

# Newsletter

**North American Rock Garden Society  
Berkshire Chapter November 2010**

**Next Meeting:  
Saturday, November 6  
Annual Luncheon**

Luncheon 12 Noon  
Main Dining Room  
**Red Lion Inn**  
30 Main Street  
Stockbridge, Massachusetts  
Followed by our Program at the BBG

**Sydney Eddison**

**"Change: The Passage of Time in  
the Garden"**

Sydney Eddison has written six other books on gardening. For her work as a writer, gardener, and lecturer, she received the Connecticut Horticultural Society's Gustav A. L. Melquist Award in 2002; the New England Wild Flower Society's Kathryn S. Taylor Award in 2005; and in 2006, The Federated Garden Clubs of Connecticut's Bronze Medal. Her garden has been featured in magazines and on television. A former scene designer and drama teacher, Eddison lectures widely and continues to teach a course on color at the New York Botanical Garden, Bronx, New York.



## A Garden by Accretion



I put the blame squarely on Ronald Beckwith for starting it. I was introduced to Ron in 1974 at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, where he was superintendent of the research greenhouses of the botany department. At the time, I was a post-doctoral research fellow working on a grant investigating aging in blowflies as a corollary to aging in general, e.g., sensitivity to taste declines in older adult blowflies as it does in older humans. Ron awakened, aroused and encouraged my interest in all plants, especially in alpinists.

Shortly thereafter I joined the Connecticut Chapter of (N)ARGS and met Ev Whittemore and Ed Leimseider, whose gardens were eye-openers for me. They generously gave me many plants to start my garden. Ev was involved in the seed exchange at the time and was growing

thousands of pots of seedlings under lights in the basement of her home. I soon learned that she grew this many seedling pots every year as her usual modus operandi. Ev goes to extremes most of us would not bother with in order to satisfy her alpine plants' needs – including moving her garden from Massachusetts to the Asheville-Hendersonville area of North Carolina, in order to have a site with less summer heat and less winter cold, so that she could grow a greater range of plants. She goes so far as to place small electric fans in her garden to blow air over heat sensitive alpiners during hot weather! After filling her first garden in North Carolina with plants, she sold that property and bought another nearby (in Penrose, North Carolina) in order to begin filling a second garden.

Ed Leimseider, now deceased, had a mature woodland garden in Westport, Connecticut. I came home from his garden with a car trunk full of plants. I still have the *Shortia galacifolia* Ev gave to me and the purple *Iris tectorum* from Ed.

Elliott Jessen is a longtime friend who I met in 1974 through the Connecticut Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. He has given me many woody plants including conifers, rhododendrons, maples and, of course,



*Rhododendron smirnowii*

magnolias. Over the years, Elliott and I have undertaken botanizing-by-car trips to the Rocky Mountains (three trips, including Colorado, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming), to the southern Appalachians in North and South Carolina, and to the Bruce Peninsula/Manitoulin Island in Canada as well as the west coast of

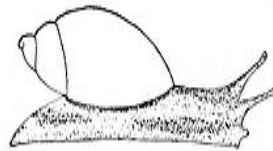
Newfoundland. Elliott and I travel well together.

To me, my garden is more than just collection/accumulation of pretty plants but, also, it is a collection of memories and fond thoughts of friends, fellow gardeners and nurserymen. I have plants from so many individuals growing throughout the garden, and I am reminded of them when I see these plants: *Rhododendron smirnowii* from Linc Foster, *R. yakushimanum* (and many more) from Elinor Clarke, *R. bureavioides* from Fred Serbin, *R. keiskei* from Guy Nearing along with some of his hybrids, assorted hybrids by and from Gus Mehlquist and Toni Angelini, purchased plants from Jim Cross and Don and Hazel Smith, epimediums from Harold Epstein, and many more from other generous gardeners. Sadly, most of the plants I purchased at our chapter's plant sales that were grown by Norman Singer and Geoffrey Charlesworth are "alas, no longer whinnying with us" and only their labels remain as mementos. My favorite conifer in my garden, now 20+ years old and 12 feet tall, is a *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* grown from a cutting from Nick Nickou's magnificent specimen and rooted for me by Lud Hoffmann. The deer like it too.

This is a complete change of topic, but I just had to add it in:

A couple of years ago, Joe Strauch gave me a 35 mm slide of a terrestrial snail he had photographed in his garden in Lenox, Massachusetts. I did not know what it was.

Recently a fellow at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst identified it as a native snail named *Novisuccinea ovalis* (Say, 1817), the oval ambersnail.



This snail has a very interesting twist. It is the intermediate host for the trematode flatworm, *Leucochloridium variae* McIntosh, 1932. Trematodes are a class of flatworms (aka flukes) that are all parasites of mollusks and vertebrate animals, and

have complex life cycles involving both asexual reproduction in the intermediate host (the mollusk) and sexual reproduction in the definitive host (the vertebrate).

The life cycle of *L. varia* is truly weird. The sexually reproducing adult worms live in the caeca and bursa Fabricius of birds (e.g., the American robin). The caeca are a pair of pouches off the end of the small intestine and contain bacteria that aid digestion. The bursa Fabricius is a dorsal diverticulum near the end of the gut (the cloaca) that produces B lymphocytes, which synthesize circulating antibodies to foreign antigens. This latter structure is named for Hieronymus Fabricius (1533-1619) who discovered and described it (published posthumously in 1621). He had no idea of its function.

