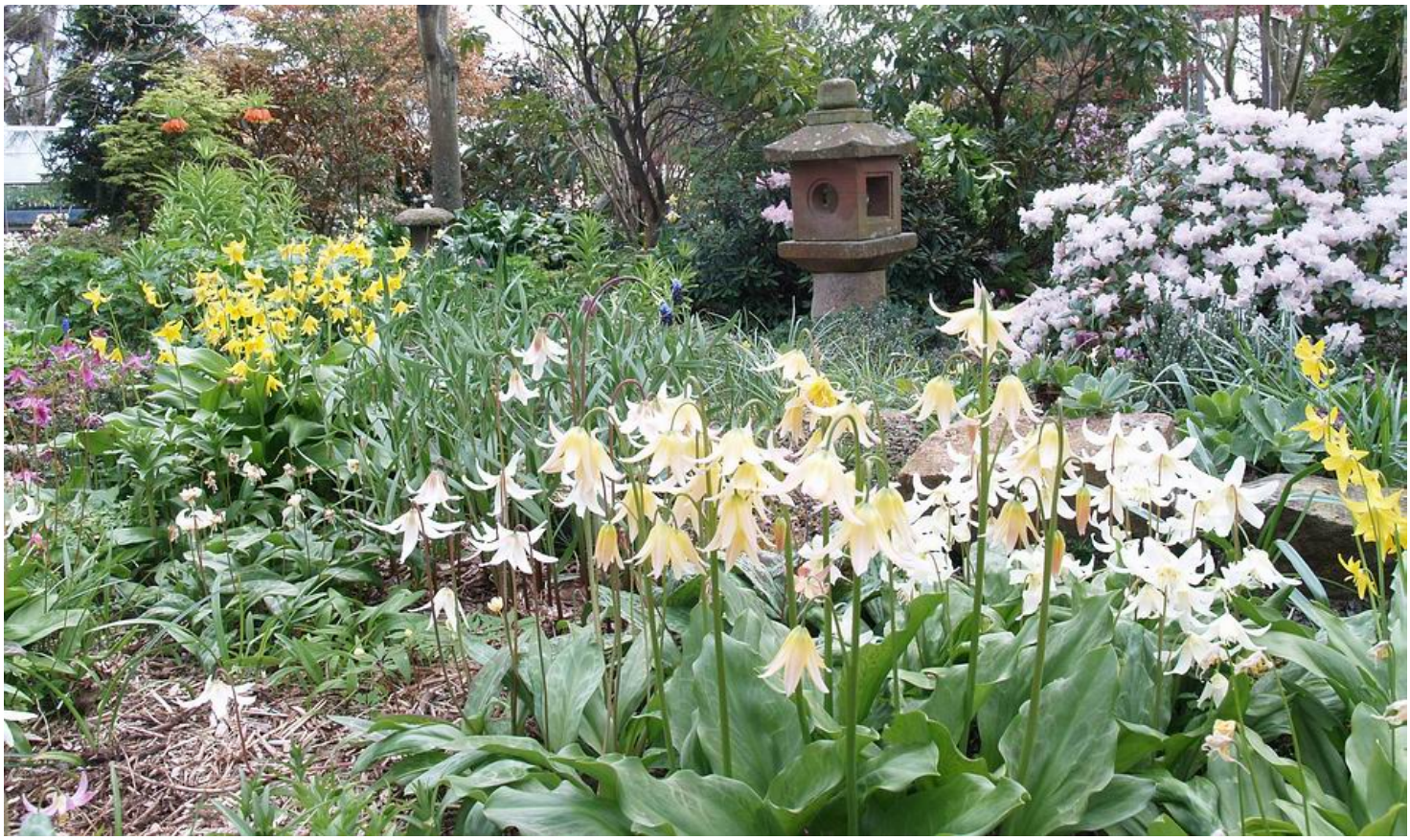
SRGC ----- Bulb Log Diary -----

BULB LOG 17 ……..….29th April 2009



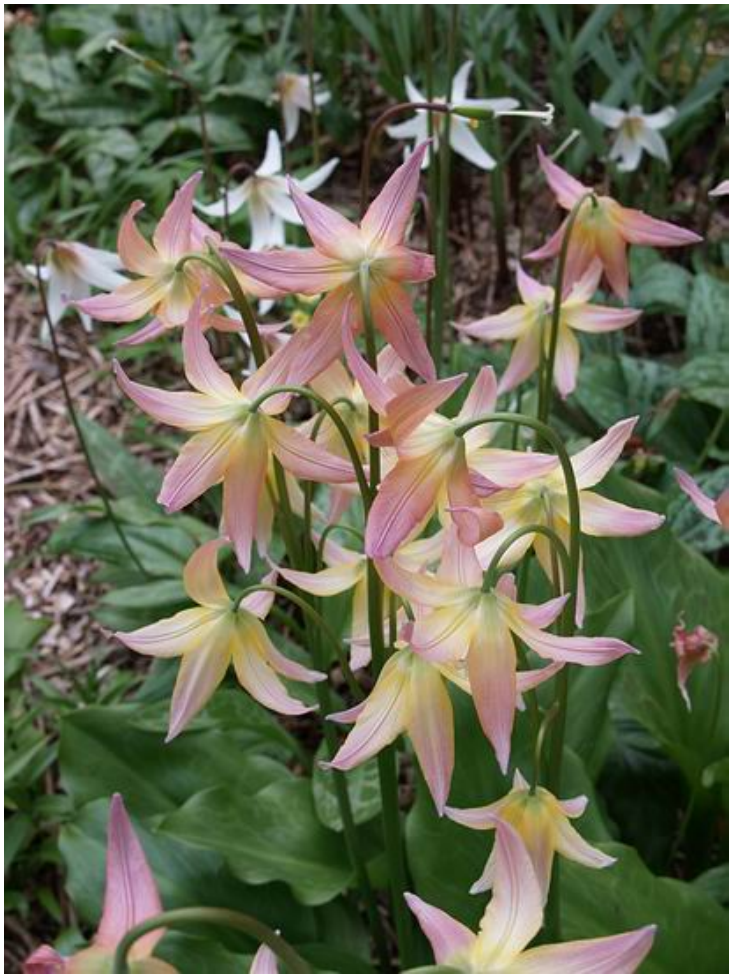
Spring Garden

Oh, what a lovely time of year spring is, if only the weather were a wee bit warmer. We are getting some good spells of sunshine but there is a constant North to East wind blowing off the sea keeping everything cooler than I would like. Still the garden looks wonderful - if I am allowed to say so myself - and I spend hours just walking around and looking at every single Erythronium flower as well as all the other plants that are in flower or just pushing through the ground.

