



BULB LOG 26.....26th June 2013



I am featuring some of the troughs and raised beds in the garden this week. As you can see from the picture we have a concentration of them near the house and this is the first thing you see if you come into the garden through the side entrance. It is also the view we get from our swing seat.

Troughs of all sizes have long been favoured by growers of alpine and rock garden plants and I think the under-lying reason for this is because of the diminutive size of the plants which allows a number of them to be grown together in a small container. Growers then discovered that you can more easily adjust the growing

conditions on this small scale than you can in the wider garden tailoring them to the needs of the plants.

I do like to arrange or design the various components that make up our garden so that they can be viewed individually or from certain positions they blend into the wider landscape. From the front this view takes in a small trough of New Zealand plants, across two raised beds, a plunge bed, rock garden then onto the woodland part of our garden.



Over the years

my aim has been to create a mini-landscape rather than a formal garden design and this applies to each individual part from the smallest trough to the whole plot. The raised bed is the one I re-landscaped last year blending in the pink granite rock that was part of the previous incarnation, with broken concrete blocks to create more height and interest. The one lesson I would pass on when doing your troughs is to be bold with your rock work and build it up as high as you can so that they look interesting before you add any plants. One way I have changed over the years is that in my early days I wanted the trough to look 'mature' from the start and planted it full of good sized flowering alpine plants. This instant garden style is not part of my way now and I will often leave a trough for a



year before I add any plants. Or I will simply scatter some seeds or add some small cuttings. I want to enjoy the trough through all its cycles from infancy to maturity and not short cut to the mature stage. The new concrete landscaped part looks sparsely planted with several filler plants such as *Sempervivium* rosettes stuck in as a temporary measure to help stabilise the sand.



The other end of this bed retains an earlier landscape style where I was less bold with my rock work and it is altogether flatter. However it works well now giving the impression of a mountain slope as it rises up to the side with the concrete block. I did not want to disturb some of the plants in this half of the bed which is why I did not rework the whole bed. The smallest of the hardy orchids we grow is self-seeding in this bed and is a perfect scale to associate with the Phlox and other alpine plants however you may notice above two taller flowering spikes.





These have obviously hybridised with some of the other *Dactylorhiza* we grow – they have a more pointed top to the flower spike and longer bracts at the base of the individual flowers as well as the obvious colour variations.



This group of troughs has some of our oldest plantings, untouched for thirty years. There is no way I would leave such a flat landscape now. A few years ago I did have to remove 150 self-seeded orchids from the right hand side of the front trough as they were getting too crowded.



At over one metre wide this plant of Saxifraga slowly swamped all the other plants we originally planted over thirty years ago - it now forms a tight rock hard mat. Most years it produces good flowers but every now and then it flowers exceptionally well - like this year.



I planted a single silver saxifrage picked up at a Club plant sale into this fish box trough. The rock is broken cement and the growing medium sharp sand - as I planted I tore the sax into a number of small sections.



This is the best it has ever flowered with masses of stems each bearing clusters of small white flowers. While the flowers are very welcome and decorative they only last for a few weeks but the wonderful silver encrusted leaf rosettes provide year round interest. I would say that the proportion of plant to rock is now perfect but this year the rosette growth will hide almost all of the rock (cement) work upsetting the

balance I was trying to achieve. My intention is to thin out the rosettes later in the year.



The other success of nature in this trough is only seen when you look carefully through the forest of saxifrage stems to see the many self-seeded orchids growing up through the rock hard rosettes. Once the flowers pass I will cut away the stems to reveal them.



Another trough nearby has a silver saxifrage with orange spotted flowers. I was thinking, as I sat on the swing seat viewing them, that it would be fun to have a trough planted with a mixture of these two colours. When I thin out these rosettes later I will not be wasting the removed material I will be planting a new mixed trough.



More often seen on the show bench, I grow *Saxifraga pubescens* 'Snow Cap' outside on one of the raised beds. It never approaches the perfect domes of flowers seen at shows but it does survive and flower each year.



The two small troughs in the fore ground are tiny- less than 25 cms across and 5cms deep but still I try and create a landscape by building them up with rocks. Adding all this rock increase the planting depth of the shallow container and greatly increases the volume of planting medium to hold water for the plants roots to explore.



These were planted up at a workshop I gave about five years ago with Saxifrage, Sempervivum and Sedum cuttings, plus one small form of *Primula marginata*, all placed into nothing but sharp sand. They established remarkably well with only the occasional watering in hot dry conditions.



I had to recreate this trough which contains a single lump of limestone populated by *Erinus alpinus* when the last trough disintegrated due to years of recurring frosts. Unfortunately I did not act quickly enough and the rock dried out causing the plants to die so I had to start again by simply placing the rock into a new trough of sand and sprinkling seeds.



