SRGC ----- Bulb Log Diary ----- Pictures and text © Ian Young

BULB LOG 31.....3rd August 2011

Poppy and Sedum spurium

Poppy enjoys a snooze in front of the narrow south facing bulb bed below our kitchen wall but just look at the display of flowers in the background. Not a rare or difficult plant and perhaps for that reason not one many of us would consider but we should look again. Sedum spurium is low growing and you would hardly notice the tangled open mat of stems and succulent leaves for much of the year until it flowers. It is ideal to grow in bulb beds where the tangled stems can help support the autumn flowering Crocus – at least that is my plan.

Plunge bed

At last we have had a long enough period between rain to allow the plunges to dry out sufficiently to allow me to work on them. Our underlying ground is well drained and all our potting mixes are free draining so surplus moisture drains away quickly but I think you can see from the dark colour of the sand in this picture that it is not completely dry and still retains some moisture.

Crocus pelistericus

The leaves you can see are Crocus pelistericus which in our garden never goes dormant. The leaves will eventually die back as winter approaches but by then the new roots, which are growing now, will be well established. This pattern of growth makes it very difficult to decide when to repot it. To limit the disturbance of this plant I only repot them every second year around July, hopefully before the new roots emerge, on the grounds that it is better to damage old leaves and roots that have served their purpose than to damage new emerging roots that will nourish the plant for the next year. These were done last year.

Erythronium basket

I firmly believe that the Erythroniums do better if repotted every year; that way you will get maximium increase but I find that you can leave them for two years without any significant deterioration and as these were not done last year I am keen to get into them if the weather permits. Part of the problems in our plunges is that the tree roots are attracted into the rich compost by the leaf mould and the nutrients that I add. These roots do help dry the compost out in wet summers, helping the dormant bulbs to avoid wet rot attacks but if left for more than two years they rob all the goodness from the compost plus they become too big, gripping the pots to the ground so I cannot lift them easily.

Escaping bulb

The first thing I do when I get the basket to my work station is to turn it upside down to check if any bulbs are escaping from the bottom. This is another reason why it is best not to leave them any longer than two years as more will push down through even this tiny 1mm mesh. The only way to remove them when they are growing both in and out like this is to give them a gentle twist which will leave some of the bulb inside and some outside - plant both bits and at least one will grow away.

Crocus shoots

Turning the basket upside down generally causes the top dressing to fall away revealing the surface of the potting medium and in this case revealing some delicate Crocus nudiflorus shoots that need careful handling. These Crocus corms have escaped from their own basket by stolons which invade all the surrounding baskets and that is why I keep these Crocus away from other Crocus species in the Erythronium plunge.

Erythronium bulbs and roots

Now I have separated out the compost you can see the tangle of tree roots which if left could starve out the Erythroniums completely.

Once I have cleaned up the Erythronium bulbs they are ready to be replanted.

As all our potting mixes contain high proportions of grit and sand they retain their structure well for several years but I always mix in some organic matter in the form of leaf mould plus a pinch of bone meal to freshen it up.

I cover the bottom of the basket with around 2-3cms of compost and then position the bulbs. As you can see I have also spaced out the Crocus nudiflorus inbetween them as they will provide some flowering interest in the late summer and autumn and not interfere at all with the growth of the Erythroniums.

I found a number of beasties in the compost; some would chew on the roots others like the millipede, bottom right, help break down the leaf mould – but I had an assistant, see below, who helped me deal with these.

The robin, who is nesting in the Mutisia growing up our wall, was grateful and quickly snapped up these morsels to help feed what is his second or even third brood of hungry chicks.

Dicentra cuccularia 'Pink Punk'

Dicentra cuccularia 'Pink Punk'

Because it enjoys similar growing conditions, it grows alongside Erythroniums in the wild, I also have a basket of Dicentra cuccularia in this plunge. This is the nice pink flowered form named 'Pink Punk' and even the bulbs are tinged with pink – the normal form of Dicentra cuccularia which has white flowers also has white bulbs. The bulbs are fascinating with the bases being covered with masses of small loosely connected scales. These could also be described as bulbils and if they are removed each will form a new plant which takes around three years to reach flowering size. Most bulbs I handle carefully so as not to knock off too many scales then they are replanted immediately as you can see below.

Dicentra cuccularia 'Pink Punk'

Erythronium hendersonii bulb

Look carefully at the picture above and you will see the old roots to the left have not completely died back yet and already the new roots are emerging on the right hand side of the base. This is a typical feature that I have observed in many high altitude and snow-melt bulbs : that given constant moisture they will never go completely dormant. Unless the weather stays dry for a week I doubt if |I will be able to repot all of our Erythroniums this year as the roots will be too advanced and I am likely to do them damage

Erythronium montanum

Erythronium montanum is a beautiful species which has always held a fascination for me possibly because many books and articles described it as being “ungrowable in cultivation”. After nearly thirty years of raising it from seed we now have reasonable numbers of it growing both in plunge baskets and garden beds. Each new generation of garden seedlings are more adapted to our garden conditions. The bulbs form chains at the base are made up of the remnants of previous year’s growth which never die away completely – they are almost like a creeping rhizome in some respects.

Erythronium montanum roots

Another feature of E. montanum, is that the roots are well branched as this picture shows while most other species have largely unbranched roots.

Erythronium montanum bulb chain

In this picture I have removed the chain from the base of the bulb and split it into individual segments. If left attached the chains will remain alive but dormant as long as the main bulb is healthy but if anything happens to the main bulb then each chain has a number of buds that are capable of growing.

Erythronium montanum bulb chain removed

Here you can see a bulb chain removed from the parent bulb has produced a growing bud, bottom left, with roots emerging. It is a good way of increasing any of the Erythroniums that retain these chains and it will take around three years for the growths to make a flowering sized bulb.

Again you can see that I have combined some Crocus nudiflorus corms complete with extending flower shoots with these Erythronium bulbs.

Erythronum sibericum bulbs

I go through the same procedure with all the baskets including this one of well grown Erythronum sibericum seedlings that are now fully mature and producing offsets.

Erythronum sibericum bulb

Again you can see that the new roots are already emerging and so I have to handle the bulbs very carefully so that I do not snap the brittle roots, also I keep them shaded and plant them immediately to prevent them from drying out.

A note on the engraved aluminium labels that I use, made from old window blinds – I can cut them any size I want and by making them quite long I can bend the bottom at right angles and place the bend at the bottom of the basket so it will be well held in place by the compost.

I started with Poppy so I will finish this week with Lily.