hosta trivia. Ten seconds after the bidding closed, a late bid of \$5,000.00 was received. We’ll never know if it was just a typo or if someone really wanted it that bad.)

In the summer of 2007, Mark Zilis visited Brian and Virginia’s garden. Armed with his notepad, camera and infamous tape measure, Mark was drawn to ‘Empress Wu’. After several studious brow-furrowed trips around the clump (approximately 27 feet in circumference) he measured one of the largest leaves and proclaimed, in his understated manner, “That is a personal best.” Brian didn’t ask for an explanation. He just assumed that Mark thought it was “pretty dog-gone big.” The leaf, in fact, measured 23 inches wide and 25

inches in length—67% larger than the record-setting ‘Big John’ leaf measured by Mark back in 1998. Pretty dog-gone big, indeed.

H. ‘Empress Wu’ was first available in the retail market in 2008. Based on the number of comments in the various online hosta forums, ‘Empress Wu’ is certainly a hot hosta. The Boyz at Naylor Creek Nursery, Gary Lindheimer and Jack Hirsch, have been long-time FOoSF supporters and have an exclusive on ‘Empress Wu’ in 2008. It has been their top seller this year, as of this writing. Look for increased availability of ‘Empress Wu’ in 2009, when Walters Gardens will make its tissue-cultured plants available to all growers.

So move over, ‘Sum and Substance’. There’s a new heavyweight champion in town. Make room—lots of room—for the Empress. In fact, it’s so big, you might even consider underplanting it with ‘Sum and Substance’! ■