BULB LOG 26.....29th June 2011

Eucomis schijffii above and **Rhodohypoxis baurii** below

Both the plants shown above have something in common – they both come from South Africa are winter dormant and have evolved to grow in a climate of summer rain fall. That is not what drew me to photograph them –I was interested in the way they are holding water. Many plants that have evolved leaves that can shed water away from the centre of the plant, think of some of the Arisaema that have long acuminate tips to the leaves that bend and direct the water to fall away from the crown of the plant. Other plants funnel the water down the stem towards the centre of the plant. I cannot think of an advantage of retaining the water like Eucomis schijiffii – it is liable to cause rotting of the centre in our climate- perhaps it comes from an area of lower rainfall – I will need to research this. On the other hand if you ever wondered why the flowers of Rhodohypoxis hide their centre in the way they do I think the answer is perfectly illustrated above.

The pinched centre of these upwards pointing flowers that, due to the surface tension of the water, does not allow the water to get down into the tube soaking the anthers and stigma is a wonderful adaptation so that it can hold its flowers upright to attract pollinators and still not fill up with water

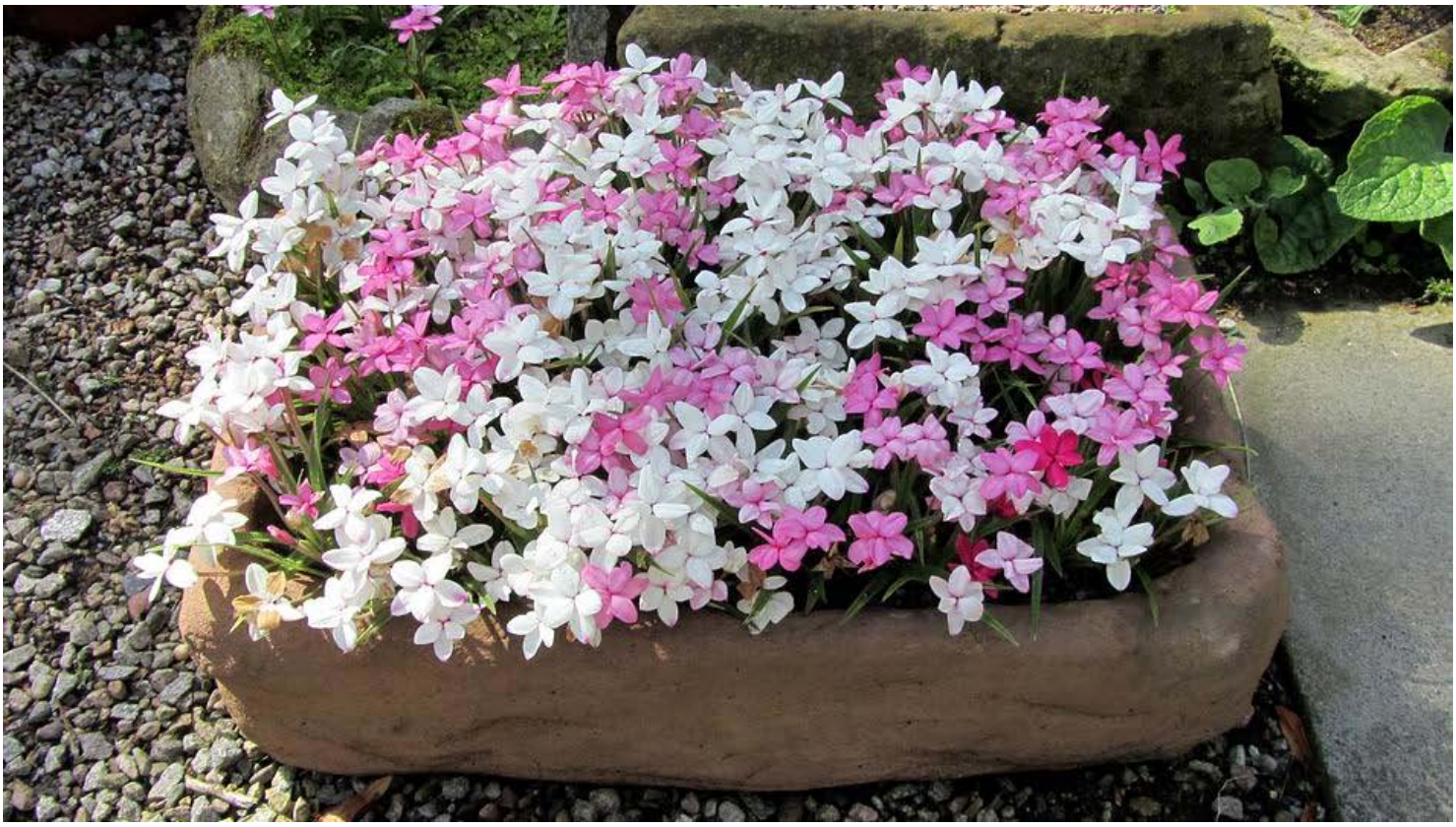
It is interesting to compare how the Rhodohypoxis troughs have come through last winter.