The worm eggs pass out in the bird's feces, land on plant leaves, and are consumed by passing *N. ovalis*. Once inside the snail the eggs hatch, releasing larvae (miracidium, pl. miracidia) that digest their way through the gut wall into the snail tissues where they transform into the next larval stage, the mother sporocyst. The mother sporocysts develop brood chambers, which contain germ balls that, in turn, develop into daughter sporocysts. The daughter sporocysts grow and become highly branched and extend into the snail's tentacle (preferring the left tentacle!). The sporocyst-invaded tentacle becomes greatly enlarged and sausage shaped, and the surface becomes transparent. The portion of the daughter sporocyst within the tentacle has green and brown to orange rings, and pulsates continuously in daylight. The behavior of the snail changes, too. Instead of seeking dark hiding places during the day, it remains in the open. The movement and the color of the tentacles are attractive to birds that peck at them and ingest the infective stage, the encysted cercaria (= metacercaria), within the daughter sporocyst. Each daughter sporocyst contains about 300 metacercariae. Once in the bird's gut the cercariae break out of the cyst and take up residence in their usual haunts. Sometimes nestlings become infected when their

parents feeding them infected snail tentacles. Yummy.

*Cliff Desch*

## Garden Visits

Rather than preach to the choir about the value of visiting other gardens let me plunge right in and tell you about some New England gardens we visited recently and what I learned from them.

### *Garden #1: Extroversion as a gardening philosophy*

By most standards this garden is enormous, occupying several acres on a moderate slope. The largest section is downslope from the none-too-small house and the primary axis of its layout is perpendicular to the slope and thus parallel to the house. As a whole, the garden is clearly inspired by classic, formal, European estate gardens and it features much of the gamut of traditional garden features. There are garden rooms, long perennial borders, topiaries, a long allee, water features, and more. Several portions have been developed in collaboration with



professional garden designers and form attractive subunits within the much larger, more complex whole. There are impressive views, abundant stonework, and the successful use of mass plantings. Overall, the garden conveys the impression of formality without being consistently formal in its structure. European estate gardens celebrated an aristocratic culture of power, wealth, and privilege, now largely and gratifyingly extinct. Likewise, this garden celebrates a modern culture of wealth and power, but it does so in traditional terms that evoke the elites of the past.

On the downside, the garden seems more like a coarse-grained mosaic than an integrated whole - you can almost sniff the glue holding all the different pieces together. There are many good plants, but we looked in vain for the kind of rare plant treasures that tell you where the gardener's heart truly resides. There was also far too much oppression of woody plants. Pleaching, pollarding, espaliering, shearing, etc... are acceptable in moderation, but it is easy to overdo them. Here, few woody plants are allowed to



Stefan & Rosemary's Garden – photo by M. McDonough

develop unmolested, and the effects come at the expense of the natural grace of the plants. The result is a somewhat agitated, rather than a relaxed atmosphere. Though there are benches to sit on, there were few places where I was tempted to pause and contemplate my surroundings. Instead this garden was all about being on the hoof. Several times I found myself imagining how a promenade of Eighteenth Century French aristocrats (powdered wigs, knee breeches, hoop-skirts, servants, and all)

would look so natural in this place... which speaks volumes about the imbalance between display and introspection here.

### ***Garden #2: Formality That Works***

This garden is much smaller, perhaps an acre in size, and is centered about a modest, pleasant antique house. The garden was mostly formal in structure. It surrounded all sides of the house and consisted of a series of well-connected sub-gardens. Linear paths and geometric beds predominated. The plantsmanship was admirable and the plants and beds tastefully maintained. While I normally prefer more naturalistic, more exuberant gardens, I liked this one a lot. Every part of the garden seemed related to the house and its wider setting. Wherever you stood or sat in the garden, you were happy to be there. If the first garden conveyed the impression of "more being less," this garden was a fine example of "less being more."

### ***Garden #3: Garden as Fortress***

"In an unpredictable, meaningless universe, our only hope is to create an island of order where we and our loved ones can be safe (at least for a while) from the tumult and chaos around us." If this was your view of the world, what kind of garden would you create? Perhaps you might create one like the following. This sizable garden is beautifully laid out to complement a house bordered on two sides by open fields. Large informal beds with trees planted in them define much of the garden's border with the fields, but allow for beautiful views in selected places. The plantsmanship is quite good and there is much attractive stonework, especially near the house. But what most strikes the eye is the exquisite care that goes into maintaining the plantings. Plants are groomed or pruned with a degree of precision seldom seen in North American gardens, or anywhere else for that matter. Not a leaf or twig or grass-blade is out of place. Each plant fills its allotted space and no more. This care is lavished equally on all, from tiny trough plants to large trees. Even the bugs, I expect, have their hairs neatly combed and are all wearing clean underwear.