Erythronium ‘Joanna’

Erythronium ‘Joanna’ is an interesting hybrid between Erythronium tuolumnense and E. revolutum – I have not read what the seed parent was but I would guess that it is E. tuolumnense with the pollen coming from E. revolutum. If any one knows for sure I would be glad to hear.

Crossing a yellow species to a pink one does not always make for a good looking result as the colour can just look muddy brown and not very attractive at all. However ‘Joanna’ has outswept flowers with a good clean colour which when they first emerge are mostly pale yellow with just a hint of pink on the reverse of the petals.



Erythronium ‘Joanna’

As time progresses the red develops more giving the flowers a distinct almost orange colour especially on the reverse of the petals.

Many years ago I was told by a plant breeder that some of the best range of colour forms you will ever get come from hybrids between yellow and pink flowers. He went on to qualify his statement by stating that these good forms did not appear in the first generation, F1, which were often muddy colours but in the F2, second generation seedlings and beyond.

I will have to hope that someday I might get a few seeds from Erythronium ‘Joanna’ and can then test this theory for myself.

After a few days the pinky orange colour is all through the flowers of Erythronium ‘Joanna’ both front and back of the petals. The hybrid vigour is obvious in this plant as it can easily have four flowers per stem when it is growing well. As with all bulbs they grow strongest if they are lifted, split and replanted into fresh compost every few years and that is why we grow many in mesh baskets plunged into sand. Erythroniums will go very deep in the ground if they are left to their own devices - by keeping them in baskets we can easily lift them for re-potting every year or two.

Erythronium Plunge Bed

I try to keep these plunge beds as natural looking as possible so that they blend into the overall garden rather than standing out. Last autumn for the first time I decided to apply a mulch of shredded prunings over the sand mainly to tackle the problems I was having with weeds, especially mosses and liverworts that found the sharply draining sand very much to their liking. So much for what you read all the time that these liverwort and mosses are encouraged by poorly drained water-logged soils and if you improve the drainage they will miraculously disappear – unfortunately many garden writers just repeat what they have read and do not write from practical experience. Anyway the mulch has been highly successful in discouraging the weeds and it gives the appearance that these are permanent beds mulched like the rest of the garden. It has also reduced the amount of fungal problems that can attack the leaves of many bulbs - as the overwintering spores that lie on the surface have been covered by the mulch and are unable splash up onto the foliage so readily when it rains.

Erythronium tuolumnense

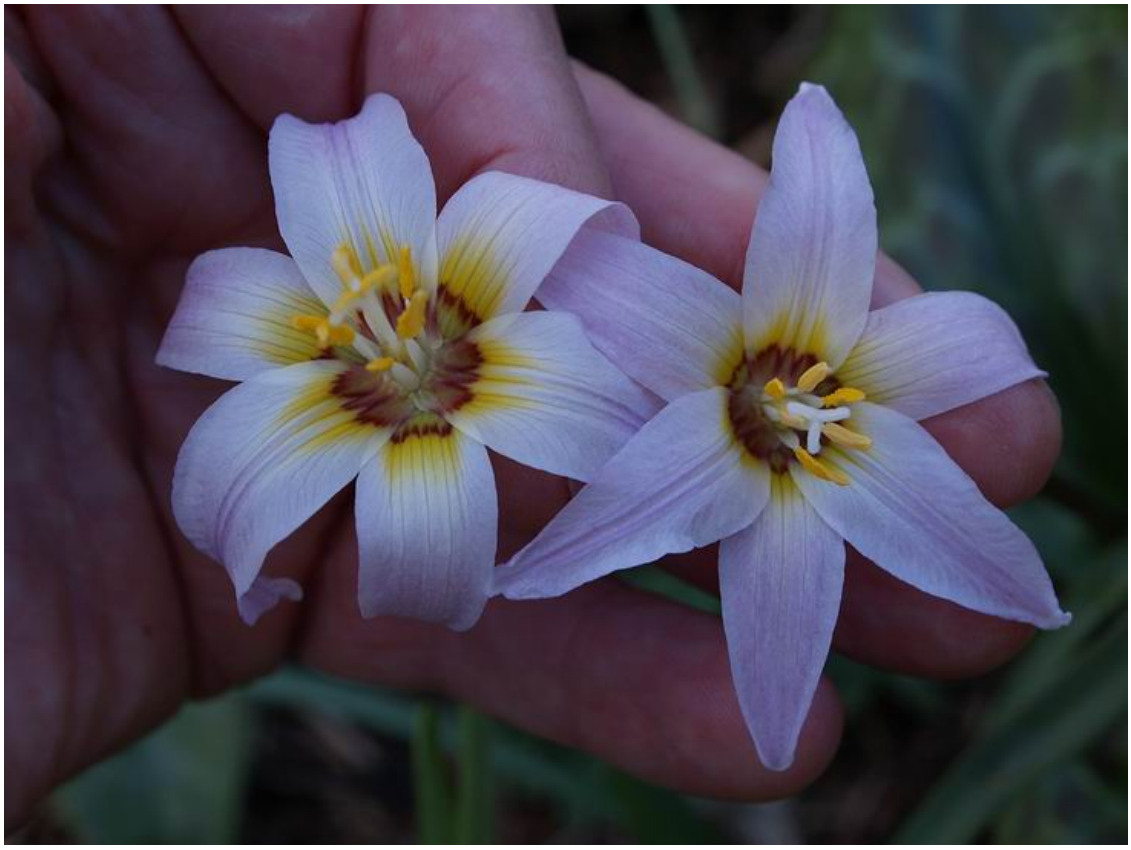
The beautiful clear yellow flowers make Erythronium tuolumnense a very valuable garden plant. Unfortunately the one that seems to be most often encountered in commerce is not the best form. It has very wide and large leaves and the flowers which are few in proportion sometimes never rise above the leaves. We grow a number of good selected forms that are much better representatives of this lovely species. The leaves are generally bigger than most other species but the forms we have selected hold their flower spikes well above the leaves which are moderate in size rather than gigantic. Most of the forms that we grow also set seed, something the commercial form seems reluctant to do, so we can continue to maintain good young vigorous stocks.

Erythronium ‘Mini Ha Ha’
and
Erythronium oregonum

In one of our garden beds you can see Erythronium ‘Mini Ha Ha’ a great hybrid growing to the left with one of the parent species E.oregonum to the right.
Superficially they look quite similar but once you know the species you can easily tell them apart.
The filaments of E. oregonum are quite expanded at the base while those of the hybrid are almost parallel throughout their length with only a very slight taper. Min Ha Ha has only faintly marked leaves.