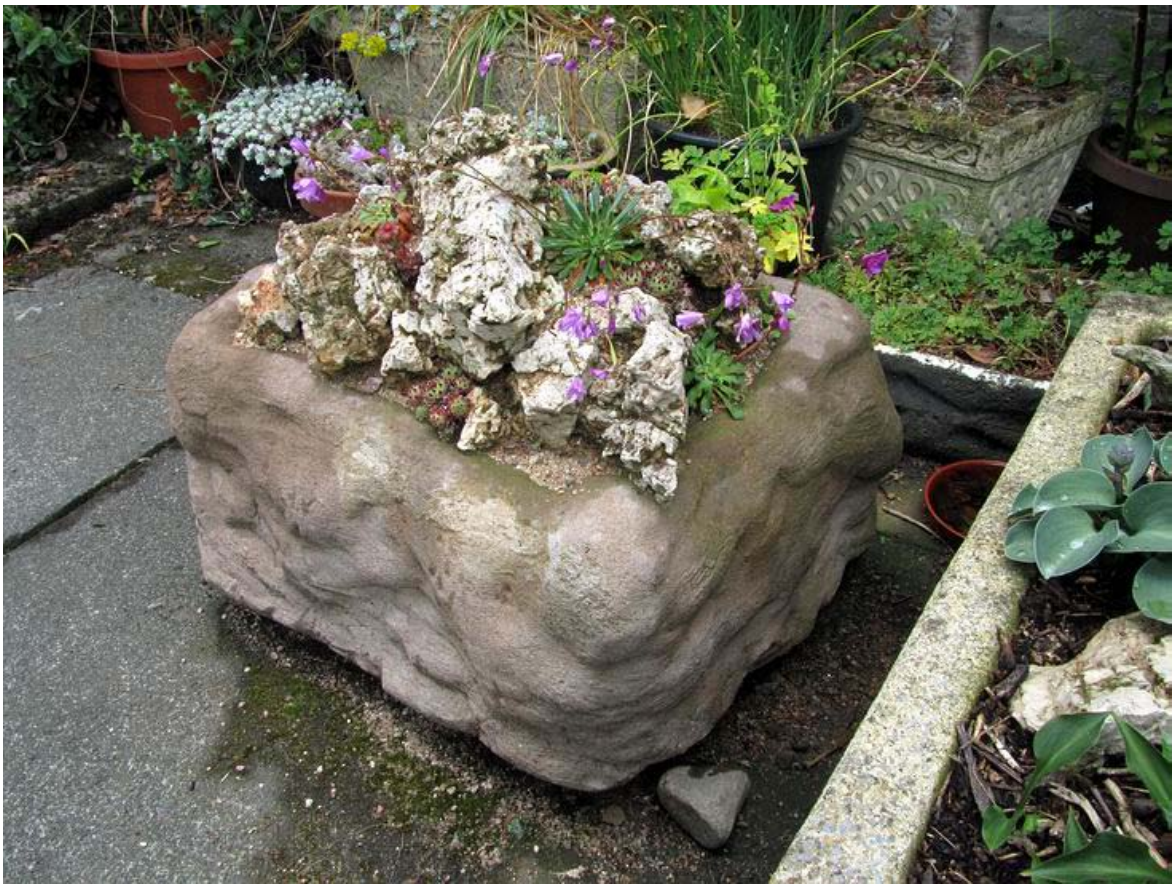
Rhodohypoxis baurii

Both the trough above and the one on the right were overwintered side by side under the glasshouse staging and it is obvious to see that one has survived much better than the other. I now have to wonder why this is? The one above is a single clone ‘Fred Broome’ could it be that it is more cold tolerant than many of the seedlings in the trough on the left were?

Rhodohypoxis baurii

Luckily the majority of them have come through the winter and are growing on strongly – enjoying the wet weather we are currently experiencing. The trough above and below were some of the new ones I made a month or so ago to replace the rather battered old polystyrene fish box troughs that I had been using for over ten years. I moved the plants just a month ago taking care not to damage their emerging roots and shoots. As you can see they have not suffered at all from this upheaval and I think they look good in their new style troughs which although heavier than the painted polystyrene fish box type I can still manage to lift them in and out of the glasshouse for winter cover.