All this discipline and control may sound a tad stifling and so it is. But what makes the garden interesting is the vivid contrast between the order inside and the glimpses of wild nature the gardener allows to enter. Together, garden and surroundings form a living meditation on humankind's never-ending attempts to make nature safe, orderly, obedient, and predictable, an obsession driven as much by our fears as by



Stefan & Rosemary's Garden – photo by M. McDonough

our greed. The gardener is clearly on the side of civilization. I'm rooting for nature all the way, but that does not prevent me from acknowledging the gardener's achievement here.

#### ***Garden #4: Garden as Alternative Universe***

This large (two acres or more), 30+ year old garden is a truly original conception. It is a self-enclosed rectangular "box" isolated at a distance from the house and its surrounding meadows. The "box" is formed by mature hedges and trees which effectively wall off the interior from the outside world. Inside, a strong sense of fantasy prevails. More than once I felt I had just popped down a hole while chasing a White Rabbit and would encounter a large blue Caterpillar on a

mushroom smoking a hookah at any moment. The interior is a series of interconnected garden rooms, each based on its own design theme, that make one feel as if one is passing through a series of tableaux. Creative design touches abound and parts of the garden are lovely. The plantsmanship is good and the garden's age has allowed many of the design concepts to come to maturity. While the garden is old, it is anything but static. Evidence of new planting or new construction was nearly everywhere.

*So why didn't I like it?* The garden's very *originality* was the source of my disquiet. I didn't *like* its isolation from the wider world. The surreal atmosphere is striking, but the cost is a general want of simplicity and elegance. Parts of the garden seem overdesigned and overplanted, as if the gardeners are striving too hard for effects. In addition, many woody plants are overmature and need substantial pruning or replacement. While there was evidence of work everywhere, the garden was plainly not receiving the kind of renewal that mature gardens so often need. The nature of this problem was made clear by the following. It was obvious that there had been storm damage during the past 2-3 winters. Instead of removing badly damaged woody plant stems entirely and letting the plant resprout, or removing the whole plant and replanting, damaged stems were often allowed to remain after severe pruning, even if it might take years of growing for the plant to reestablish a pleasing form. This gave the garden a battered look in places. Further evidence of poor pruning practices added to the dishevelment and made me itch for a pruning saw. Lastly, there was clutter throughout: pots of plants to be planted were strewn about and materials for new projects were piled up here and there. All and all, this is an important and innovative garden let down by lacklustre woody plant management and spotty housekeeping.

#### ***Garden #5: Garden Renewal Done Right***

This is a large, mature garden, mostly centered about a modest house and an adjacent stream valley on a moderate slope. Rosemary and I visit it every year and it has been a wonderful experience to see it change over time. I cannot

take the space to describe it fully, but suffice it to say that this extraordinary garden contains almost every kind of sub-garden you can imagine. There are perennial borders, large expanses of woodland garden, a rock garden, a bog garden, a vegetable garden, lots of pots of tender plants, you name it - it's here. All of these well-designed elements blend informally and come together to form a coherent and lovely whole. By the way, the plantsmanship is outstanding. There are treats for the chlorophyll connoisseur everywhere and these range from trees to trough plants.

In gardens, maturity is a two-edged sword. On the one hand age offers the fruition of design, the attainment of size, grace, and elegance in woody specimen plants, perennial borders, and plantings of all types, and perhaps even the achievement of a gardener's vision. On the other hand there is the ever present danger of stagnation or even decline. Without a commitment to prompt, fearless, and substantive renewal, a mature garden can lose much of what was achieved during its establishment and growth in a few short years, largely through failure to cope with the law of unintended consequences. In this garden, for example, in the last five years or so, much priceless space was lost as the unpruned lower branches of trees and overgrown, large shrubs gradually narrowed paths, cluttered views, and smothered perennials and smaller shrubs alike. As a result, large parts of the garden were becoming cramped, less diverse, and a lot darker. We wondered whether the gardeners sensed these changes, especially as they became more and more pronounced every year.

Well, this year everything was different. The woodland sections of the garden were much lighter, more spacious, and formerly languishing herbaceous plantings were rejuvenating. Clearly the gardeners had seen the problem and responded. Many trees with obtruding lower branches had been subtly limbed up, letting light and air into areas where little or none had penetrated the year before. Overgrown shrubs were pruned (or better yet) removed entirely, creating much needed space at eye level. The garden felt like it was breathing again. This was

renewal on the grand scale, but it was major change done so sensitively that it was hard to see exactly how the gardeners had achieved their purposes.

#### ***Garden #6: The Fields of Elysium***

The last garden is perhaps two acres in size. It is loosely rectangular in shape with an old farmhouse at one end. I mention it here in the context of garden boundaries. Like most old farmhouses, the house was originally bounded by open fields or pastures that began only a very short distance away. A central problem in creating a large garden in such a setting is how does one relate the garden to the wider context of field or pasture without losing its connection to the house. Many might choose not to address the issue at all. For instance, one could wall the garden off entirely from its context by establishing hedges or by erecting a fence (see Garden #4). Others might elect to do the opposite and have the garden beds border the open fields directly with minimal separation. Here the gardeners have solved the boundary problem brilliantly through the sensitive use of stonework and woody plants that together form a permeable barrier that lets light into the garden, provides beautiful views of the surrounding