Bed with Erythronium 'Craigton Cover Girl'

If you are wondering why we would bother with hybrids when we have so many beautiful species of Erythronium take a look at the picture above - which plant stands out the most? I know they are all good but the large clump of pink flowers on the right hand side does steal the show a bit. It is Erythronium 'Craigton Cover Girl', a hybrid of E. revolutum. What makes this a good flower is that it has much of the beauty of the parent with good pink flowers but for me the most important thing is that it increases reasonably quickly by division – at least doubling itself every year in ideal conditions.
There is another reason that I am interested in Erythronium hybrids: when you grow a lot of species together in a relatively small garden hybrids can occur spontaneously.



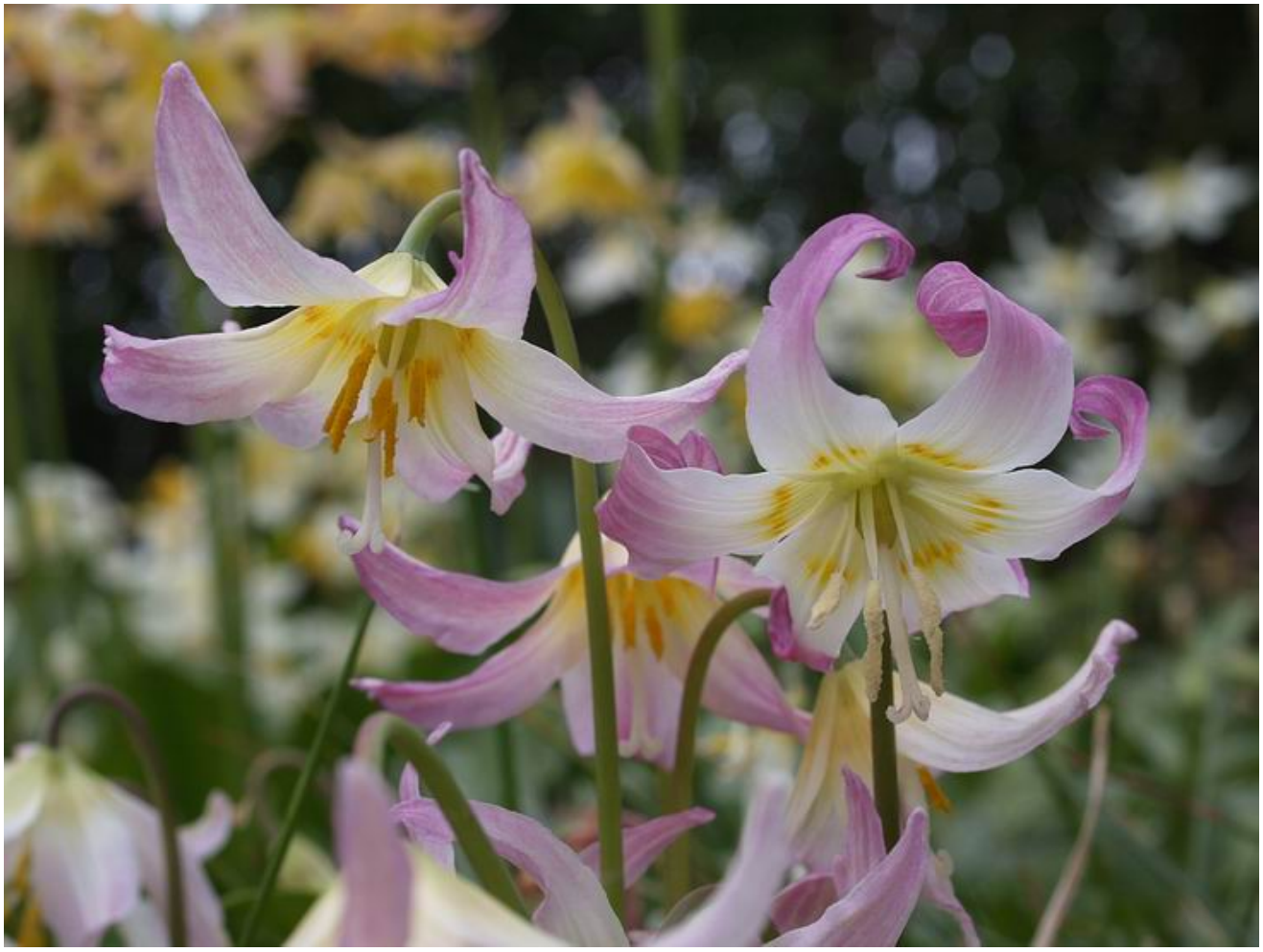
Erythronium revolutum hybrids

As I go around the garden turning every Erythronium flower up to see what it is I find a number of hybrids like these pale pink E. revolutum seedlings. The pollen parent is most likely to be E. ‘White Beauty’ a selected form of E. californicum.

Erythronium revolutum hybrids

This plant that stood out because it held its flowers sideways looking at me so I did not have to turn them upwards to see the beautiful zig zag red internal markings picked up from the pollen parent. The other indication that it is not pure E. revolutum is the shape of the filaments which are not as expanded towards the base as they are in the true species.

Here are two more hybrids showing similar markings. There are a lot of these hybrids around, not just in our garden, and it is important that when they are passed around that they are named so they can be traced. Eventually the best of them will stand out and can be selected for wider distribution.

