

LOOK-ALIKES

Of the four white-leaved, green-edged sports of *H.* 'Patriot', which is best?

by Peter Cross Ash Grove, Missouri

It is a problem many of us face when browsing through the latest hosta mail-order catalog: We find two or three hosta cultivars that have essentially identical descriptions and are sports out of the same parent hostas, yet have different names and (more pertinently) different price tags. Are these “look-alike” hostas really unique varieties, or are they simply one plant answering to multiple names? Which one to buy? Granted, most of us want them all, but financial realities or a lack of space in the garden usually force a choice. If I can only have one, which is the best?

One classic case of look-alike hostas is a group of four reverse-variegated sports of *Hosta* 'Patriot'. These four varieties—'Fire and Ice', 'Loyalist', 'Paul Revere' and 'Flash of Light'—all have white leaves with dark green margins and are so similar that at first glance they might be mistaken as identical. However, by observing these four cultivars growing side-by-side in my family's garden and nursery, as well as in many other gardens across the globe, I have come to the conclusion that they are, in fact, four distinct—albeit similar—varieties.

***H.* 'Fire and Ice' (H. Hansen and Shady Oaks Nursery – 1999)**

The first reverse-variegated sport of 'Patriot' to arrive on the market was 'Fire and Ice', discovered in tissue culture by Hans

Hansen of Shady Oaks Nursery. Featuring stunning twisted leaves with pure white centers and dark green margins, 'Fire and Ice' immediately became the object of lust and desire for hosta collectors everywhere. What could be more striking than a white-centered, green-margined hosta with the habit and size of 'Patriot'?

Though hosta collectors everywhere (myself included) initially looked to 'Fire and Ice' as nothing less than the macho 'Patriot' with a new paint job, reality proved to be otherwise. The defining characteristic of 'Fire and Ice'—its foliage, which has led more than one hosta collector to break the commandment “thou shall not covet”—is associated with a cascade of secondary traits that made 'Fire and Ice' an altogether different plant from 'Patriot'.

The most noticeable of these was the marked change in the habit of 'Fire and Ice' as compared to 'Patriot'. While 'Patriot' possesses flat, roughly heart-shaped, ovate leaves, the leaves of 'Fire and Ice' are more elongated and strongly and consistently twisted. Along with the dramatic change in leaf form, the shape of the plant changed significantly as well. *H.* 'Patriot' forms a wide, spreading mound of foliage, while 'Fire and Ice' forms a rather compact, upright mound of leaves. A typical clump of 'Patriot' is



At first glance, these three different cultivars look the same (and maybe at second glance, too). Can you identify them?



approximately twice as wide as it is tall, whereas a clump of 'Fire and Ice' is more like a ball, with the width and height roughly equal. Many of these characteristics (elongated leaves, strong twisting, upright habit) are typical of white-centered hosta sports (consider 'Royal Tiara' or 'Apple Court').

Because its leaves have a smaller proportion of energy-harvesting, chlorophyll-rich green tissue, 'Fire and Ice' is a much smaller plant than its parent, and it is also much slower-growing. This slow growth rate is the Achilles' heel of 'Fire and Ice'; it needs a fair bit of coddling in order to perform well. *H.* 'Fire and Ice' also seems to be especially susceptible to "melt-

out" in the centers of the leaves. Although this is not uncommon with white-centered hostas, 'Fire and Ice' appears to suffer from it more than its look-alike sisters. Melt-out seems to be less of a problem in cooler climates, however, and the best 'Fire and Ice' clumps I've seen have been grown in cooler areas of the country.

Though it is possible to grow a respectable specimen of 'Fire and Ice', and 'Fire and Ice' should be in every serious hosta collector's garden, its need for special care, slower growth rate and tendency to melt out may lead casual collectors or gardeners new to hostas to pass on it in preference for the more robust 'Loyalist' or 'Paul Revere'.

***H.* 'Loyalist' (C.H. Falstad and G. Van Eijk-Bos – 1998)**

Shortly after the arrival of 'Fire and Ice' came the introduction of 'Loyalist' from Walters Gardens. This second reverse-variegated sport of 'Patriot' was generally thought to be identical to 'Fire and Ice'. To be sure, 'Loyalist' possesses many of the characteristics of its look-alike sister. Like 'Fire and Ice', 'Loyalist' has very twisted, dark green leaves with pure white center variegation, and a dense, upright habit. However, observation has led me to conclude that 'Fire and Ice' and 'Loyalist' are two distinct varieties.

It is possible to easily discern several differences between 'Loyalist' and 'Fire and Ice' when they are



PHOTOS: BOB OLSON

H. 'Paul Revere'.



H. 'Paul Revere'.

H. 'Loyalist'.

H. 'Fire and Ice'.

How did you do?

grown side by side. Most noticeable is a marked difference in growth rates. *H. 'Loyalist'* is more vigorous and is consistently a better grower, though it still cannot match the vigor of its parent hosta, 'Patriot'. *H. 'Loyalist'* also seems to mature into a bit larger clump than its sister 'Fire and Ice'. Though 'Loyalist' is still subject to melt-out, this seems to be less of a problem than with 'Fire and Ice' or 'Flash of Light'.