fields, and yet maintains the garden as distinct from its surroundings. A striking touch is a simple mowed path that leads from the garden into the fields to a small grove of Pin Oaks (*Quercus palustris*) with a sitting area at its center. This extension of the garden into the fields connects the two in an entirely unexpected way... and it allows one to view the garden and house together at a distance, a unique and lovely perspective. Within the garden is a mixture of formal and informal elements that mix well-chosen woody and herbaceous plants that provide a wide variety of textures, colors, and moods. Paths lead to well-placed sitting areas that encourage contemplation and/or reverie. The plantsmanship is excellent and maintenance is impeccable. Beauty and charm abound and it all seems somehow effortless - perhaps the ultimate secret that separates great gardens from the merely good.. If I was an ancient Roman I would say that some god favors this spot. In fact, as a modern-day American I say exactly the same thing - some god favors this spot!.

***So what did I learn or relearn or unlearn - if anything?***

1) *Plantsmanship makes a big difference.* Not a revelation, but always worth saying again. Even spectacular garden designs underwhelm and disappoint if the plantsmanship is on the garden-center/Horticulture magazine level... Likewise, superior plantsmanship amplifies the effects of good design many times over.

2) *Woody plant management is critical.* The gardens discussed here all achieve much of their impact via well-managed woody plants. As time passes, woody plants will come to dominate our gardens... whether we like it or not. Thus, unless we exclude them altogether, woody plant placement, pruning, and renewal are skills essential to helping any garden achieve its full potential. The poor use or maintenance of woody plants is ultimately crippling, and the problem only grows worse as the garden ages. The primacy of woody plants is sad news for those who wish to think that fiddling with *perennials* is the talent most required for good gardening, but I didn't invent the facts, I'm just reporting them.

3) *Garden Renewal and us?* Nothing is more important to a garden as it ages as fearless renewal. In one of the gardens mentioned here (#5), a bold renewal transformed a garden that was stagnating into a fresh, living creation. We all need to look at our gardens and ask if we should, as it says in the gospels, "Go and do thou likewise..."

4) *Boundaries...* When Adam and Eve got themselves tossed out of the Garden of Eden for bad behavior, God placed an Angel with a flaming sword (the World's first underpaid Security Guard) at the edge of the garden to prevent the miscreants from coming back. We need to pay similar, sharp-eyed attention to the boundaries of our gardens and watch out for miscreants - who may turn out to be us instead of the usual suspects like deer or woodchucks. With respect to garden boundaries, too often we get lazy and settle for the obvious or the cheap, even when we have many possibilities. Our last garden (#6) shows us that creative, well-designed garden boundaries can illumine an entire garden and be the difference between the transcendent and the merely competent.

5) Lastly, I've concluded we all need to go back to our own gardens *as visitors* and ask, "Just what are these crazy people trying to accomplish here anyway?" As kids say these days, "Good luck with that!"

*Stefan Cover*

*Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the October newsletter of The New England Chapter of NARGS, and has been modified a bit for us by the author. Stefan, and his wife, Rosemary Monahan, live and garden, or perhaps more aptly, live TO garden, in Stow, MA. The two photographs that are not attributed were taken in gardens which generally meet Stefan's definition of 'well designed,' but whose owners prefer to remain anonymous. Stefan is an ant specialist who loves magnolias, not unlike our very own mite specialist who loves rhododendrons.*





## Those Siskiyou Boys

by Phyllis Gustafson

When I became friends with Lawrence Crocker in the late 1960's I occasionally visited on cold wet days knowing that I might find him home with time to spend showing the neophyte whatever plant or publication was new. I loved being there asking



Steve Doonan and Boyd Kline

questions, and learning about rock garden plants from this very knowledgeable, unassuming and quiet man. I felt really at home when I was allowed in the sacred dining room where he was working on the entire ARGS seed exchange. Lawrence served as seed exchange chairman from 1967-69. I and many other chapter members got our first exchange seed from him. Looking through his garden you would never go home empty handed. We all got great ferns an on- going love of his and for a while tried New Zealand mountain plants when he went through that phase.

Lawrence (1905-2002) was introduced to the plants and the places they grow in the mountains of Southern Oregon, Northern California by



Lawrence Crocker with Trowel

John Heckner (1882-1938), botanist and later nurseryman. He wrote an article about him in the ARGS bulletin April 1965, PP. 47-48.

Boyd and Lawrence worked together in the Medford Post Office and both enjoyed collecting agates. While out in the field Lawrence started showing Boyd lilies which he fell in love with and started growing by the 100's and still loves today. They also started to study the smaller mountain plants. When Lawrence and Boyd wanted to learn more about native plants they introduced themselves to Marcel Le Piniec. Marcel, a plantsman had come from New York to the Rogue Valley because he had heard about and wanted to explore for more of the wide variety of plants that grow here. The three of them would travel the rough roads of the Siskiyou, study the plants, collect a few and gather much seed to try to grow. Propagating, trading and growing from seed, soon Boyd and Lawrence had their gardens full. From this they started Siskiyou Rare Plant Nursery in 1964. They shipped many plants to ARGS members in Seattle, Portland and on the east coast and later around the world.