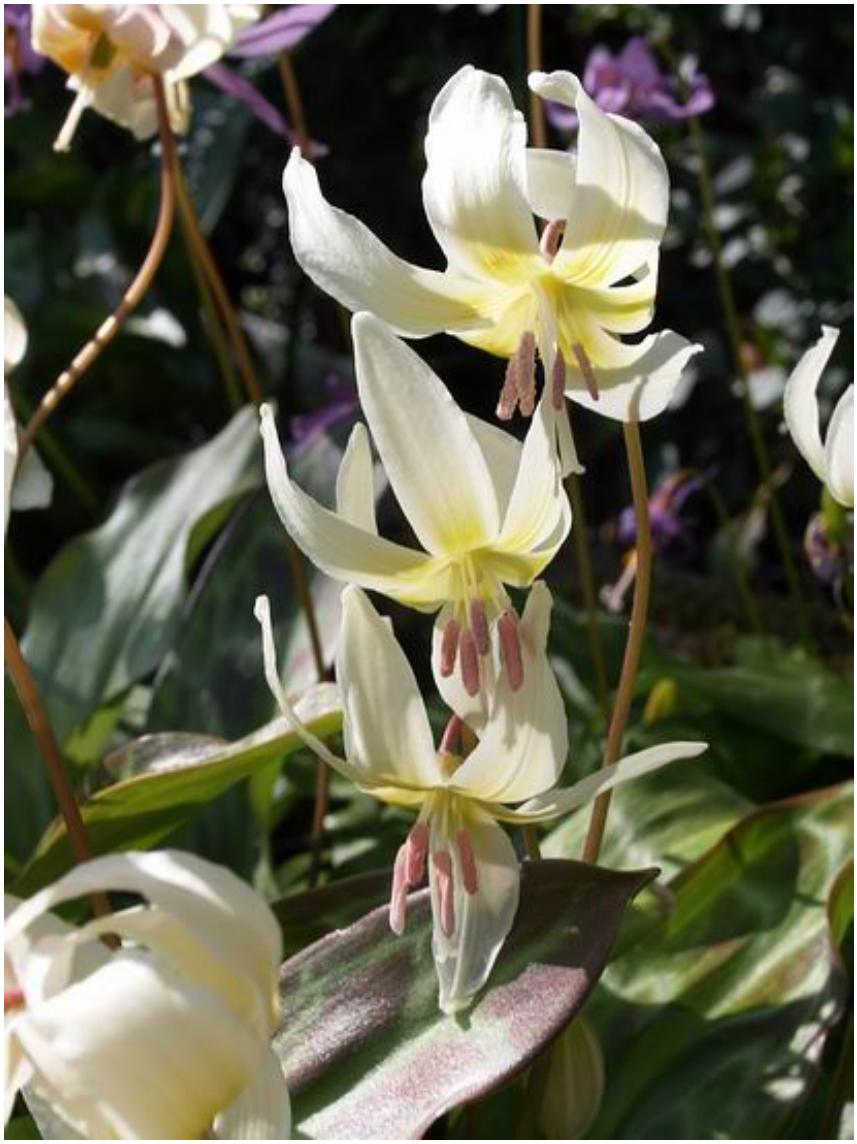


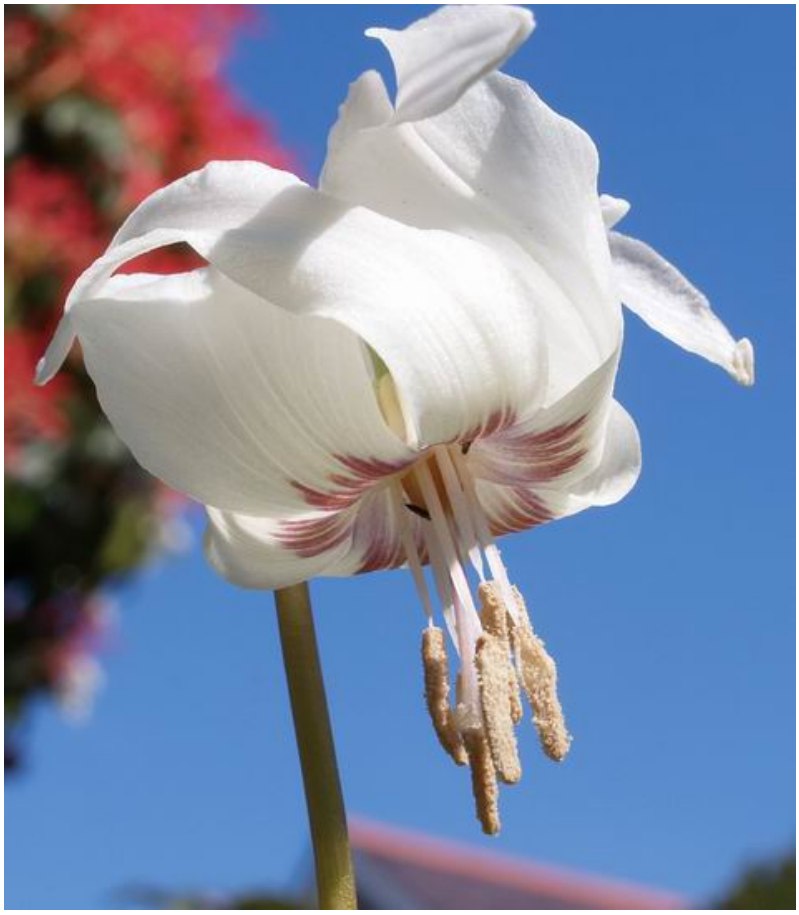
Erythronium hybrids

All the previous ones I have shown above have had E. revolutum as the seed parent;the seeds of these forms came from E. californicum – the other parent is most likely to be E. revolutum, so these are the reverse cross. The main difference is that these flowers tend to be creamy white with varying degrees of pink along the tepals and the central markings are yellow rather than red. Also notice that the pollen on these two flowers are different colours – they are two separate seedlings.

Erythronium hybrids

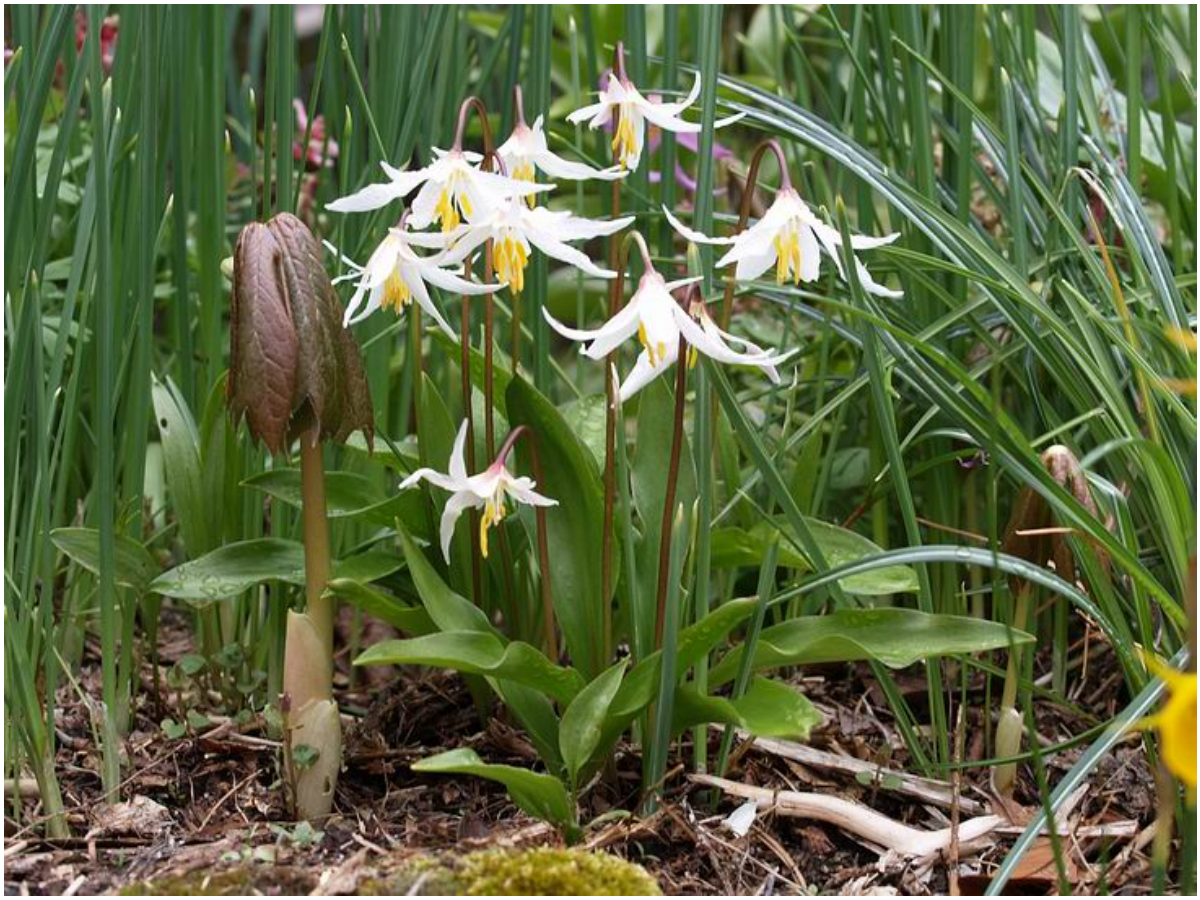
These are also Erythronium californicum hybrids but this time, due to the pale rose coloured pollen, I can speculate that that pollen parent was E. hendersonii, another species that seems quite promiscuous.