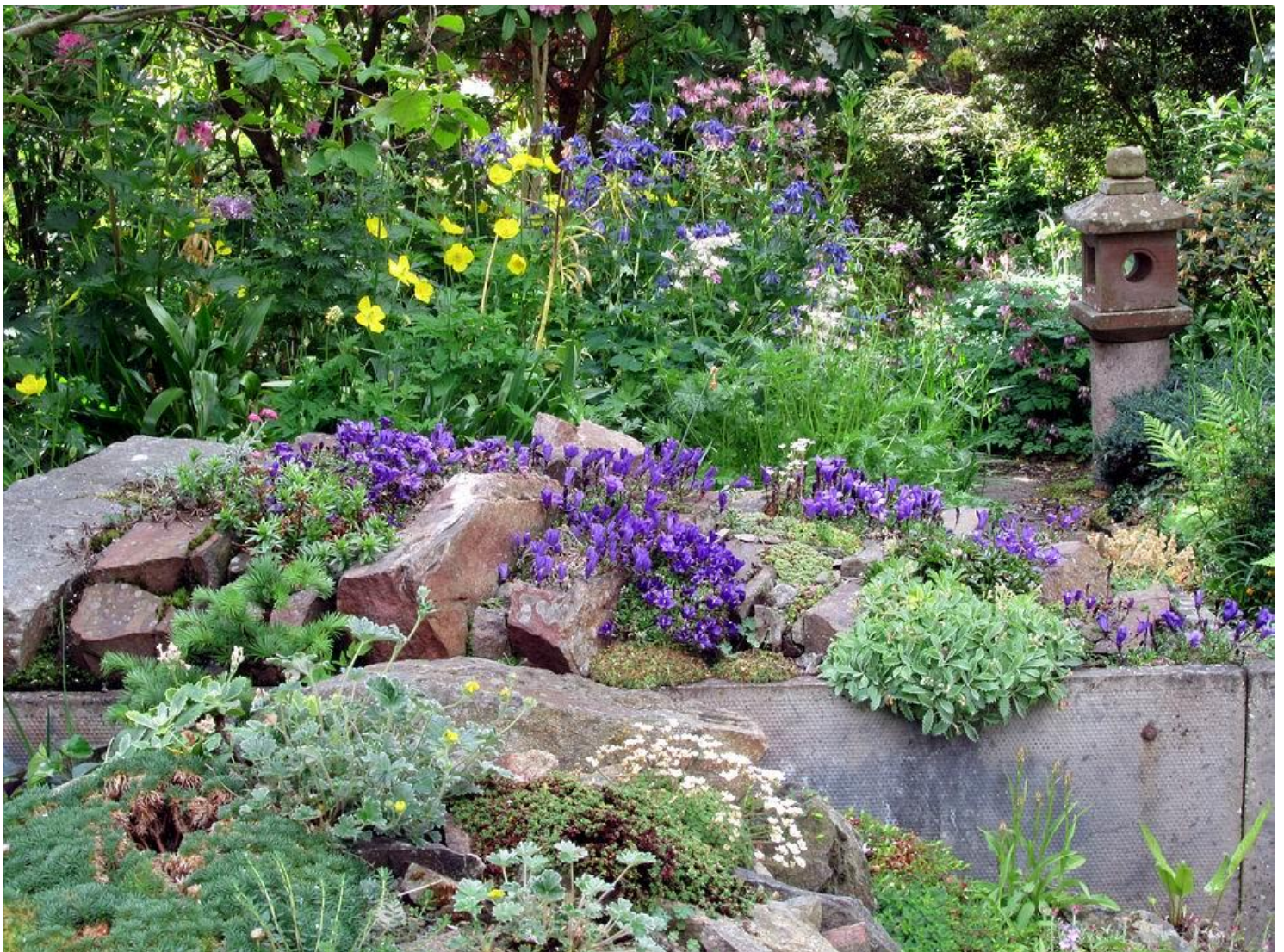
I carved these next two troughs out of granite paving slabs. They are around twenty years old and were landscaped with rock and planted with a single conifer in each -all the other plants have seeded in without any help from me.



I grew *Edrianthus serpyllifolius* from collected seeds and planted the seedlings into this bed – now they in turn are self-seeding around – some growing through the saxifrages. There is no discernible colour variation in the flowers but there are a number of growth forms. Some plants form tight, compact plants while others have a more sprawling habit.



These raised beds are a great success as they bring the plants up towards the viewer who can home in on individual groups like a rocky vignette lifted from a mountain side, above, or you can stand back and take in the whole 2 by 1 metre raised bed seen on the left.



Alternatively you can move to take in the wider view looking across two raised beds towards the wider garden.



So it becomes obvious that the placing of beds and troughs in your gardens is as important as their individual landscaping to allow them to be both viewed individually or taken in as part of the wider garden landscape.....