Troughs

I love working with troughs both making them and planting them up – I see them like I do my sketch books, where I can experiment and work out ideas before I work them up to a finished painting, print or sculpture but at the same time the sketches are unique and have a spontaneity that is often lost in the larger work. The same is true for troughs – you can use them to try out ideas that you can scale up to larger beds or you can see them as complete gardens providing a range of different habitats to suit different plants often difficult to recreate on a larger scale.

In the one above I use a limestone marl using plenty of rock to build up the landscape well above the top of the trough. This is a style I like and use a lot as you can see in the one below which has a very similar effect but this time the rock is broken up old cement blocks.

Broken cement block

The idea of using recycled material that is readily available to most people really appeals to me and after a short while the broken edges weather and attracts moss and lichens just like real rocks do. It would appear that by using old blocks that have been allowed to weather in the open for a number of months any salts or lime that might damage sensitive plants have been washed away. Compare them yourselves and see which you would prefer and think about which of the materials could be more readily available to you. As the many alpines we used to grow under glass have been squeezed out of the glasshouses by the ever expanding number of bulbs we grow it is in the troughs and raised beds that have to become their new home as we try to grow them.

Limestone marl

Broken cement block

I have always said that my gardening is just another medium for my artistic needs and often the methods of inspiration come in similar ways where I see something that spurs an idea that I can work up whether it is a compositional suggestion or a methodology. While having a cup of tea my gaze was drawn to this batch of broken concrete block lying in the tray which had filled with rain water. I noticed how all the blocks were moist even the top most ones but they also had plenty of air pockets and I am now wondering if plants could grow into these blocks as they do in tufa. I intend to make a trough with no drainage holes so that it can be kept constantly topped up with water in the summer and landscape it entirely with broken cement block into which I will place the plants – it will be an interesting experiment.

Potentilla nitida Cuttings

Many of the cuttings I took some weeks ago have now rooted under the mist unit and are ready to pot on. I will grow them in pots for a while before I plant them into some of the troughs.

Cuttings trough

The other way I way I take cuttings is to plant the cuttings directly into a compost of sharp sand in troughs – I take these later in August and September. This picture is to update you on the progress of the one I planted up with cuttings of Androsaces last year.

Troughs

Looking across a group of troughs each one is an experiment in rock work and plantings. Some have a single species of plant in that I encourage to seed around the rocks imitating what you might find in a small pocket of soil on a rocky mountain summit. Others have a collection of different plants, some easy others difficult, as I continue to observe how the plants respond to the varying conditions experienced in the different styles of compost and landscaping.

Small slate trough

This small trough is no more than a base of cement with a shallow rim made from surplus cement mix at one of my trough making workshops. At a later workshop I used it to demonstrate a crevice style landscaping method using old roofing slates. At the time, it was one August, I pulled some bits off the plants of an established trough and stuck them in un-rooted into the sand to show how it could look with a few plants in and they all rooted. It has been untouched for the last four or more years excepting for the occasional watering in very hot dry conditions.

Often when I landscape a trough I do not have the plants ready to go into it so it may sit for a few months or a year before I get round to planting it. Sometimes I plant them up by scattering seeds directly into them. This trough lay unplanted and got colonized by mosses and liverworts and has now become an experiment as I observe what often happens in nature as the early colonisers of rock detritus are the lichens, mosses and liverworts which in turn add a humus content to the gravel which in turn may provide

suitable conditions for an alpine plant to seed into. So I have scattered odd seeds around to see if the plants can germinate and in turn take over the spaces colonised by these ‘weedy’ plants.