Erythronium californicum x hendersonii

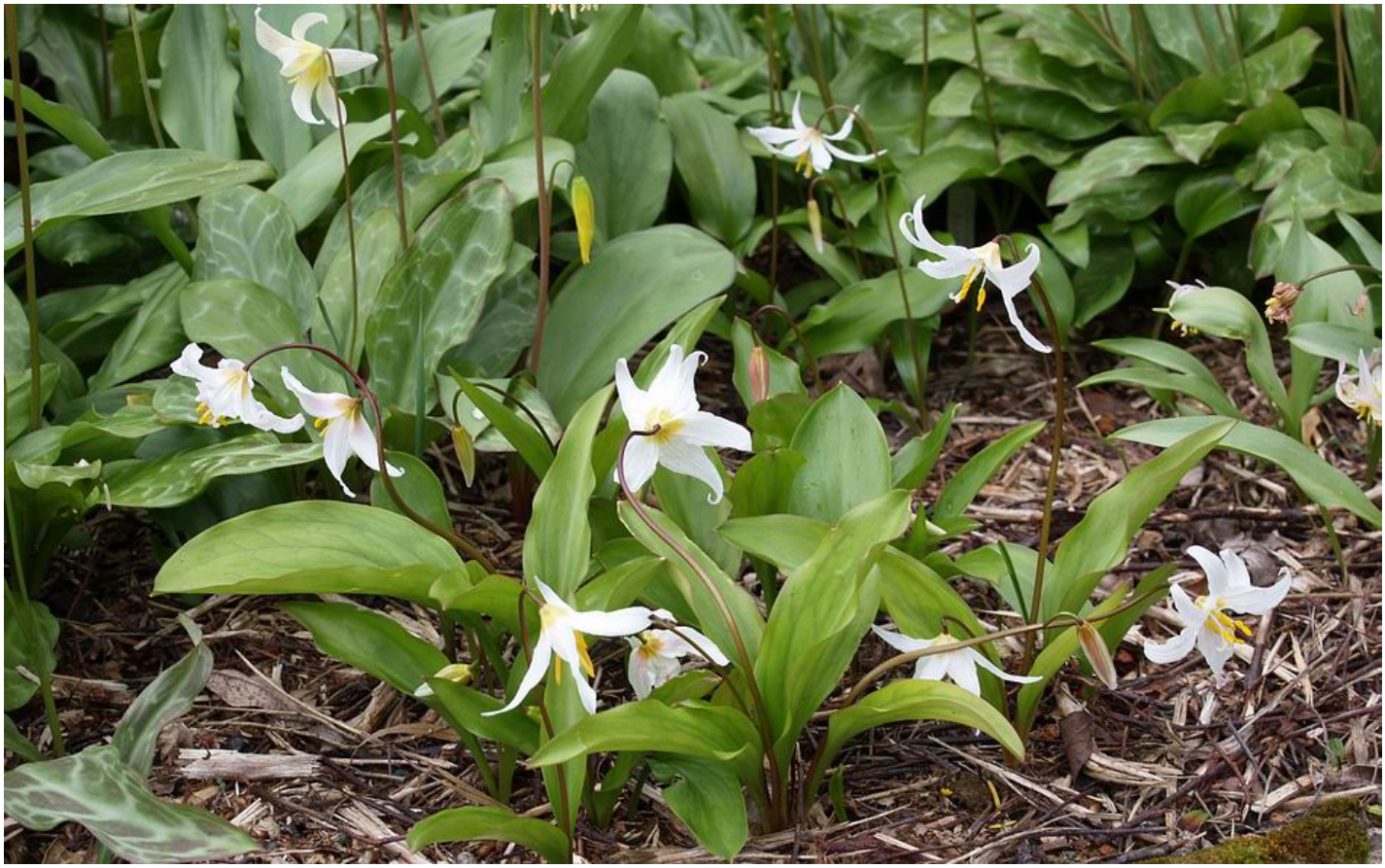
Yet another nice form of the many E. hendersonii hybrids we have appearing around the garden.



