

HOT HOSTAS

Hosta 'Hacksaw'

Both a Journey
and a Destination

by Rob Mortko Olathe, Kansas

When is the whole greater than the sum of the parts? In hosta hybridizing, certainly. It might also be true for FOoSF (Fraternal Order of the Seedy Fellows), a group of little-known hosta hybridizers who banded together to offer encouragement, ideas and feedback, as well as share plants, seeds and talent. Co-founded by Ron Livingston along with Brian and Virginia Skaggs, this group is now receiving critical acclaim at First Look competitions, at hosta conventions and in the hosta trade for a steadily increasing number of hosta introductions.

Hosta 'Hacksaw' from Ron Livingston is not just a Hot Hosta. It embodies the mission of FOoSF. The group seeks to improve the genus *Hosta* by creating new combinations of genes, bringing together recessive qualities that were once hidden in the gene pools and producing plants with unique architecture and modern color combinations—a truly visionary quest.

H. 'Hacksaw' is a small green hosta with long, narrow, tapered leaves that are intensely rippled and serrated. The leaf edge reminds you of a hacksaw blade. It has received interest from hosta gardeners, collectors and hybridizers alike. It is quite vigorous and has a stoloniferous tendency, which allows it to rapidly increase and form a 9-inch-tall by 17-inch-wide clump. It blooms very late in the season with lavender flowers and is extremely fertile both as a pod and pollen parent.

BOB OLSON

H. 'Hacksaw'.

H. 'Hacksaw' may never have found its way out of Ron's garden had it not been for the support and encouragement of fellow FOoSF member Alttara Sheer. Alttara raved about this seedling early on and encouraged Ron to enter it at First Look 3 (sponsored by AHS Region One) in 2003. Ron couldn't attend First Look, so Alttara entered a division she had been growing in her own garden. Alttara's hunch was right. *H. 'Hacksaw'* won the William and Eleanor Lachman award for best new seedling as judged by the AHS judges.

For those of you familiar with HostaPix (<http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/hostapix/>), Ron needs no introduction. His enthusiasm for sharing hosta pictures and information with fellow hosta growers in this online forum is unrivaled. Ron's abundant ability to encourage his peers is surpassed only by his prowess

in photography and his serious dedication to stretching the limits of the hosta gene pool.

A man of many talents, Ron taught middle school science for 35 years in the Detroit Public Schools. He also taught botany and heredity graduate classes at a nearby technical university. His degrees in biology, physical science and education have served him well in many ways. His long-time interest in breeding fish taught him about pushing the genetic envelope.

Like most school teachers, Ron never rested during the summer months. Early on, he worked as a landscaper during his summer "free time." He was familiar with hostas, but they never really caught his attention until he moved to his current home in 1993. There, an existing grouping of *H. plantaginea* nearly escaped his attention that first year—until the plants bloomed. He became

infatuated with this species' fragrance, and this was the catalyst for his continuing interest in hostas and hosta hybridizing.

Ron was on a walk through his neighborhood one day a couple of years later when, by chance, he met Stuart Asch tending his garden. Stuart was already well into hosta hybridizing (having been mentored by Pauline Banyai) and he and Ron developed a natural friendship. Ron credits Stuart, Bill Zumbar and Bill Nash as his early mentors.

Ron approached his hybridizing program in a most interesting fashion. He studied old issues of *The Hosta Journal* and the *Hosta Finder*, as well as catalogs. He categorized the hostas by price and popularity. He was specifically interested in where there were gaps in color, shape, form and texture, because that would mean an opening that might be filled.

When he first started hybrid-

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izing, Ron didn't own any fancy streaked hostas, so he concentrated on crosses of solid-colored hostas with different leaf forms. A seemingly simple cross of 'Ginko Craig' with 'Chartreuse Wiggles' was the first that really excited him. Even at the seedling stage, the strong ripples were obvious. Half the seedlings were green and half were yellow. He selected the narrowest of the yellow seedlings and named it 'Atom Smasher'. Mirroring the process that goes on in a chamber where subatomic particles are bombarded at atoms, a new hosta was created—one that redefined what narrow and wavy could look like in a hosta.

While 'Atom Smasher' remains relatively rare in the trade, its legacy lives on in Ron's breeding program. His continued interest

in narrow hosta leaves led to a 1998 cross of 'Atom Smasher' with 'Stiletto', which yielded a plant with narrow, highly serrated leaf in a semi-upright form. That hosta was named 'Hacksaw' and, like many of Ron's hostas, it

Bringing together recessive qualities that were once hidden in the gene pool.

is truly groundbreaking from a genetic perspective.

Jack Hirsch and Gary Lindheimer of Naylor Creek Nursery have been big-time supporters of the FOoSF group, putting many FOoSF hostas into tissue culture and then offering them to the public on an exclusive basis. *H.* 'Hacksaw' was first available from Naylor Creek in 2006. After two years of very successful

sales, 'Hacksaw' is now offered to all growers, directly from Shady Oaks' TC lab. No doubt this will help balance supply with demand for this rising star.

But the story doesn't end there. *H.* 'Hacksaw' genes are already showing up in new hybrids from a number of fellow FOoSF members, notably Kent Terpening's 'Red Dog' and 'The Razor's Edge' (a backcross with 'Atom Smasher' and a First Look 6 winner) and Ron's own 'Red Dragon' × 'Hacksaw' cross.

So is 'Hacksaw' a journey or a destination? The simple answer is, "Both." Ron firmly believes we have only scratched the surface with the hosta gene pool. Like clay in the hands of a gifted sculptor, hosta DNA is just waiting to be further shaped by talented and patient folks like Ron. ■

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