The ARGS meanwhile wanted to honor explorers and growers that bring us so many of the plants we love to grow. In 1969 they named an award the Marcel Le Piniec Award and gave the first award to Boyd and Lawrence.

I, like many others, found hiking with either of these guys was a challenge, even when I was young. Lawrence could beat anyone up the hill and Boyd just kept on going no matter how far





Lawrence Crocker and Marcel LePiniec

or steep. I shared a cantaloupe with him one time when he carried it in a sack over his shoulder to the top of Mt. Eddy. Very busy with many family duties this affable man still found time to spend time showing the rest of us *Phlox adsurgens*, *Lewisia cotyledon* and *L. leeana* forms, and of course all sorts of bulbs among many other plants, trees and shrubs.

The members of the Siskiyou Chapter are thankful to Eloise Garcia a local SRPN customer and ARGs member who got Lawrence and Boyd to help her organize our chapter on March 25, 1970. Each year Boyd and Lawrence were the leaders of many chapter field trips to the mountains to see the special plants. Other plant enthusiasts have come from around the world to visit 'the boys' and the nursery. Often a group of us would be off to the mountains with visitors in tow. Boyd has been out with his son Curt, in this his 92 year, to see as many plants as they can. Boyd is still enjoying the lilies and looking for something new. Curt is taking pictures and our lucky chapter gets to see them occasionally.

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## À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu

By Dean Evans

Peter George asked me to write something about a member who has passed on. I have had no call to write anything for quite a number of years, so I am a little rusty, needless to say. But I'll look back in my memory and see what I can find. First let me commend Peter for his continued work editing

the newsletter. He for some reason has always enjoyed my writing style. Of course, as a good businessman, it's probably helpful to be able to say that some of his best friends are Baptist!

About all I can do is speak of incidents, impressions, helpful information and the occasional kindness shown me. I have found in life that by the time I had spent enough time with a person to become a friend they had already filed an order of protection against me. It may surprise those that read this to find out that I am really a very shallow person. I believe that there is Dean Evans and people who want to be Dean Evans. It's not that I am very successful, talented or accomplished. It's just that people recognize that I am a past master at entertaining myself. Of course this haughtiness takes constant reinforcement so I worked up a lever-activated linkage assembly with a baseball glove attached. By merely pulling on a cord I can pat myself on the back and a simulated voice says "What a guy"!

But since the annual banquet is to be held at the Red Lion this year let me try to recall my first banquet, which was also held there. I saw in the center of the room a table with two available seats. As I had only attended two or three meetings up to that point, I didn't really know anyone. I sat down at a round table with sparkling white linen tablecloth and matching place settings. I was impressed. I knew this was a big step up from the oilcloth that I use. Orlan Gaeddert, who I later came to know well, was seated directly across from me with his wife. Orlan was telling me much of what he knew about plants and I was telling him a story that I was trying to perfect for future use in a larger venue. As she was forced to listen, Orlan's wife had an expression on her face that mirrored someone experiencing acid reflux- the poor dear. I didn't think she would be willing to try an old family remedy derived from the boiling down of beaver glands although I had a bottle behind the seat of my truck.

About this time a tall older woman approached and stood behind the remaining chair. She asked if she might join us. Tamsin Goggin, who was seated next to Orlan's wife, said "By all means

Betty, please.” When I looked at her I realized it was Betty Corning, the wife of the mayor of Albany, Erastus Corning. He served in this position for 42 years. He was a member of the Daniel O’Connell political machine which was as powerful as the Daley machine in Chicago. The Albany machine, along with two precincts in Illinois, made it possible for John F Kennedy to be elected President. (For more on the Corning era, simply Google Mayor Erastus Corning) I was intimidated by her presence and proximity to me. After conversing with others at the table she turned to me and asked who I was and also where I worked. And I responded that I worked for the State of NY in Albany. She knew my Commissioner, along with his wife. I immediately switched the conversation to the clematis that was named after her. I had seen the Betty Corning and its clone Duchess of Albany outside of the Victorian greenhouse at the NY Botanical Garden. They were truly beautiful plants. The blossoms were bell shaped, bigger



*Clematis viticella* 'Betty Corning'

than your thumb and very lovely, not garish like other clematis. I said to her “How did you happen to find that plant?” She said she was walking down the street in a section of Albany that was destroyed to make way for the Empire State Plaza. One of the homes had a large set of steps up to a landing for the main entrance of the house, thereby creating a flat surface on either side of the steps. On the right side of the steps a trellis had been built. And on this trellis grew a clematis that she recognized was unique in her experience. She knocked on a number of doors until she found someone who stated that they had bought it from an ordinary plant vendor and

knew nothing about it other than that. Betty asked if she could take some cuttings and the woman said she could as long as she didn’t kill the plant. In time she showed it to other knowledgeable plant people and it was recognized as something previously unknown.