Erythronium elegans

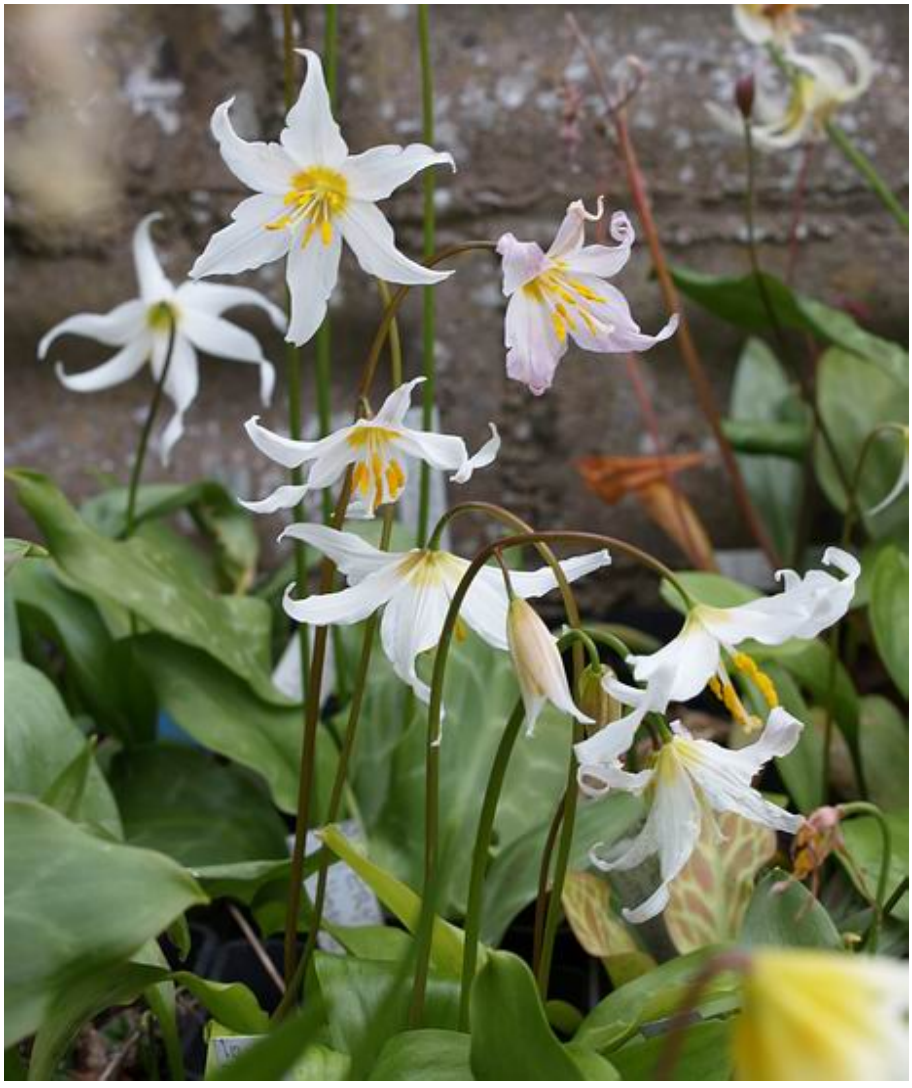
Growing beside an emerging Podophylum peltatum is this group of Erythronium elegans with its well named, elegant flowers. Many consider that this species is an ancient and stable natural hybrid between Erythronium montanum and E. revolutum. After the flowers have been out for a while and before they start to fade they often develop a pink tinge towards the ends of the tepals as the picture below illustrates.

Erythronium elegans with tepals going pink



Erythronium montanum

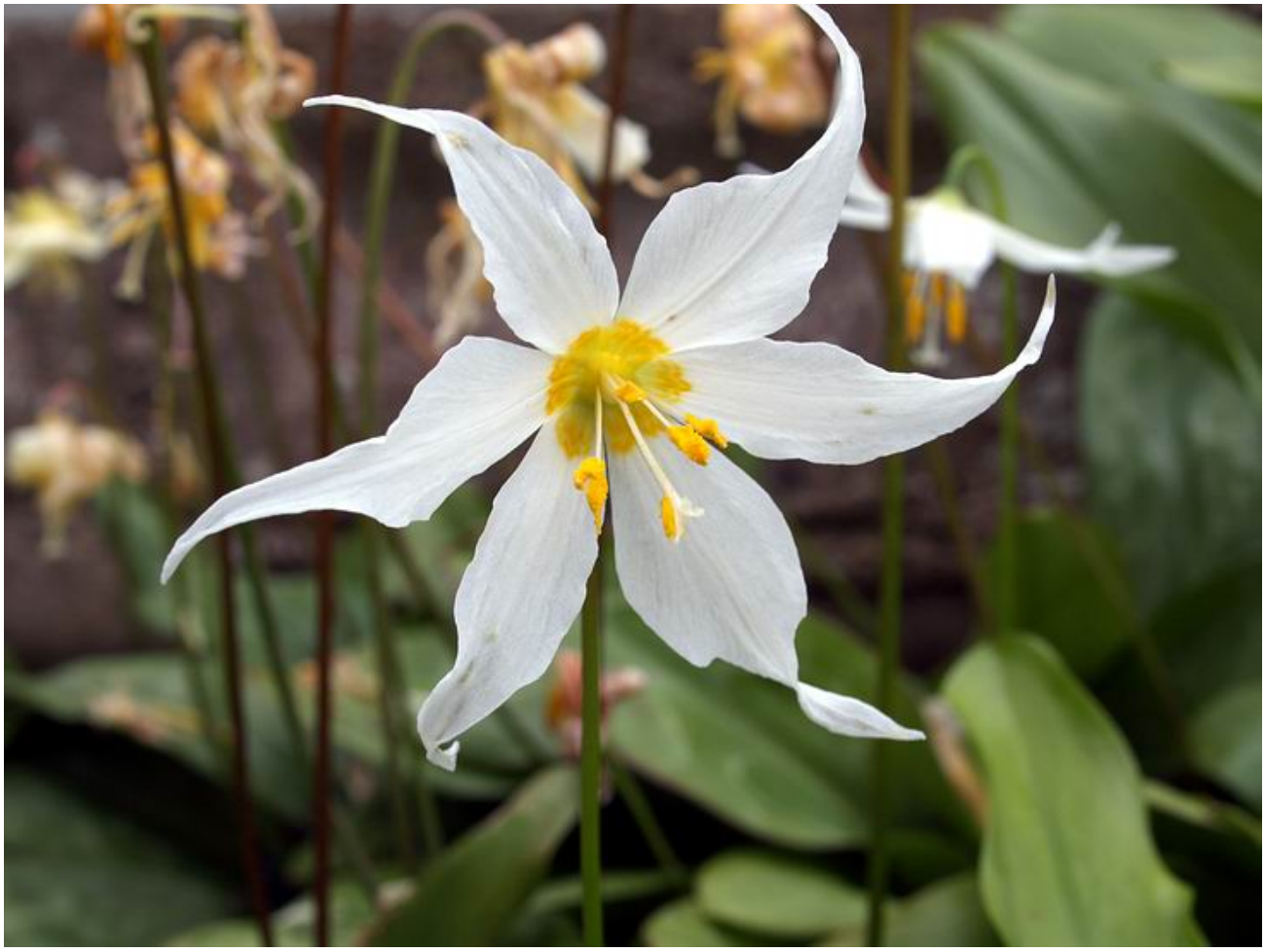
Erythronium montanum with its plain green leaves and large pure white flowers is one of the higher altitude species although some populations do occur at lower elevations. It is often described as not being growable in cultivation. Note the shredded mulch I mentioned above makes this plunge look more like an open garden bed.



