

# Frances Williams and Her Garden Adventures

Some plant lovers find adventure in far-away places, on distant mountains and in wild valleys, or in ancient exotic gardens. Others, although they may dream of these alluring spots, are able to find adventure at their doorsteps. Frances Ropes Williams was one of the stay-at-homes, in Winchester, a suburb of Boston. But on her small property of only a third of an acre, shaded by several large trees, she gardened for many years, first in the time she could spare from her growing family, then, when her children were grown, much more intensively.

Mrs. Williams was a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in landscape architecture, and her studies there, she said, gave her a background in horticulture. (How many landscape architects can say that of their training?) She was in her middle years when she entered into the concentrated phase of her gardening adventure, and she tackled it with a keen and observant mind, and, apparently, with boundless energy, both physical and mental. Her activities extended on both sides of the doorstep. Not only was she active outdoors. She kept voluminous records, and had a wide correspondence.

Since her yard was shady, Mrs. Williams started accumulating plants that would thrive under her conditions. She found that there were many that she could grow well. She enjoyed those with gray leaves and those with white or yellow variegations that added summer interest, as well as many other ground covers — lamiums, artemisias, wild-gingers. Plantainlilies (hostas) flourished under the big trees, and she found pleasure in making groupings of ground covers around them that accentuated their characteristics. A variety of *Hosta sieboldiana* with yellow-edged leaves, for example, was surrounded by a form of *Vinca minor* with yellow-edged leaves. Under and around all these were small spring bulbs. Texture, form, and scale and the changes of the seasons all were subjects of her attention, as well as growth behaviors.

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shade and, through her interest in herbs, she became active in the Herb Society of America. She became corresponding secretary and continued serving in this office for many years, finally, in recognition of her devotion, being made Honorary Corresponding Secretary. She also served the Society as curator of its herbarium. In 1952 she received the first Award of Merit given by the Society, and in 1956 the New England Unit of the Society made her an honorary member.

It was the genus *Hosta*, however, that began to occupy more and more of her time and attention. It was in the early 1930's that she began collecting hostas, which proved to be well adapted to the somewhat damp shade of her partial acre. She bought some from local nurseries, and friends in Salem, where she grew up, gave her plants from old gardens.

Her interest in the plants grew, so that she looked up nurseries farther away to acquire more kinds. She began photographing plants at different stages of growth, and her record-keeping grew in importance. Each plant, when she acquired it, received a number. Each photograph bore the record of the number of the plant, its source, and the date the picture was taken. In her notebooks, plants were entered with names, numbers, sources, and other information connected with them. Through forty years she kept up all this information and added to it. She noted growth and bloom habits. She investigated the differences of root structure. The peculiarities of sporting did not escape her attention. In the fall of 1967 she wrote (at the age of 84): "I have been much interested this fall in the shoots with leaf buds at the ends of some *hemerocallis* roots. And in the fact that some of my *hosta* roots have leaf shoots on them, either at the end of the root or as fat little 1/16-inch buds that grew as perky little plants . . ."

At another time she wrote: "In several cases *Hosta undulata* (different plants) have sent out shoots that have become what is called *Hosta erromena*, big leaves, long stems two to three feet, and leaf blades five by ten inches, plants five feet across." The validity of this observation was confirmed when *H. erromena* was reduced to a variety of *H. undulata* by Maekawa.

As the years went by, seedlings began to appear in the garden that were attractive enough to be singled out for increase. At first Mrs. Williams shared these with others designated only by the numbers she had assigned to them. Later she named a number of plants that were introduced by Mrs. Thomas Nesmith of Fairmount Gardens. Unfortunately, plants given away under number were often given Latin names or descriptive designa-

tions by the recipients. Mrs. Williams also shared other hostas, including the offspring of seed she received from the Nikko Botanic Garden in Japan in 1950.

Her exhibits at the shows of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society won awards, including, in 1953, a bronze medal. Her photographs appeared among those in the study, *The Genus Hosta in Swedish Gardens*, by Nils Hylander (Uppsala, 1954). Her articles appeared in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's *Plants and Gardens*, and in other gardening magazines.

She also did some hand crossing, and several of the plants that were grown from the seed of the pollinated plants were named and introduced.

*Hosta Cultivars of Mrs. Williams.* In the following list, I use the names used by Mrs. Williams.\* They will be understood by those who have a serious interest in hostas, and I do not wish to wander into the maze of *Hosta* taxonomy, described by Prof. Hylander as a nightmare. Where quotes are used, I am repeating Mrs. Williams' written words. I have included Mrs. Williams' numbers with the cultivar names.

