



BULB LOG 35.....2<sup>nd</sup> September 2009



**Potato tuber**

Bulbs never cease to amaze and fascinate me. Their ability to hold on to life and survive prolonged periods of very unfavourable conditions has developed over millenniums of evolution. This is one of my potato experiments to see how long it could survive left sitting on a bit of wood in a shaded area with no water. After four months its roots are exploring for signs of moisture and its stems and leaves fuelled by the store within the tuber are also slowly growing – true determination. I will now plant it and see what happens.



**Narcissus pots**

The fact that bulbs have a way of determining the season when they should be coming out of dormancy is undeniable – how they determine the time is still a mystery. Many plants, like trees, respond to shortening daylight to trigger the start to their autumn shut down but I think that we can rule that out for bulbs as they are underground and could not determine light levels. I believe that it is linked to falling temperatures and it is now time that I cleaned up these pots as it is also now time to apply the first storm by giving them a good soaking.



### Cleaning the Pots

I now have to compromise as I have run out of time to repot everything and I need to start watering the Narcissus and Crocus so I am just going to tidy up the remaining pots. I start by tipping off the gravel then I remove all the dried up remains of the old growth which looks harmless just now but once it gets wet and the temperatures drop it can attract grey mould which can then cross infect the new leaves as they emerge.



When the old leaves are cleaned away I then give them a sprinkle of **bone meal** to add a bit more nourishment before I replace the cleaned up gravel. I clean the gravel by shaking it in a box while blowing across it to blow all the chaff to one end so it can be removed – much the same method as I use to clean seeds.



### First storm

Now to the first storm – regular readers of the bulb log will be familiar with my regime of always applying the first watering to the bulbs on the 1<sup>st</sup> September. The precise date is not too important but it has served me well and given me the incentive to provide water at the time that many of the bulbs roots are just starting to emerge. In warmer areas, if my temperature theory is correct, the bulbs clocks will be running behind ours so you may wish to hold the watering back for up to a month.



### **Fritillaria house**

All bulbs have different requirements and I have discovered over the years that most Fritillaries start to form roots that bit later than Narcissus so now I have started off the Bulb house my attention must turn to the Fritillaria house as I have now to replot or tidy up all these pots before I water them in a month's time.

The regime of watering all your bulbs on a fixed date in the early autumn will work for 90% of bulbs and is a good bench mark. However there are always some that need watering that bit earlier or later to allow them to grow to their best – these you have to learn from experience. As bulbs are survival experts many of these will survive under my autumn storm regime however you may lose a few to wet rot through being soaked too soon - there is no better way to learn than to make your own mistakes.



### **Bulb house**

Now the bulb houses are all tidy and ready to be soaked but some are in growth even before I apply any water.



### **Crocus kotschyanus**

This lone flower in a pot of *Crocus kotschyanus* appears every year before any water is applied proving with out doubt that the bulbs do have a built in way of determining the season.



### **Crocus vallicola**

The keen eyed bulb loggers may have noticed these *Crocus vallicola* flowers in the picture of the bulb house. These have been watered as they live outside in an open frame all year around. I only bring them under glass when they are in flower to protect the beautiful blooms from the ravages of the wind and rain. The extra bit of warmth provided by the glass also helps the pollen to grow and fertilise the plant ensuring a seed set for next year.



## **Crocus vallicola**

I will never cease to say that the best way to get healthy bulbs that will best suit your growing conditions is to raise them from seed.

If you raise them from seed you will also get variation even in a basically white flower. One of the distinctive characteristics of *C. vallicola* is the yellow spots towards the base of the floral segments – you can even see them from the outside through the tepals.

Violet lines are also sometime present in varying degrees of intensity as you can see in the right hand flower where even the acuminate tips are tinged with violet.

To look inside the flowers see the picture below.



## **Crocus vallicola**

The flowers are reversed in order in this picture which shows the beautifully delicate markings.



### **Crocus vallicola and Hover fly**

I always use a paint brush to pollinate the flowers to ensure the best chance of fertilisation but I also appreciate the assistance of a the hover flies that are so attracted to the crocus flowers.



### **Colchicum montanum**

These two flowers of *Colchicum montanum* – previously called *Merendera montana*- also show the variation in colour and form you get from seed raised plants. The variation also extends to the adaptability to varying growing environments with some clones being well suited to your conditions while others will not. The good thing about seed raising is that the seedlings that do not adapt to your conditions die off early on, while the rest of the potful will thrive and that is not so painful as losing an expensive single bulb you have just purchased.



*Colchicum alpinum*



*Colchicum alpinum*



The smallest of all the *Colchicum*s that we grow is *C. alpinum* a perfectly formed wee beauty again showing slight variation with one single flowered bulb and one with twins. The taller flower is under 4cms high, from the gravel.



**Acis rosea**

Another tiny representative of its genus is *Acis rosea* – formally called *Leucojum roseum* – flowering on stems that are only 3 to 4cms these miniature flowers beautifully washed with pink. *Acis rosea* is one of the only autumn flowering bulbs that I am aware of that sets its seeds immediately after flowering – most autumn flowering bulbs delay the ripening of their seeds until spring. I think that this species is too small to plant into the open garden but I must try it in a trough or raised bed where I can watch over it.



**Acis autumnalis**

*Acis autumnalis* is very close to *A. rosea* except it is pure white, produces a number of flowers and I find it is also flowers on a slightly taller stem.





### Conifer and Acis

The reason for showing this dwarf conifer is to both warn you of the problems with such shrubs growing wider and pointing yet again the survival instinct of bulbs. Notice to the right a small clump of *Acis autumnalis* with just a few flowers. I first noticed the leaves growing there several weeks ago and thought that it was an *Acis* that I had planted many years ago and I feared it had died out.



Here is a closer low view of the *Acis* on the right and if you look under the overhang of the conifer you will see a few leaves struggling to grow in the dry low light conditions. Those few leaves are what remains of the original bulbs I planted but they could not compete with the expanding conifer as they were starved out. However they must have flowered and set seed one year and that seed head fell over to shed its seeds just out of reach of the conifer and these leaves and few flowering stems are the next generation. You can see from the trailing leaf coming from under the conifer that it is just the exact distance that the falling stem would deposit its treasure of seeds. I will rescue the original few surviving bulbs and make sure that the new clump does not suffer from the same fate.