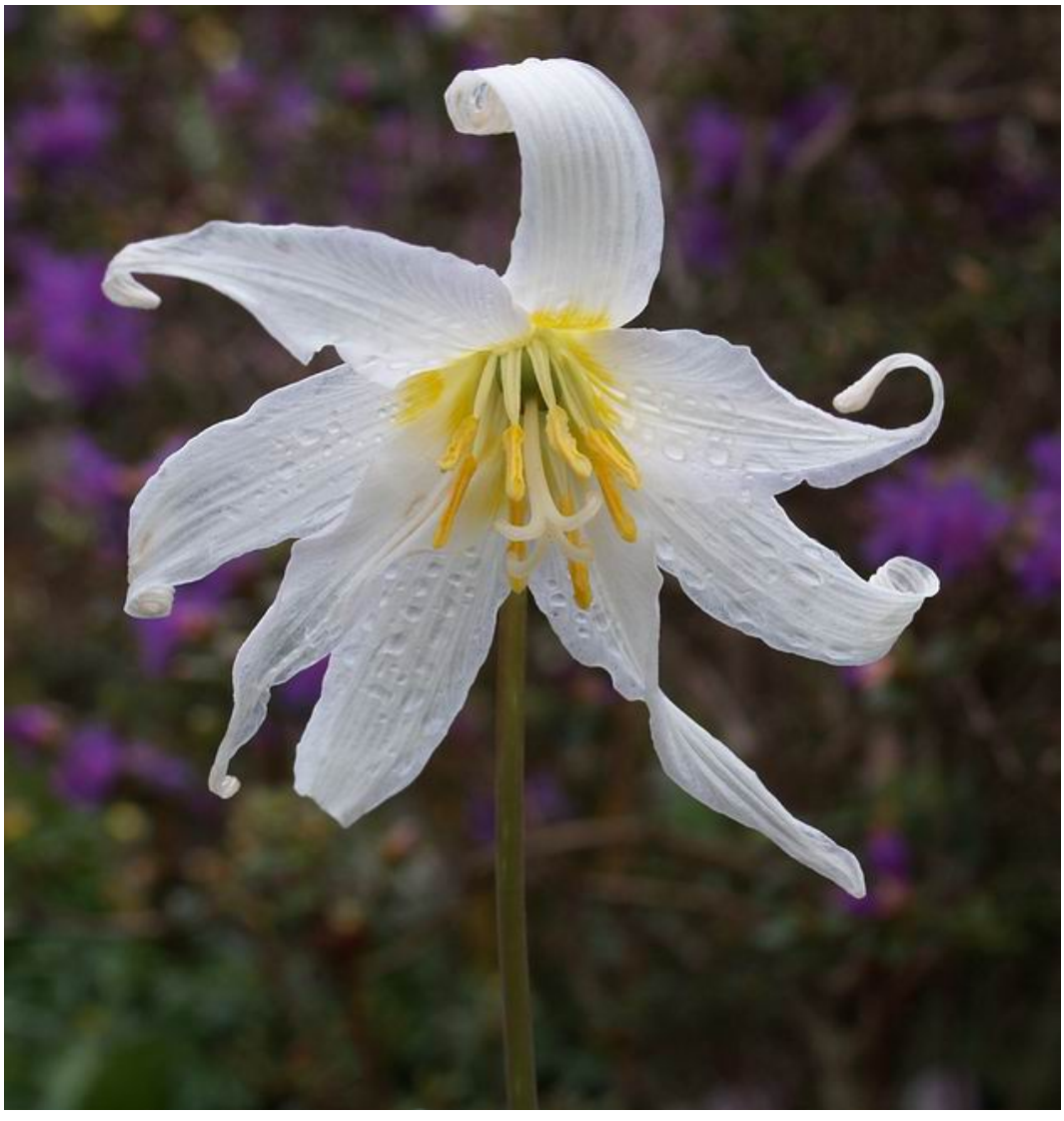
Erythronium montanum

We have no problems growing it in our cool north garden where it is always the last of the Erythroniums to emerge through the ground but the first to set seed and go dormant, indicating its adaptation to having a very short growing season at the cold high altitudes of its native habitat.

We have several generations now flowering from our own garden collected seeds and each new generation seems more adapted to our conditions. This is the other great advantage of raising plants from seed - that process of natural selection which allows those most suited to survive in your garden to grow on and eventually to also produce seed.
Each subsequent generation is self selected to your climate and garden conditions.

