



BULB LOG 49.....3rd December 2014





It is the time of year when we see the climbing sun dramatically light up the clouds, as it rises over the horizon, causing me to venture out to try and capture the scene over the bulb houses. As you may have detected from the grainy quality of the opening page the light levels were much lower than the picture indicates, who says the camera never lies? I had to push the contrast levels down and use a fill in flash to cast some light onto the troughs in the foreground without burning out the beautiful colours of the dawn.

A bit later the light is still very low but reasonable enough to have a walk around to view the garden.

I am a big fan of troughs of all sizes – they are a great way to grow plants especially alpines. The foreground is dominated by one of our four, 6ft 3ft (c2m x 1m) slab beds which are in effect simply very large troughs. The near end I landscaped using broken concrete over two years ago and the plants are really starting to settle in now. If you want to see some more on the use of concrete in the troughs there is an article in this month's [IRG](#).

A slightly different view, below, shows how we group smaller troughs around the slab beds – these are landscaped with both real and man-made rocks.



The trough in the centre is landscaped with limestone marle which is like a relatively hard type of tufa.

While the rock itself is too hard for plants to root into it is covered in holes and fissures of varying depths and sizes where roots can explore. This trough is dominated by *Sempervivums* with a few *Lewisiads* and self seeded *Erinus alpinus*.



There are few alpinists so adaptable as **Sempervivums**. As the name would suggest (ever living) they are great survivors being very difficult to kill - add to that the ease with which you can root the side rosettes plus the great variety of colour forms that are available what could be better? Well the other major advantage they have is that they look attractive all year round – the most colourful may lose some of the reds in the low light of the winter but the colour soon returns when the sun comes back in the spring and summer.

When I was installing the new staging in the Frit-house I had a small amount of cement mix left over which I formed into a few shallow dishes with a hole for drainage poked into the bottom. A month or so ago I added some sharp sand, landscaped with broken concrete and added some rooted Sempervivum plants and some broken off rosettes. The extreme nature of such a shallow container would prove an impossible challenge to many plants but not Sempervivums.





This trough is landscaped with a single lump of limestone marl: another extreme environment but just the sort of place that we would see **Erinus alpinus** growing in on rocks and cliffs of its natural habitat or naturalized in a man-made wall. Over the years moss has established on the fissures of the rock then Erinus seedlings get a hold in the moss – I wanted to repeat this experiment using a lump of concrete block in place of the limestone.



Around two months ago I chiseled a lump of concrete block into a more natural looking shape and also drilled a series of holes into it mimicking those in the limestone marl - I then transferred some Erinus seedlings; some planted around the base and the smaller ones into the drilled holes. My long term aim is to allow moss to grow in places and encourage the Erinus to self-seed over this lump as it has in the limestone trough.



Taking the extreme environment to another level I have placed another lump of concrete in the other shallow trough –in this I plan to get *Sempervivum* to root into the holes I have drilled. So often we ignore these easy alpines as we try and grow the rare and difficult subjects but

experimenting with different methods of creating ‘extreme environments’ may just lead me on to being able to grow some of those challenging plants.



This is an earlier venture into my use of concrete for landscaping troughs – this time it was broken concrete paving slabs that I used. I wanted to create some crevices to grow **Ramonda myconi**, on the left, and **Ramonda nathaliae** - the plants have grown well but the slabs still just look like broken slabs. Unlike the open porous concrete blocks these slabs are impervious to water penetration and so do not attract moss except from along the top broken edges and as they are also much harder they cannot be carved and disguised so easily.



Haberlea rhodopensis is another member of the Gesneriaceae whose evergreen nature provides welcome winter interest - here it is growing in what was a rock garden bed before it became over shaded by the growing trees and shrubs. Now this bed is home to shade loving subjects and spring bulbs.



Many forms of **Ramonda myconi** also grow in this bed along with the bulbs and Hepatica seeding around.



Did you notice the **Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin'** shoots towards the top of the picture above - they are already well extended ready to spring into flower. I have never known them to flower before the turn of the year - mostly they start to open in early February if the conditions are not too cold. More fallen leaves to clear up when we get a dry spell.



The dark narrow leaves of **Ophiopogon planiscapus 'Nigrescens'** can get a bit lost when the garden is in full growth when your eye being drawn to the brighter colours but in winter they do stand out.



The Ophiopogon had flowers in late summer/early autumn and is now bearing fruits which something has been eating.



The Celmisia from New Zealand are excellent plants for all year round interest especially important in the winter for bringing structure to beds where most other plants are underground. I have never been able to find the name of this one.



Celmisia semicordata



Pinus 'Schmidtii' and narrow silver leafed ***Celmisia lyallii***

It is only when viewing this picture that I realize this pine is as now as tall as the wall of the raised bed.



In the foreground the mat forming *Celmisia brevifolia* is one of a number that form great mats in our garden.