Granite trough

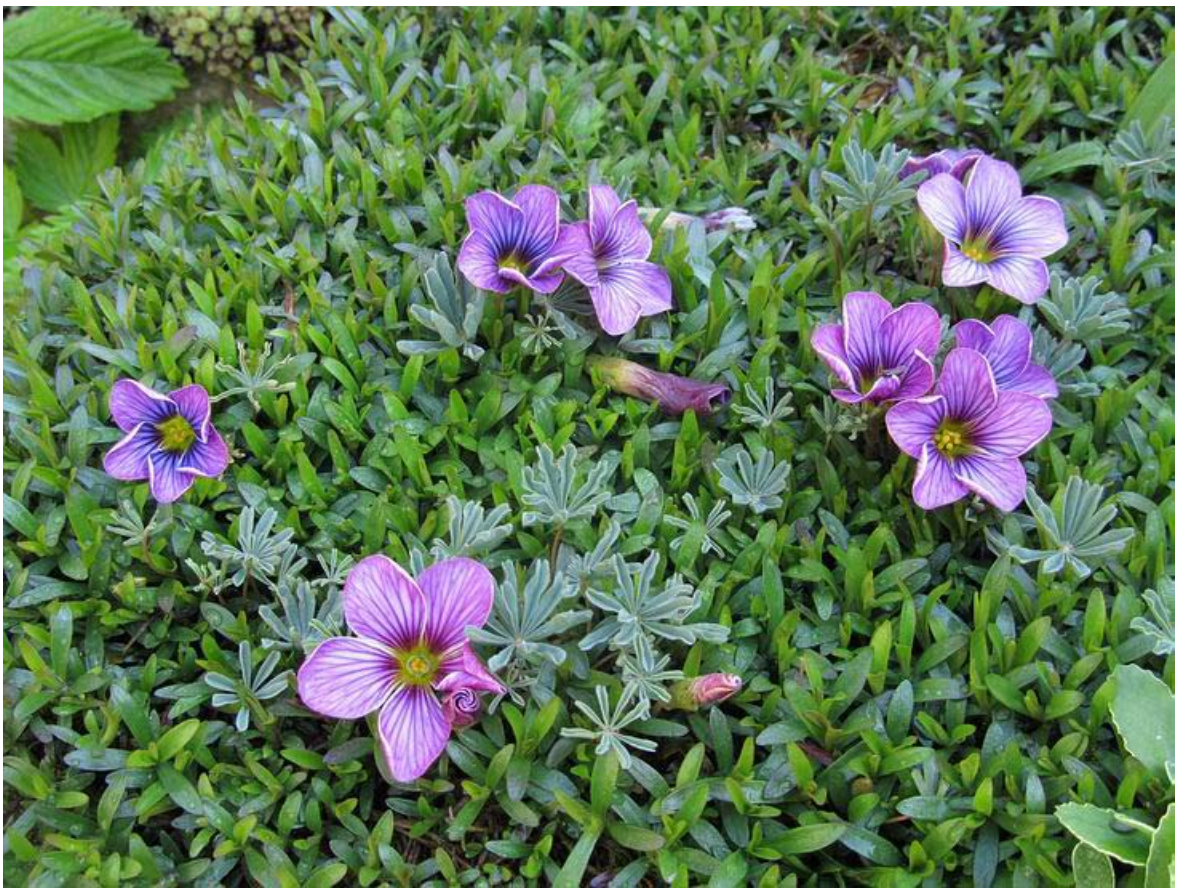
To look at a few of the older established troughs – one of my favourites and so easy to look after, is this granite trough planted with sempervivums and sedums. It needs no watering at all in Aberdeen as it gets all the water it needs from the skies even when we have dry periods, the plants have evolved to retain their own water supply.

Granite trough

Another granite trough landscaped with roofing slates contains a wide mixture of plants. The growth of these plants can become an issue as some spread covering the slate work which is part of the attraction of the whole thing. I have here in miniature the same dilemma that we have in the wider garden when plants no matter how nice they may be get too big for their space and need to get trimmed back or propagated and replaced.

Troughs

This picture shows some of our oldest established troughs that have been planted up for over twenty five years. To keep troughs looking good you often have to rip them apart after around five years and start again because plants get old and loose vigour or they get too big as described above. Sometimes the compost used becomes old and no longer suitable and that is particularly so if you use a compost with a high humus content that can break down over time. Nowadays I use a lot of sharp sand in my troughs and even before that I made a compost of roughly half grit and half loam which retains its bulk and free draining properties over a very long time. Nutrients of course leach out and need replenished and I feed these troughs around February each year with a granular balanced fertilizer that also contains trace elements. It has to be well watered in to prevent the nitrogen content burning the foliage.



Oxalis laciniata

Over the years the Dianthus alpinus has spread covering over a number of other plants – some of these objected and died out but some like this Oxalis laciniata have become happy companions and flower each year through the fresh young Dianthus growth.

Dianthus alpinus

The Dianthus has lovely deep coloured flowers with a contrasting dark eye and we raised it from seed from Dianthus ‘Joan’s Blood’. For the last few years it has not flowered too well and I keep trying to work out how to encourage it to flower all over as it once used to when it was a much smaller plant – perhaps that is the answer. Notice also the many young leaves of self sown Dactylorhiza.

Cement trough

This is one of the first troughs I made thirty odd years ago. I built a wooden mould that screwed together to form them and made quite a number all of which have survived undamaged by the years. They have gone through many plantings over the years and this one, planted up with New Zealand plants, sits in the North side of the house.

Bought trough

In our early years we bought a number of troughs/planters at a stock clearing sale when a local nursery-garden centre was taken over. It is now planted up with a number of dwarf Hostas given to us by a generous friend and SRGC Forumist.

Troughs

Neglected troughs are the places where the seed of Dactylorhiza orchids will germinate and grow giving them a new look without the intervention of the gardener.