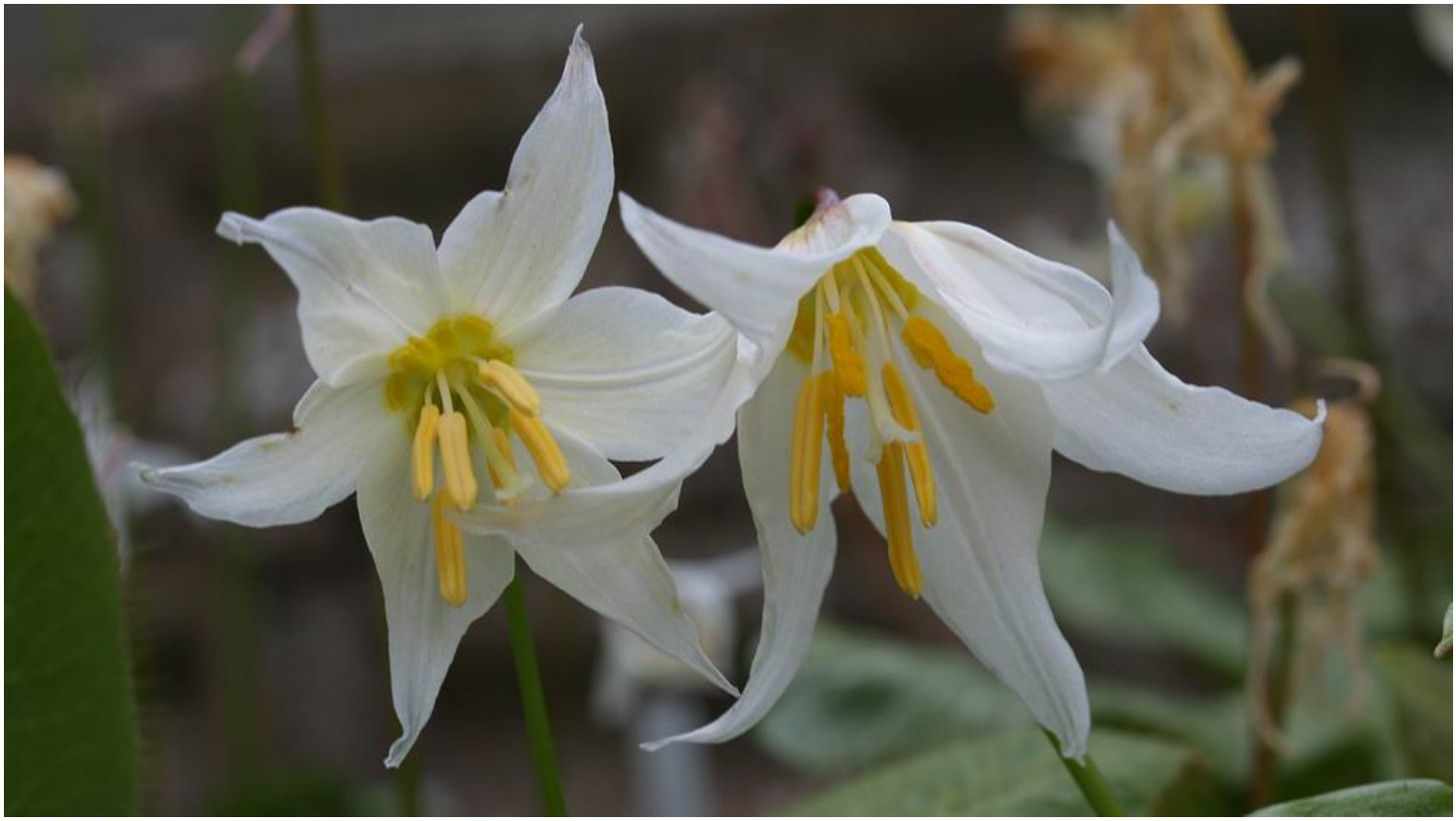


Erythronium montanum flower



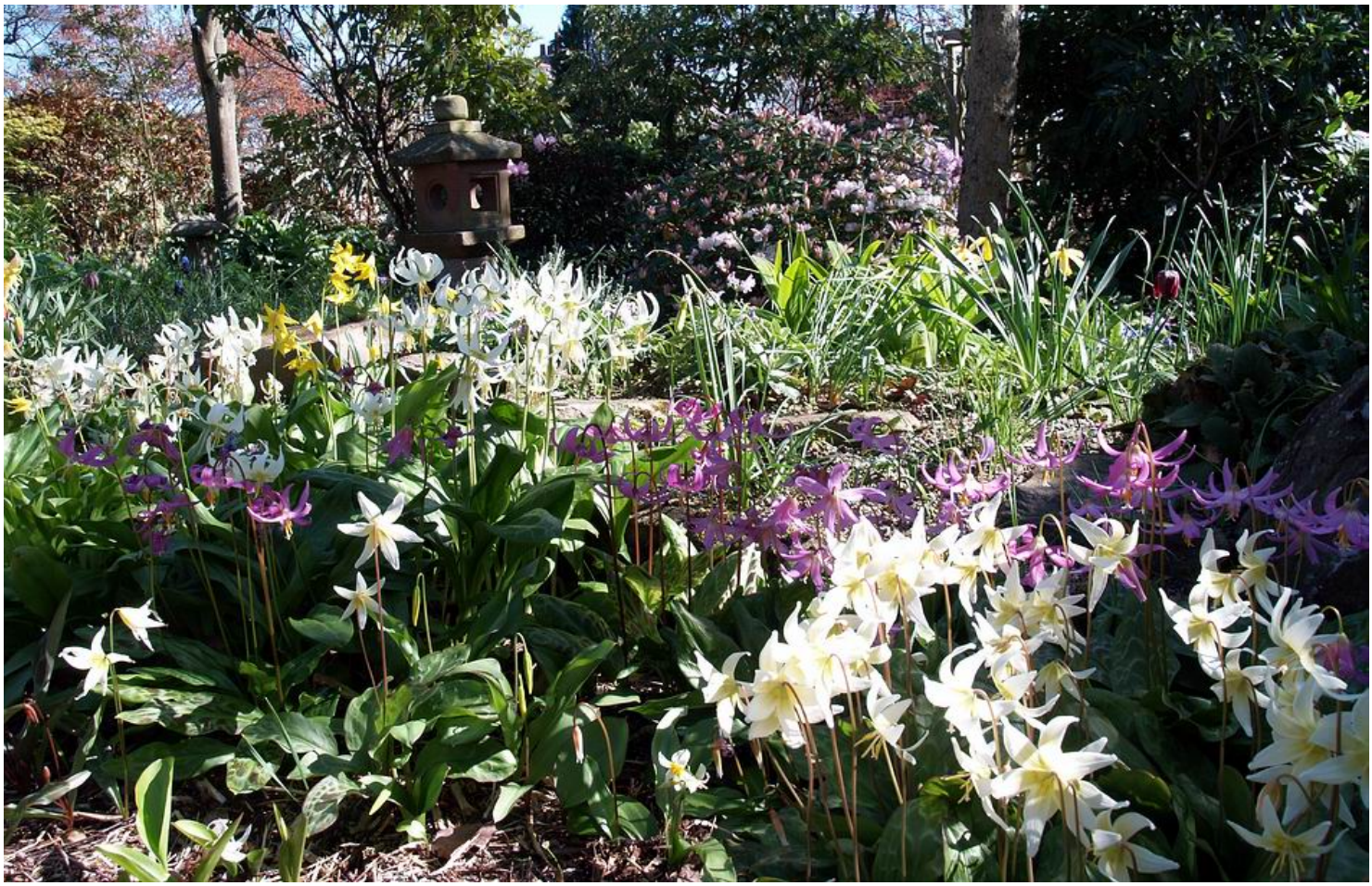
Erythronium montanum hybrid?

Above is a picture showing the details of an Erythronium montanum flower.
Typical characteristics are the pure white slightly twisting tepals, with a long slender style and filaments holding the golden yellow pollen laden anthers.
The flower on the left shares the pure white twisting tepals but the style and filaments are not correct for pure montanum. The seed parent was E. oregonum and I am wondering if it is a hybrid between that species and E. montanum?
This flower has extra petals and stamens, this mutation may not be fixed and may revert to the normal number, six of each, next year.



Erythronium montanum hybrids?

These are two seedlings raised from seed collected from Erythronium montanum in our own garden and again I have a suspicion that another species may be involved as they are not typical of E.montanum as I have seen it. There is maybe more variation in wild populations than I am aware of and if anyone can tell me I would be very pleased to hear from you. Again hybrids are unlikely to be more beautiful than this stunning species with its large- up to 15cms wide- pure white flowers but if they can retain just some of that beauty and at the same time be more adaptable to garden growing conditions that would be a great breakthrough that would allow more people to grow them.



I leave you this week with another view across one of the Erythronium beds that I am so enjoying just now.....