I got some worried messages when I cut this *Cassiope wardii* x *fastigiata* down to ground level a few years ago. I know from experience that it was the best way to regenerate the plant and keep it looking good. If left to their own devices the lower stems become brown and unattractive so cutting back encourages new growth to come from low down on the stems and from the roots.



As you see it is back bigger and better than before providing welcome winter interest. It will need cutting back again in the next few years.



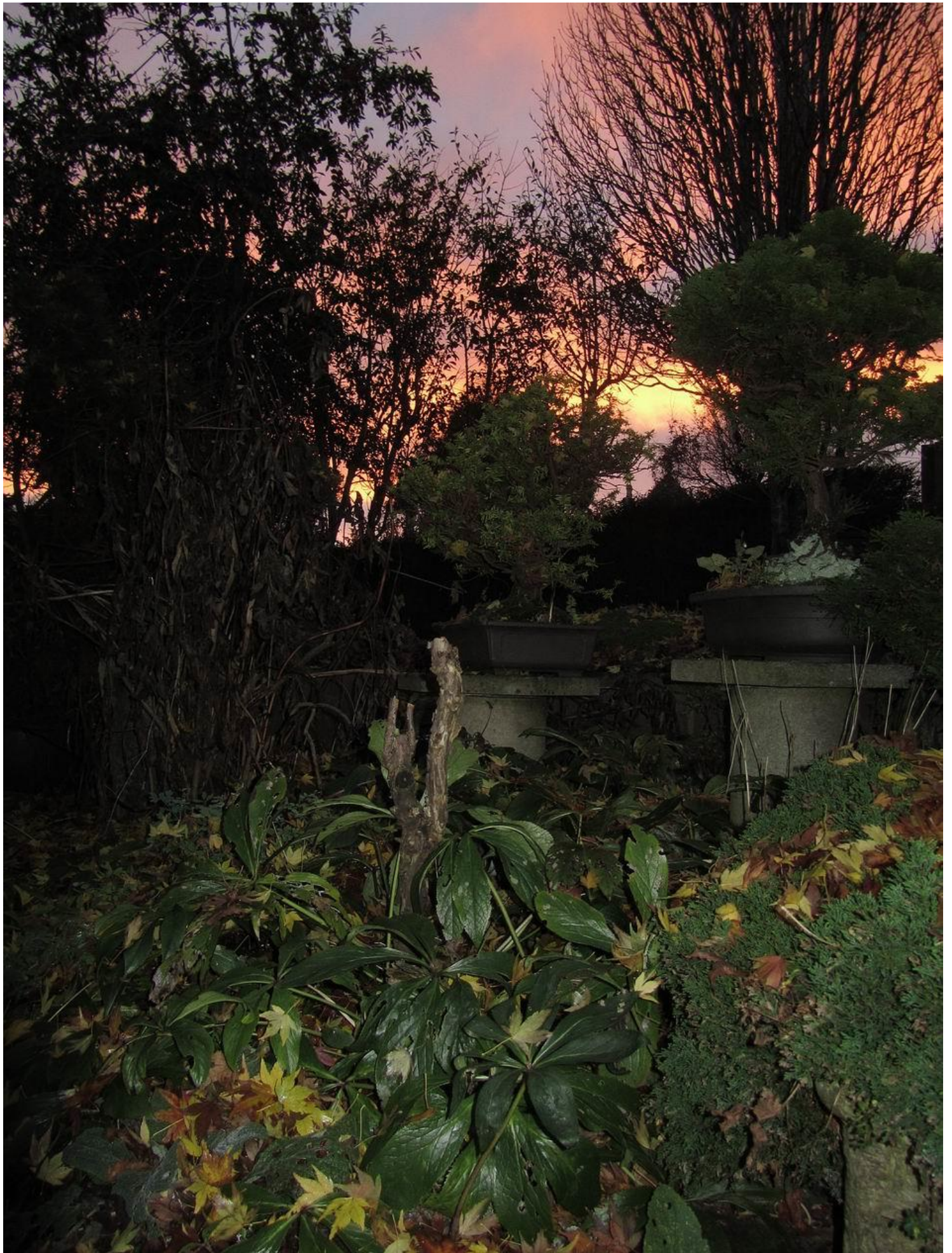
Phyllodoce caerulea is among the many dwarf Ericaceous shrubs that also serve to bring structure to the winter garden.

Podophyllum 'Spotty Dotty'

Largely due to the mild conditions the leaves of 'Spotty Dotty' are still green and attractive. In a normal winter the frost would have cut them back by this time.

As I write the temperature has fallen and we are getting freezing temperatures.





The sun sets all too quickly at this time of year, that is if we get to see it at all. Recent weather fronts have seen us under deep layers of rain clouds which insulates us keeping the temperatures from falling but it would be much better for the plants and the gardener if we got the cold bright winter days through the winter.....