



BULB LOG 36..... 9th September 2015





The onset of autumn is hard to ignore – for some it is a time when the garden goes into a slow shut down for the winter months but it need not be that way. At first I wondered what there was in the garden that I could photograph and share with you this week. Everywhere I looked I saw chewed yellowing decaying leaves - it was then I came to my senses - if I was interested to see how the leaves change, hopefully so will you.

Since they emerged, young, fresh and vigorous in the spring, the leaves have served their purpose - absorbing what sunshine we get, converting it into energy in the form of nutrients to both power the plants' growth and to lay

down a store to support the early spring growth of next season. While some plants may be shutting down, towards a winter dormancy, others are just awakening to take advantage of the autumn moisture, converting any sunshine we may get but, more importantly to the evolution of these autumn flowering bulbous plants, would be the late flying pollinators such as hoverflies that appear in masses. Cyclamen are among the plants that flower in late summer into autumn. The cover picture shows a silver-leaved form of **Cyclamen hederifolium** growing in perfect combination with the patterned leaves of **Hepatica nobilis** and yes, the artist within me could not resist adding some colour to the title page by adding a couple of Rhododendron leaves that had taken on autumn colours and fallen nearby.



As so much of the garden is coming towards the end of a seasonal cycle the bulbs are just about to start theirs.



The previous picture is of the U-shaped sand plunge bed across the end of a bulb house - this used to be for pots but more recently I have been planting bulbs and seed directly into the sand. There are no labels here so we may not know exactly what the plants are but the intention here is just to enjoy and perhaps be surprised by what comes up.

After writing last week's Bulb Log the temperatures crashed and I decided that I should not delay giving the first of the autumn storms any longer so the hose pipe came out.

I used a spray head to soak the sand in the plunge going over it many times allowing some time in between to allow the moisture to soak all the way through the sand.



As I sprayed I was aware, that due to the water spray, the temperature of the bulb house was dropping even lower, as it would be in the sand with the addition of all that cold water. It is the drop in temperature that first initiates the bulbs roots to emerge - the presence of moisture allows them to grow out rapidly.



As I sprayed the sand some bulbs were washed to the surface so I simply pushed a hole with a finger and popped the bulb back down.



Onto the bulb house – I estimate that I have re-potted less than half of the pots this year so I have been spending the last few days removing as much as I can of the dried remains of last season's growth away from the top of the pots. The danger with leaving these dried remains is when they absorb the moisture I am applying rot will set in - this in itself would not be an issue but when the new growth emerges any grey moulds that form on the remains will cross-infect the young leaves.



Aware that it is at least one and perhaps two years since some of these pots were last replanted they could be very low in nutrients so I have decided to add a small sprinkle of a fine granule Grow More, NPK 7.7.7 type fertiliser on the top of each pot. Thinking back to the problem of poor root growth I noted in some of the pots that I did tip out this summer I think the addition of some low level nitrogen with the watering will help the formation of good roots. I collected a pinch of the pellets between my fingers scattering some on to each pot without any precise measurement – adding more or less depending on the size of the pot. This small container was filled to the bottom of the ridge around the top and the drop that you see shows the amount that I used between both the bulb houses.



I spent some time watering the pots going around repeatedly until I felt they were well soaked.



Even then when I lifted one of the pots from the plunge I could see that while the pot was heavy indicating it was well soaked the sand of the plunge below the pot still had dry areas. I am determined not to repeat the mistake I made last year, when I feel I did not ensure that the plunges were fully soaked, so this year I am making sure to thoroughly soak everything. As long as you have good drainage both in the plunge and the potting mix you cannot over do the watering at this stage but you can under do it and risk having dry areas that will hinder the growth of a good root system.



When I replaced the staging I built in a drainage system that allows me to catch and recycle all the water that drains from the plunges – this not only helps conserve our water but more importantly recycles any nutrients that are in solution.



I continue to flood the pots using this recycled water until I am sure that both the potting mix and the sand plunge are fully moist.

It is sometimes difficult to pick all the dried remains off the gravel before I water so I will continue removing it over the next few weeks as I watch for the first signs of new growth.



In the garden the light cast by the low sun brings drama in the form of highlights and shade to the aging foliage with the moss capped antique stone mushroom adding some sculptural interest to the scene. Unlike the other greenery in this picture which is dying back the moss will continue to grow taking advantage of the cooler moist conditions of the autumn and winter months – growth only stops in freezing conditions.



Moss grows on most of the rocks in our garden eventually and this can be seen as either an advantage or a nuisance.

It is a nuisance if you want to see the fine rocks and if you leave the moss it will eventually hide all the rock under its green carpet.

The moss can be seen as an advantage when it acts as a hospitable seed bed such as you can see below where there are both Cotoneaster and Sorbus seedlings growing in this moist environment.



If we did not intervene the moss would enable a whole soil to form aided by the establishment of such trees and other plants that would grow upon it.

I have used this as an advantage in other parts of the garden, such as the moss covered rock island with Pinguicola I showed in [Bub log 3315](#), but in this instance I have removed the trees giving me some lovely seedlings of **Sorbus hupehensis** to pass on.





We can take some pleasure from observing the collapsing foliage of **Podophyllum and Glaucidium** knowing that it is not wasted but simply retreating for the winter drawing unused nutrients to the underground storage ready for next season's growth. Any remains will eventually find their way to our compost heap where they too will be

recycled back onto the garden.



Looking carefully we can also see that this is the time for seed on many plants.



Glaucidium palmatum album seed pods which will, in my experience, produce white seedlings.



Trillium kurabayashii, with its leaves all but eaten away by slugs and snails, has a plump ripe seedpod.



I used to collect all the seeds in our garden and sow it into pots but now I am much more likely to leave it to self-sow naturally or perhaps I will pluck a ripe capsule scattering the seeds somewhere else in the garden.



Trillium seed capsules do not open from the top they simply drop off and disintegrate on the ground as both of these are in the process of doing. The seeds have a treat to encourage ants or other insects to help disperse them - in our garden it is usually wasps that fly off with them however there seems to be a distinct lack of wasps so far this year.



Chewing insects and molluscs also help break down foliage— here they have eaten away the soft cells exposing the harder structural elements of the leaf.



The size of these **Cardiocrinum giganteum** leaves suggest that this one will flower next year.



The tangled scrambling stems of **Corydalis davidii** are still topped by long-spurred sharp yellow flowers bringing some colour.



A volunteer plant of **Pseudofumaria lutea** also shines yellow in the sunshine.



So rather than dismissing retreating autumn leaves we should look and enjoy the beauty of nature and follow the lesson of recycling – any remains or leaves removed will be added to the compost heaps and returned to the ground.



As herbaceous leaves decay in autumn some plants like this **Epimedium** have harder leaves that will stay green all through the winter until the new growth comes through then the old leaves change colour and die back. The first **Colchicum** flowers are now appearing as they start their annual growth cycle.



***Paeonia cambessedesii* seed pod**

Rather than viewing autumn as a time of die back we could read it as a time of renewal as the plump seed pods on *Paeonia cambessedesii* carry the promise of new growth to come – gardening is a game of patience as even freshly-sown seed of this species will not put up its first seed leaf until the second spring. Autumn is the end of a growth cycle for many plants but it is also the start of the season for many bulbs and already we have the first few flowers on *Crocus*, *Colchicum* and *Cyclamen* to enjoy with the promise of *Narcissus* joining them to give us flowering interest in the bulb houses all through the winter.....