I had heard that she was a real classy lady and an excellent gardener and our talk confirmed that to me. But I wanted to see just how smart she was, for my own satisfaction. So at some point in the conversation I said “I have always fancied myself a gentleman among stable boys and a stable boy among gentleman.” And I watched her eyes intently. She had interesting gray eyes with little black lines of correlation in the iris. Her pupils contracted and she studied me. And then she said “You have the best of both worlds, don’t you?” I had opened myself to be ridiculed and she did just the opposite, proving to me that she had what my people would call breeding. She earned my respect

## Fissures for *Eritrichium*

Text by Harvey Wrightman – photos by Harvey & Esther Wrightman

Twenty years ago I was enthralled with offering of *Eritrichium howardii* seed in Jim & Jenny Archibald’s North American collections list, “...Dead Indian Pass NW of Cody. 2800m. Limestone gravel patches and rock fissures...this is certainly not impossible to cultivate well...of course it needs superb drainage and protection from winter wet...Silver rosettes packed into dense cushions, to 10 cm. across, covered with the purest blue flowers on 5 cm. stems. (10 seeds @ \$7) Taking that sitting down, one packet was enough, and I don’t recall any success. 10 years on I was able to germinate and plant to a tufa piece a seedling that was very vigorous and gradable, *E. howardii* ‘blue sky’. More have followed and the plants raised from cuttings are far easier to handle. In Jim’s notes there is valuable information:

1. The preference for rich, limestone-derived soil (mineral rich) and growing

in narrow crevices (keeping the crown dry and provides a cool root run).

2. The location near Dead Indian Pass, though relatively high at 2800 m., is very hot in summer. This is to the good, as many *Eritrichium* sp. are not so heat tolerant.



*Eritrichium nanum* var. *lanceolatum*

The notes about culture in Europe are not so useful. We can grow it outside without protection. This point was recently brought home to me when John Mitchell, the supervisor for the alpine section of RBG, Edinburgh commented on the range of plants we grow outside that they cannot, and so must grow as specimens in pots. Winter wet is the main problem. One coping strategy for such conditions is to plant directly in/on tufa, and indeed, the RBG had just bought a load for that purpose. You can still fail with tufa if you don't adjust, (radicalize), your methods. Humans are creatures of habit and we dislike challenges to our approved practices. But Jim's notes say it simply and best, "...Limestone gravel patches and rock fissures". He also noted that they had collected seed from plants they had grown – a sign of hope for those of us with no experience. In the same list was *Eritrichium nanum* var. *aretioides* from both Colorado and Wyoming. Most interesting are the different soil conditions. On Pike's Peak, soils are a "granite grit" vs. those of the Big Horn Mts., "...exposed, stony ridges on hard limestone". My recollection is masses of *E. nanum* growing on fertile, rocky pastures on Hunt Mt. in the Big Horn's. The soil was actually a heavy, silt/loam and would grow

an excellent vegetable garden. The two collections are not as different as the soil data



*E. nanum* growing on fertile, rocky pastures

would suggest. I have plants of both and they grow equally well. As Jim notes, "...While more difficult than *E. howardii*, the N. American races seem easier than those from the Alps... the classic arctic-alpine of the N. hemisphere. Purest blue flowers on silver-haired cushions." I have only been growing them for ~ 3 years, but in a narrow, elevated clay crevice, the plants have grown much better than I expected, with 3 of the 7 seedlings surviving both summer and winter. Though *e. nanum* is more sensitive, I think that we will find a hardier plant among all the seedlings we grow much as what happened with *E. howardii* 'blue sky'. The sight of masses of *E. nanum* growing with *Dodecatheon conjugens*, *Douglasia montana* and *Aquilegia jonesi*, essentially in what is used as pasture for sheep, is much different idea than we might imagine, but so it is. At least here, one can see the plant's need for a richer soils and its acceptance of some competition – it may be that there are co-operative benefits involved too. Often, I think, we treat plants as solitary specimens/individuals when they more likely need the benefit of association. Currently, I grow *Eritrichium* using 2 methods. With freshly rooted cuttings, a compact "brush" of roots radiates from the lower stem. In this case, it is easy to drill a small (12mm) hole in tufa to a depth ~ 4cm. with the cutting in place, the hole is filled with Spanish River Carbonatite which provides nutrition, and the top part is capped with clay to prevent wash-out. The clay does not bother the stem and

preventing wash-out is important. One may also “smear graft” a rooted cutting onto the tufa. It will quickly root into the stone. The tufa does slow down growth, but the plants are quite healthy.



*E. nanum* seedlings in crevice

The other method applies to any flat-surfaced stone – in my case it is tufa that is layered like sandstone and splits easily on those reed lines. Two or more perfectly aligned pieces are made. A thin layer of clay is trowelled onto one side. The plants, either seedlings or cuttings are set on the clay with the roots splayed out. The pieces are pressed together so that there are no air voids, and then set into the garden or trough. The caveat being to create a thin crevice no more than 12 mm wide. The plants grow faster with this technique, but still remain in character – thinner is better.

So, with reasonable success with these 2 species, I'd like to try others. The Chinese *Chionocharis* sp. in particular are what I have in mind. So far, the problem has been germination; i.e., none! While it's easy to play “blame the seed collector”, John Mitchell said his experience has been the same – none, nil – even when they brought back plants from China with seed attached. I have no idea what the problem is, but hope we overcome it. John said that the *Chionocharis* should grow as easily as *E. howardii*. We owe a lot to the seed collectors who endure many hardships for little financial gain. They are modern day hunter/gatherers. If it weren't for the self-rewards they receive, we would be limited to selective breeding programs

and have very little really new plants to excite our minds.