If you needed to choose one of the reverse 'Patriot' sports to grow in your garden I think 'Loyalist' would be your best bet. It is an easy grower and will quickly form a good-sized clump without pampering. While I feel that 'Paul Revere' matches the growth rate and size of 'Loyalist', 'Loyalist' is more readily obtainable and likely to be cheaper.

***H. 'Paul Revere'*
(M. Zilis – 2003)**

The third reverse 'Patriot' sport was 'Paul Revere', introduced by Q&Z Nursery. *H. 'Paul Revere'* is similar to 'Loyalist', but I doubt the two are identical. From my observations it seems that the leaves of 'Paul Revere' are flatter and not nearly as twisted as the leaves on the other three reverse 'Patriot' sports.

The growth rate and mature size of 'Paul Revere' seems to be the same as for 'Loyalist'; any differences are small and difficult to determine conclusively. Of the four look-alikes, 'Paul Revere' seems to have the least problem with melt-out.

While I think 'Loyalist' would be the best bet for most people,

if I had to choose just one of the four look-alikes for my garden, I think I would choose 'Paul Revere'. That said, I do not think it can be conclusively proven that 'Paul Revere' is a better plant than 'Loyalist'; both will do equally well in the garden and can be grown successfully by novice and master alike. But 'Paul Revere' is a little harder to find and is likely to be a little more expensive than 'Fire and Ice' or 'Loyalist'.

***H. 'Flash of Light'*
(Winterberry Farms – NR)**

At about the same time that 'Paul Revere' came to market, the fourth and, to date, final reverse 'Patriot' look-alike, 'Flash of Light', was introduced by Winterberry Farms, a small tissue-

culture lab. *H.* 'Flash of Light' had still not been registered at the time of this writing, so it is not possible to conclusively establish its parentage. Originally 'Flash of Light' was advertised by the introducer to be a sport of 'Minuteman' (a look-alike to 'Patriot') though the tissue-culture lab now claims it is actually a sport of 'Patriot'. Regardless of its exact parentage, it still qualifies as a reverse 'Patriot' look-alike.

When comparing 'Flash of Light' to the other look-alikes, the closest match is 'Fire and Ice'. The two are similar in terms of variegation, leaf shape and habit. However, it seems that 'Flash of Light' is more susceptible to melt-out than any of the other look-alikes, and is the smallest and weakest grower of them all by far. *H.* 'Flash of Light' is especially slow-growing and

finicky when young. For about the first two years after coming from tissue culture, 'Flash of Light' barely grows, and a large number will give up trying and die. However, once the plant gets established, after a year or two, it seems to do better, though any of the other look-alikes grow better yet.

H. 'Flash of Light' is a definite collector's hosta, and, though it is difficult to grow, it is not impossible. New hosta gardeners will likely not do well with 'Flash of Light' and should steer clear of it in favor of 'Loyalist' or 'Paul Revere'. Since 'Flash of Light' is somewhat rare, it will also likely be more expensive than its look-alike sisters.

In Conclusion

Though these four varieties are virtually identical in coloration

and variegation pattern, I believe they possess significant differences in both habit and rate of growth. Based upon Peter's Somewhat Arbitrary Scale of Garden Worthiness, where 10 is "must have; easy to grow" and 0 is "avoid at all costs; impossible to grow" I propose the following scores: 'Fire and Ice' – 7.5, 'Loyalist' – 8.5, 'Paul Revere' – 8.6, 'Flash of Light' – 3.5.

Casual hosta growers who simply want a nice, white-centered green hosta and are not interested in having one particular variety over another would probably do best with either 'Loyalist' or 'Paul Revere'. More seasoned collectors wishing to have a complete collection that includes 'Fire and Ice' or 'Flash of Light' should be aware of the special needs and challenges associated with these varieties. ■

COMPARISON OF FOUR SPORTS OF *H.* 'PATRIOT'

	<i>H.</i> 'Fire and Ice'	<i>H.</i> 'Loyalist'	<i>H.</i> 'Paul Revere'	<i>H.</i> 'Flash of Light'
Melt-out	Especially susceptible	Somewhat susceptible	Least susceptible	Most susceptible
Leaf twist	Strongly twisted	Strongly twisted	Not as twisted	Strongly twisted
Mound shape	Compact, upright	Compact, upright	Compact, upright	Compact, upright
Growth rate	Slow	Moderate	Moderate	Very slow
Care	Needs coddling	More vigorous	More vigorous	Very finicky, especially when young
Size	Small	A bit larger	A bit larger (similar to 'Loyalist')	Smallest
Peter's overall ranking	7.5	8.5	8.6	3.5