

Secrets

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Mondays, from 6 to 8:30 p.m. April 19 and 26.

"It's something I've done all my life," said Stockton, referring to his garden. "Even when I was a kid I had my own separate garden. I grew things that were different and unique."

A native of North Carolina, Stockton now lives in Winchester with his wife and daughter. When he isn't at work on the Moore County campus, he's at work in his garden, growing hundreds of varieties of tall bearded iris and hosta.

"About 12 years ago I visited my brother in Boise, Idaho, and they were in full bloom. Every house out there had irises growing. I brought back some and got hooked," Stockton said. "I grow approximately 200 irises and I probably have just about every color and shade that's on the market."

Popular Colors

Stockton says the most popular colors seem to be the blues, although the bloom voted most popular by the American Iris Society last year was the deep purple, almost black, "Dusky Challenge."

Bi-colored blooms, with their standards and falls of differing colors, are also popular. Stockton's own bi-color, "Conjuration," recently won the Dykes Medal, the highest national medal in the society, and was featured on the cover of the society's October magazine.

The iris, of course, is the Tennessee state flower, which is not surprising since Nashville was known as the "Iris Capital of the World" in the first part of this century. But the industry eventually migrated to the West Coast, where the climate made for easier growing. Unfortunately, that move created as many growing problems as it solved, problems that Stockton addresses in his class.

"They don't have the same conditions and climate we do here," he said. "As a rule, some varieties do not do well in our climate."

Heaven", "Night Before Christmas", "Strip Tease" and "Guacamole."

Wins Awards

Stockton's hosta wins awards at the shows as well, with his "Yellow River" taking the President's Cup at a show last year.

Growing irises and hostas is relatively easy, according to Stockton, even for the novice gardener. There are several hardy plants that can survive weather extremes at both ends, as well as the southern humidity. They key — and the majority of the cost — lies in soil preparation.

"As a rule, irises prefer neutral soil," Stockton said. "They can do well in light shade but prefer full sun."

Hostas, on the other hand, prefer shade and can do well with morning sun or light shade. They do not like the hot midday or afternoon sun.

There are several tricks to building successful iris and hosta beds, from keeping the nitrogen content low for the irises to planting other perennials for accents with the hosta. In his classes, Stockton will explain bed preparation, propagation and maintenance.

"There is very low maintenance," he said. "The critical thing is soil preparation."

Other Topics

The other topics his classes will cover include site location, fertilizing, insect control and disease control.

Of course, a major component in gardening is nature, and even the best gardener can be baffled and frustrated by the weather or just the general quirks of the plants themselves. One year, a handful of iris rhizomes (not bulbs) weren't planted, but just tossed aside beneath a shrub. They not only grew, they bloomed.

"I was ready to quit," said Stockton, recalling his iris bed of last year.

A rainstorm had flattened the

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climate.

Although Stockton enjoys his rainbow bed of irises, his passion is for hosta, that green leafy plant so often seen forming borders in Middle Tennessee gardens.

"Hosta can be used in so many ways in landscaping," he said. "As edging, as part of a perennial bed, as groundcover... There are approximately 3,000 varieties named. Of those, 1,200 are registered and there are 500 that are distinct and garden-worthy."

Stockton, a self-described "hosta-holic," has about 100 varieties of hosta, all bearing names as unique as their patterns, variegation and color — names like "Sum and Substance", "Yellow River", "Seventh

A rainstorm had flattened the plants and a late freeze took the early blooms. Resigned to having no irises at all, he staked the plants up anyway and was later treated to "one of the most beautiful blooms" he'd ever had. This year, the late warmth of the season supplied another surprise — double blooming irises, enjoying a second season of flowering.

"I had tall bearded irises for Christmas," he said.

With the oddities of nature contributing to the mystique of growing things, the average gardener needs all the help he can get in the form of knowledge.

Harlan Stockton is more than happy to supply the know-how — just in time for spring. ■