'Beatrice', #1399A. Seedling of *H. lancifolia albomarginata*, planted 1958. "May 1962 — one leaf variegated with yellow stripes. 1965 — plant had five variegated leaves." 'Beatrice' tends to give variegated seedlings, which make it of great interest to those who like to play with hostas.

'Betsy King', #502. (Introduced 1960) Mrs. Williams thought this to be a *decorata-lancifolia* hybrid. It starts growth early in the spring like *lancifolia*, and the flower shape is very like that of *decorata*. It is light to moderate purple, the color solid outside and solid inside except for six white stripes at the joinings of the perianth segments. The leaf mound is to 14 inches, the scapes reach 20 inches. It is an effective garden plant, neat and well proportioned, the color darker than that of most hostas, blooming in early August. It is one of Mrs. Williams' best.

'Carol', #1429. A clone with white-edged leaves, a sport cut out of *H. fortunei* #152 in 1967.

\* The nomenclature of cultivated hostas is somewhat complex. Those who wish to pursue the subject further should consult: Hylander, Nils, "Genus *Hosta* in Swedish Gardens," *Acta Horti Bergani* 16: 339-420, 1954. ———, "The Genus *Hosta*," *Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society* 85: 356-366, 1960.

Hensen, K. J. W., "Preliminary Registration Lists of Cultivar Names in *Hosta* Tratt," *Mededelingen van de Landbouwhogeschool te Wageningen* 63 (7): 1-12, 1963.

'Dorothy', #511. (Introduced 1961) Mrs. Williams guessed the parents to be *fortunei* and *decorata*. The leaves are gray underneath, and the shape of *decorata*, though more cordate. The flowers are like those of *H. fortunei*. They are light purple outside, striped a little deeper inside. The plant is well proportioned, with 30-inch scapes. The leaves are about 5½ inches wide by 7 inches long.

'Frances Williams', #383. Named by G. W. Robinson, superintendent of the Oxford Botanical Garden (*Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society*, February 1963). Mrs. Williams picked this out of a batch of *H. sieboldiana* seedlings at Bristol Nurseries in 1936. It is included with her plants because it was through her efforts that it was singled out, propagated, and introduced into commerce as a special clone. It has been known as *H. sieboldiana* 'Yellow Edge' and *H. sieboldiana aureo-marginata*. A large clump is a handsome and effective accent in a shady place. It still commands a good price, as much as nine or ten dollars, after almost thirty-five years.

'Golden Circles', #1141. Seedling found in 1954 under 'Frances Williams'. Mrs. Williams said the yellow edge was broader; otherwise it, too, is typical *H. sieboldiana*.

'Green Pie Crust', #1290. Seedling found in 1951. The large leaves have neatly ruffled margins. The flowers are pale purple, almost white. The beautifully crimped leaves of this large, handsome plant make it especially choice, and it is sure to be ardently sought after when it becomes better known.

'Green Ripples', #851. (Named 1967-68) Seedling of *H. fortunei gigantea* #128. Mrs. Williams' photograph of #128 shows rather wavy foliage. A large plant, the light green leaves with crinkled edges, the flowers very pale.

'Kathleen', #1528. (Named 1968) Seedling. "Lovely soft pinky flowers — similar to *H. fortunei*, gray leaves."

'Louisa', #537. (Introduced some years ago, but not named by Mrs. Williams until 1969.) This charming little hosta found its way into gardens under several designations. Gray and Cole introduced it, calling it *Hosta lancifolia albomarginata alba*. The white-edged lanceolate leaves are about 4½ inches long by 1½ inches wide, making a mound about a foot high. The white flaring flowers on two-foot scapes begin to bloom in mid-August. It has also been called *Hosta* "minor alba" white edge, and F. R. W. #537. It, too, gives interesting seedlings, some variegated, some white-flowered. Combinations of both traits are likely. 'Louisa' is a choice, dainty plant.



*Fig. 6: Hosta sieboldiana 'Frances Williams' with yellow edged leaves. Photo: Frances R. Williams.*

'Sentinels', #1350. (Introduced 1966) Seedling found in 1954. "Profuse purple flowers, upright flower stalks. Very early shiny green leaves like *lancifolia*." Blooms in late August.

'Sprite', #795. Seedling found about 1946. "Low, six inches, flower eight inches, leaf thickened. Mosaic?" This was not introduced, perhaps because of the possible mosaic, or perhaps it lacked the proper attraction.

