



BULB LOG 3421st August 2013



Snails are plentiful in our garden and we have an on-going campaign to try and reduce their numbers to minimise the damage they do. I observed this one munching on a Saxifraga and to be fair it was eating the dead rotting matter and not green living material – that is not always the case.

Gentians are providing some colour especially the septemfida types.

Crocus pelistericus

We speak about Mediterranean type bulbs entering into dormancy in the summer months but like so many of the terms we use this should be qualified. In my observation many are not fully dormant - they may be independent of external food or moisture but the buds continue to develop very slowly utilising the supplies stored in the bulb itself. These *Crocus pelistericus* corms will not flower or produce leaves until next spring but the buds are slowly growing.



Bulb house

I have replaced the glass down the hedge side of the bulb house with double wall polycarbonate. The main reason for this was that I had a number of cracked panes of glass and it was easier to source the polycarbonate.

This removes the risk of me breaking the glass when I have to squeeze down between the hedge and the bulb house for the annual hedge trim.

With all this extra work we are undertaking this summer I have not had time to re-pot many of the bulbs – I have simply tidied up the pots by removing the dried remains of last year's leaves and stems. It is still my belief that you get the best rate of increase from your bulbs if you re-pot them every year but I have also learned that as long as you have a good compost mix they can be left for up to three years, without deterioration, provided you supplement the nutrient as required. Last year many of us faced a terrible cold wet summer with little seasonal change through autumn and early winter. Because there was no defined temperature drop, which I believe is the *main* trigger for them to start into growth, many of the autumn and winter flowering bulbs flowered late but I also think that the absence of the temperature gradient resulted in the root growth being slow to initiate and hence a poorer root system developed.



This summer has been very different as we experienced something of a heat wave. I do not foresee the same issue occurring this year – in fact we can already detect that distinct chill at nights even though the daytime temperatures remain higher than average – this is the temperature gradient.

With only around ten days before I soak the bulbs I cannot resist checking in a few pots.

These **Sternbergia lutea** bulbs show classic signs of an elongated shape that they want to be planted deeper in the pot.

It is not simply a case of bulbs requiring a certain amount of soil above them that can be precisely

quantified - it is that they are seeking a particular environment of moisture level and temperature that suite them. This will vary according to your local climate, the type of compost, the type of pot, the way they are plunged, etc. The bulbs will always indicate if they would be better planted a bit deeper by the shape, a nice globular classic bulb shape indicates the bulb is happy at that planting depth, elongated bulbs indicate that you should plant them deeper. If you cannot plant them any deeper it may be that you should be giving them some more moisture.



Sternbergia lutea bulbs

Despite seeking a bit more depth these bulbs have grown relatively well: I discovered when I removed the outer tunic that some had produced good offsets. One thing that was confirmed to me as I had to move all the pots to build the new plunges was the lack of roots extending beyond the pot. In a more typical year the bulb roots probe through the drainage holes deep into the sand – this year there were very few that had done that confirming my

theory that the lack of a temperature gradient last autumn hindered root growth. I had some suspicions last spring that the roots had not grown too well when many of the Narcissus and Crocus had browning at the leaf tips – this is a strong indication that something is not right below ground.



Tulipa stapfii bulbs

Because of the root growth issue I tentatively checked through some pots expecting to see small bulbs but was pleasantly surprised to find for the most part good sized bulbs. Even within a small pot bulbs can fare differently – in the picture below you will see the bulb on the right has grown perfectly.



Tulips are among the many bulbs that completely replace themselves every year like the one on the right. On the left the old bulb partially remains - for some reason it has not passed all its reserves on the new bulb which sits below it - also a secondary growth bulb has formed on the remains of the old scale. The evidence suggests to me that this bulb is trying to go deeper. It was nearer the surface than the other bulb as I often tier my bulbs to get more into a pot.



Tulipa stapfii

A healthy Tulip bulb with the outside tunic removed shows the dried stem from last season's growth sitting beside the new bulb – the remains of last season's bulb have shrivelled down to just the tunic at the base of the old stem with the dried remnants of last season's roots at the base.



A few years ago I introduced my 'air-pot' experiment - this is where I sink a small clay pot filled with gravel into the centre of a plastic pot. My reasoning for this was I often found when re-potting bulbs susceptible to wet rot that it was the bulbs in the centre that suffered most while those around the perimeter of the pot were healthy. This was because there was better drainage and so more air in the compost around the edges.



My air pot experiment was to introduce the same degree of drainage into the centre of the pot.



The experiment has worked – this is a *Fritillaria* that often suffered from rot in our conditions but is doing very well in its air pot.



Some Fritillara, mainly the Chinese species, are often in root very early and so should not be kept as dry through the summer as other species.



Narcissus romieuxii bulbs

I had worries that the Narcissus bulbs would not flower so well this year as a result of the poor root growth. Narcissus are one of the bulbs that break down into many small bulbs if, for whatever reason, they do not have a good growing season but the few pots I checked indicate that there are plenty of flowering sized bulbs.



A number of people contacted me about my 'flan troughs' and my use of broken concrete block for landscaping them so I share a few more pictures of three more that I made from sand/cement mix (left over from the bulb house plunge footings). My key principals in the landscaping of a trough or raised bed are to gain height and to make it interesting from all sides – above and below are the same trough.





Again the pictures above and below are both sides of one trough.



You do not have to be constrained by the shape of the container – have some rock extending over the edge.



The compost I use in these troughs is just sharp sand, I sometimes add some bone meal when I add cuttings.





Cyclamen and Hepatica

One of my favourite plantings is this *Cyclamen hederifolium* flowering with the *Hepatica* leaves – it was pure chance as both have self-seeded into the gravel.



It is remarkable that these *Cyclamen* flowers will not produce their seed for a year – look at the bottom of the picture and you will see the fat seedpods the result of last year's flowers. I cannot think of another bulbous plant that waits so long to release its seeds.....