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

BULB LOG 47.....20th November 2013

Different clones of **Crocus laevigatus** will continue to flower throughout the winter in our bulb house and what a pleasure it brings with such beautiful flowers and a delightful scent thrown in. Despite having a number of pots of seedlings I continue to sow seed every year to keep healthy young plants coming along. I see it as our duty as growers to try and get all our plants to set seed every year. If we rely solely on vegetative increase we risk spreading disease and a weakening stock which could result in a total loss of that plant in cultivation: to help preserve these plants we need to sow and distribute the seed around.

The front drive is looking very pretty with the Geranium leaves taking on an autumn hue but soon I will be cutting them back, clearing away the leaves and checking for any weeds that are lurking in this undergrowth. Then the area will be nice and clear ready for the winter and spring bulbs.

We removed a number of trees and Rhododendrons as part of our major re-working of the front garden which had become an overgrown shrubbery – but some we wanted to keep so we cut them back to the ground. Some shrubs do not respond to this severe treatment and simply die. For evergreens it is best to cut back only about a third to a half of the branches, leaving some untouched so their leaves can draw the sap up and keep the bush alive – then, if you get budding on the cut branches, allow them to grow leaves before you cut back the rest of the bush. This process can take anything from one to three years our plans did not allow for that time scale so we took the risk and as you see above this Rhododendron has not responded but I did take cuttings which hopefully will root over the winter and spring.

This Ledum (now reclassified as a Rhododendron) on the other hand has produced masses of new buds on the cut back branches so will form a nice compact plant again.

As we were enjoying our best summer for forty years I watched the Primula and Meconopsis suffering in the heat and thought that heat and lack of rain would result in less flower buds forming on the Rhododendrons. This has not proven to be the case as many, such as Rhododendron yakushimanum, has more flower buds than I have ever seen and even the clone below which rarely flowers is covered in buds.

Obviously the heat helped the new growth ripen then when the rains did come, providing relief and a late surge of growth on the Primula and Meconopsis, it also satisfied the rhodos. It certainly helps me understand that the normal lack of flowers on the above clone is not just down to lack of rainfall but also partly lack of sufficient warmth in our summers to fully ripen the new wood quickly enough for them to form flower buds.

One of the many things I enjoy while going around giving talks is what interests people the most about our fascinating hobby.

Without question troughs come very high up on that list – very few people fail to be captivated by trough gardening whether you have just one or many. The main message I give out is that most people are guilty of not creating enough planting height when landscaping their trough.

The tendency is to make them flat with just a few small rocks popping up above the upper rim – this is ok if that is what you like but you can make them look so much better by being bold with your rock work and you create more environments even within the confines of a small trough.

You can more than double the root run by piling the rock work high as you see here, in a shallow sandstone trough, where I have created good depth using a limestone marl.

In this case the trough already has good depth to the sides so the high rockwork serves another purpose. First is aesthetic as I much prefer this look to that of a flat sunken surface that I so often see. Second it creates many planting niches, facing all directions so you have surfaces facing north, south, east and west all with differing conditions to plant up. A third benefit is that troughs with high rock landscaping require less watering than flat landscaped ones do simply because they do not heat up so quickly resulting in a lower evaporation rate. Just think of a solar panel designed flat to capture as much sunshine as possible –by having rock landscaping with many different angles and slopes the sun can only hit a small proportion at any one time so reducing heat build-up and evaporation.

Regular readers will know that my favourite, and readily available, ‘rock’ used is concrete block. It may sound terrible but I assure you that after a short time it is difficult for people to see the difference between limestone work and concrete work provided you do not leave any of the straight sides on the block exposed.

During my recent North American Lecture Tour there was much discussion as to what type of concrete block I was speaking about – I called it breeze-block and it readily available in the UK and elsewhere either from a demolition or purchased from a builders merchant –I prefer the free option.

Here is the most recent one that I landscaped and planted up with Saxifrages just about six weeks ago so the concrete is still raw looking but the surface will soon weather.

This one has been established for around two years with Himalayan Androsaces and Saxifragas growing happily together. Moss is always an issue – a certain amount is good for plants to self-seed into but I do not want so much that I cannot see any of the rock work. I will undertake a certain amount of moss removal during the winter.

Looking closer you can see how the plants like to grow with and into each other, not in isolation, this also mimics how I have observed plants growing in nature.

Another long established trough landscaped using concrete block. All but one of the troughs I show today are made by covering a polystyrene fish box with sand cement mortar mix and here you can see that after time lichens and mosses start to grow on the surface just as they do on real stone troughs.

The planting medium in all the above troughs is pure sharp, (concreting) sand just like I use in some of the bulb beds. I have tried for years to establish healthy colonies of Cyclamen coum in our garden with little real success until I scattered some seeds in this sand bed in 2008/09 and these plants are now doing very well and are in turn self- seeding around in the sand.

The seed of autumn flowering bulbs will often germinate in late autumn as you see above where seeds of **Sternbergia colchiflora** sown in October this year, (despite what I wrote on the label!) are already germinating. I left them in the open to take the weather but now they have germinated I will move them under the protection of cold glass –partly for weather reasons but mostly so that I can protect them from winter foraging slugs and snails.

When I see very pale green leaves like above I normally suspect that there is a nutrient deficiency but all these pots have been treated the same so there must be another reason for this colour difference – I will keep a watching brief.

Narcissus cantabricus foliosus

I am continually fascinated by the way the buds of Narcissus unfurl themselves as they expand. The flower was formed in miniature late last spring before the bulbs went into their summer rest period so all they have to do is expand and that is the process we can see. At first they are a greeny-cream colour becoming pure white within a few days.

Above and below are the same clone of a seedling – a **hybrid of Narcissus romieuxii** – a few days apart, unfurling.

Now fully expanded and white……..