'Sunlight', #1142. A sport of 'Frances Williams' with yellow-green leaves. It is rather weak because of its lack of chlorophyll, with a tendency to brown at the edges. It reverted to green in Mrs. Williams' garden, but still exists in the collection at the Case Estates of the Arnold Arboretum.

*Mrs. Williams' Crosses.* In 1949 Mrs. Williams pollinated a plant of *Hosta* "minor alba" (I use the double quotes and lack of italics to indicate that this well known and widely used name has no botanical standing) with pollen from *H. plantaginea*.

She considered the offspring to be the result of this cross, but I can see no trace of *H. plantaginea* in the plants that she named and introduced. They may well be hybrids, however. Plants similar to the ones she named often appear in our garden, where many hostas have been growing together for several decades. However, 'Sweet Susan', result of another hand cross, is the unmistakable hybrid it is supposed to be.

'Lavender Lady', #1025. (Introduced 1964) "Very pale pinky lavender flowers, stalk 1½ to 2 feet." Mid-August.

'Purple Profusion', #1024. (Introduced 1962) "Dark purple flowers, stalks 30 to 37 inches." Leaves a little broader than those of 'Lavender Lady'. Mid-August.

'Slim Polly', #1155. (Introduced 1964) Flowers pale purple, late August. Purplish red in base of petioles.

'Snow Flakes', #1154. (Introduced 1964) White flowers in early August. Taller, with wider leaves than typical "minor alba." Flowers slightly inflated toward base of tube.

'Tinker Bell', #1156. (Introduced 1963?) White flaring flowers in early August. The leaves are more slender than those of 'Snow Flakes', and the plant is smaller and weaker.

'Sweet Susan', #1383. (Introduced 1966) The only plant resulting from the 1958 cross of *H. lancifolia albomarginata* by *H. plantaginea*. This is an interesting hybrid, as it is such an obvious blend of the two parents in size of leaves, flowers, and seed-pods. The number of well formed capsules is surprising, but there are few seeds. I planted some last fall but had no germination. The flowers of 'Sweet Susan' are somewhat fragrant, their color pale purple, deeper than those of the well known hybrid of *H. plantaginea*, 'Honeybells'. Mrs. Williams' granddaughter, Susan Williams, did the actual pollen-dabbing of this cross.

Another cross made by Mrs. Williams in 1948 involved *H. plantaginea* and *H. decorata*. She records but one resulting seedling.

'Pancakes', #1023. She says of it, "Squat, dumpy . . . leaves flat, oval and round . . . lovely gentle purple flowers." I have never seen it, and do not know anything more of it than this. Mrs. Williams does not mention any scent.

*The Moral of a Long Tale.* The moral of all this is that Mrs. Williams had a very good time in her little garden. Within the confines of what seems to have been an ordinary suburban housewife's horizons, she found adventure. The moral is further that we owe her some very fine plants, that she loved to share

plants and information with others, and that she kept records! How often in horticulture do we hear the sad refrain, "He kept no records." So anxious was Mrs. Williams to pass on information that in the last years of her life, with her eyesight failing, she wrote out notes on her plants with a felt pen, only a few large words to a page.

She gave plants to several institutions as well as to many individuals. She gave seventy-five, all with her numbers, to the Arnold Arboretum, and these can be seen in the *hosta* collection at the Case Estates in Weston. Her daughter, Miss Constance Williams, writes that her family plans to give a collection to her *Alma Mater*, M.I.T.

The Herb Society will always claim her as its own. After she died in the autumn of 1969 at the age of 86, the Appalachian Mountain Club noted that it had lost a life member. The other societies and organizations to which she belonged must feel poorer without her, but richer for having known her.

The American *Hosta* Society, born in 1968, gave her a citation in the summer of 1969, "for inspiring others with the love of *Hosta*." But perhaps the loveliest tribute came from one who had long known her through the Herb Society. With deepest feeling she said, "I never knew her to say an unkind word about anyone."

As for those records, there are boxes and boxes of them. No doubt there is much that will not be preserved. They cover her other plants, not only *Hosta*. But as far as *Hosta* goes, there are enthusiasts who will willingly comb them over, gleaning out all that is of permanent value to add to our store of information about Mrs. Williams' plants, and *Hosta* in general.

We shall always be grateful to Frances Williams for her generosity, for the lovely plants she has given us, and for those voluminous records.

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Summary of weather data recorded at the Dana Greenhouses,  
April and May 1970.

	Precipitation	Avg. 8 a.m. Temp.
April	<b>3.84</b>	46.93
May	<b>3.79</b>	57.19