*Chionocharis hookeri*

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## The Glory of Silver Saxifrages

Text and Photographs by David Sellars

“The encrusted or Silver Saxifrages make up a race so far ahead of every other in general value that a rock garden can be glorious with nothing else and without them could not be really glorious at all.”

This marvelous statement, attributed to Reginald Farrer in 1919, reflects the popularity of Silver Saxifrages in the early days of rock gardening. For reasons unclear to me, Silver Saxifrages are not grown as widely today even though they exhibit excellent year-round foliage, are pest and disease resistant, flower profusely and are relatively easy to grow,

Rex Murfitt of Victoria, British Columbia was recently in the process of rejuvenating his large collection and he generously gave me over 50 silver saxes to plant out. Many of the plants are rare in Canada and include *S. Monarch*, *S. Minima Glauca*, *S. St John's*, *S. callosa Albida*, *S. farreri*, and *S. burnatii*.

Our rock garden is located on a long, curving

bank about 10 feet high. The underlying soil is clay, so my basic construction method for new rock garden beds is to develop a granular fill layer at least 2 feet thick on top of the clay either by widening the bank or excavation into the bank.



Using Landscape Cloth in Bed Preparation

For the new sax bed I started by digging out the clay soil from a section of the bank and I backfilled with sand with a wide gradation from crusher fines up to quarter inch pieces. Some peat-based growing mix was worked into the sand - less than 10% of the total volume. I lined the upslope side of the excavation with landscape fabric to prevent nearby rhododendron roots getting into the bed and to discourage moles. Several years ago I used landscape fabric to totally enclose a pure sand bed for growing *Androsaces*. The landscape fabric helps maintain a relatively fungus-free zone. As long as you use a thick high-grade fabric it seems to work well. Saxifrages are not as fussy as *Androsaces*, so I am not so concerned with native soil in the mix but landscape cloth definitely helps to exclude roots of nearby woody plants.

The rocks in the photos are pieces of tufa laid out in a "crazy paving" pattern to create random crevices. I planted the saxes into the crevices and filled the crevices with pieces of tufa and small rocks that were tufa colored. The end result I wanted was for the bed to look like one large broken rock outcrop with randomly spaced plants growing in cracks. Later I planted some saxes directly into the tufa.



Planted Sax Bed

Rex Murfitt and Adrian Young, who maintains the Saxifrage collection at Waterperry Gardens in the UK, dropped by our garden in September and gave the new bed their blessing. Rex and Adrian were also helpful in clarifying some of the obscure Silver Saxifrage nomenclature that has developed over the years. Keeping track of plants in a tufa bed is challenging, as there is not much room for labels. I use an electronic labeling system by annotating photographs of sections of a bed using PowerPoint. I date the images, which is useful for keeping track of plant growth and I have a three-ring binder with prints of the annotated images in plastic folders for reference when I am out in the garden.



Illustration of Electronic Labeling System

One of the issues with this type of bed is that it can get overwhelming when in flower. The close planting of Silver Saxifrages in the new bed is more for the year-round foliage interest than the profusion of flowers in May. I love the way the Saxifrages creep over the tufa,

especially the *S. paniculata* varieties.

Silver Saxifrages in flower really look best as single subjects rather than as massed plantings.



Saxifraga Southside Seedling in flower

The photo of *Saxifraga* Southside Seedling in flower set against a tumbling *Salix* illustrates the dramatic impact of a single plant. Massed plantings of Saxifrages can work well if other plants are included as shown in the photo of Saxifrages and Lewisias. The white flowers of the Saxifrages do not clash with the exuberant Lewisias and even help to tone down the colors.



Saxes and Lewisias

Reginald Farrer had many strong and controversial opinions but he was unquestionably right about the glory of Silver Saxifrages with their fascinating foliage and spectacular floral display.

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Editor's Note: David Sellars, who lives and gardens in British Columbia, posted a comprehensive reprise

of his new Sax bed in the NARGS Forum several weeks ago. I thought the photographs were spectacular and the description of his approach to creating this beautiful bed to be worthy of our attention. For more photographs, and the rather lengthy and enlightening discussion that followed David's posting, go to:

<http://nargs.org/smf/index.php?topic=417.0>

## **A Coreopsis Revolution A NARGS Forum Evolution**

Text and Photographs by Mark McDonough

**D**etecting the moment whereby an era of dominant technology and its social mores transitions into another evades cognitive perception because it moves so slowly through many years and decades. But eventually the watershed moment does arrive, the tipping point at which change is inevitable, to retire an old technology and move on to the next with new social paradigms it engenders. For over two decades, email-based discussion groups known as *Listserve*s served their purpose well, allowing for the creation of special-interest chat forums open to members from around the world to freely participate in, some of these fora devoted to plants. In these days of accelerated technological innovation and social networking, *Listserve*s are becoming less relevant as more sophisticated communication venues take their place. I believe it is time to put rudimentary text-only based forums behind us, and move forward by embracing dynamic multimedia environments like the NARGS Forum (<http://nargs.org/smf>).

One of the more important aspects of the NARGS Forum, is that as NARGS users contribute discussion, links, and photos, a single cumulative database is perpetually growing, establishing a vital and invaluable resource, one that is fully searchable, a reference for now and the future. In the spirit of growing the body of knowledge on the forum, special feature *photo essays* sometimes get posted, the experience inspired more from visual materials than simply relying on fully structured prose. To this end, witness one such photo essay on a plant

breeding revolution unfolding now with the genus *Coreopsis*, a story that is close to home.

In mid September 2010, I had the distinct privilege of visiting Darrell Probst's hybrid fields, but I'm not talking about *Epimedium* as you might expect. This time around it was to walk a field of 5000 hybrid *Coreopsis* seedlings.

The seedling field represents 10 years of hybridization efforts in hardy *Coreopsis*. The key phrase here is *hardy Coreopsis*, as many of the recent hybrids that flood the market, such as 'Sweet Dreams' and 'Limerock Ruby', are crosses made with annual *C. tinctoria*, resulting in plants that are just not reliably hardy in USDA Zone 5.

The lack of hardiness and performance on a number of *Coreopsis* hybrids has left many gardeners jaded (myself included), and wary of trying more because of their unreliability.



*Coreopsis* 'Red Dwarf Select'

In contrast, Darrell searched out and found many of our USA hardy *Coreopsis* species that were not in cultivation, to add to his hybridization efforts. And of course, he also utilized the familiar *Coreopsis rosea* (native to Massachusetts), which has been used in *Coreopsis* breeding before, but remains an exceedingly difficult species with which to make successful interspecific crosses.

Driving to Darrell's field located in western Massachusetts, I tried to imagine what the hybrids would look like, but I was totally unprepared for the astonishing range of hybrids he managed to come up with. Walking the long rows upon rows of amazing hybrids was like being in a living science laboratory, with all of

the lessons of botany, genetics, and hybridization just sitting there within the plants looking up at me, it has been a long time since I've been so inspired. Visiting the field was educational in so many ways, here are a few observations:

1. It takes vision, great tenacity, and years of determination to get worthwhile results.
2. It requires gathering and exploring as wide a gene pool as possible, to truly explore the possibilities.
3. It requires LOTS and LOTS of space and thousands of seedlings yearly, to achieve sufficient diversity (and nuances within that diversity), to be able to pick out the best of the best.
4. Incredible effort and expense goes into such seemingly simple endeavors.

Let me take you through a brief photographic journey of Darrell's hardy *Coreopsis* trials. Some of his best groups of hybrids, such as the thread-leaf ones (*C. verticillata* group), I'm not at liberty to show, although I can assure you they're amazing, but there's lots here to illustrate the process and achievements. The *Coreopsis* photo essay with further commentary can be viewed at: <http://nargs.org/smf/index.php?topic=442.0>

## Request To Our Members

I've been asked to talk in January to a group of dedicated Pittsfield gardeners about the Rock Garden Society. Amongst other things, they share a large greenhouse space so some of them are probably seedaholics. I'd like to paint an enticing picture of the people in our chapter and the topics of our meetings. To that end, I'd be really grateful for a few lines from as many people as possible – email or snail mail – saying something about your gardening interests/ specialties/



favorite rock garden/ woodland plants, anything that might capture the interest of people who are potential members. And with your permission, I will also use the information to expand the members section on the website. And of course I'd like pictures to go with the words and these can be sent electronically or you can trust me to return any slides/ prints that you loan me. A healthy organization needs to keep replenishing its membership and our best target market for new members is a group of serious gardeners living quite close to where our meetings are held. So, please help me present our best face to potential new friends.

Pam Johnson

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## ***Gentiana acaulis***

The color blue evokes strong emotions independent of where we find it. This is probably, at least in part, because of its rarity in nature and its prohibitive cost throughout history. Lots of catch phrases spring to mind: “blue chip,” “blue plate,” and of course “blue blood.” Poets and painters celebrate the blue of skies and the blue of oceans. Treasure hunters since the beginning of time have risked their lives for precious blue stones: the cobalt of sapphire, the midnight of lapis and the, well, turquoise of turquoise. Many of these hues make their appearance in the illustrious genus *Gentiana*. Within that genus resides *Gentiana acaulis* but not everyone realizes that it is not a single species. It is an umbrella term for the “acaulis group.” They are: *G. acaulis*, *G. alpina*, *G. angustifolia*, *G. clussii*, *G. dinarica*, *G. lingustica* and *G. occidentalis*. A couple of others occasionally pop into this mix as well, and a plant called *G. gentianella* sometimes shows up, most often referred to as a hybrid

of garden origin. Though “acaulis” means “stemless” none of these flowers really are. So what we have is a species that is more than one species with a name that describes it wrong. And, honestly, when I have set out to read down through the list that keys the group out, the subtle differences begin to make my mind glaze over, not to mention my eyes.

Regardless of all that, this plant, with its gorgeous large blue trumpets gloriously green spotted inside the throat, holds a very special place in the rock gardener's heart. Of all the flowers we call blue, *Gentiana* undoubtedly are the Royal Family, and *Gentiana acaulis* just may be the head of that family. It is a classic alpine plant. And it is honest to goodness blue. If, as gardeners, we face the facts, we must admit that we live under many color untruths. Gardener's black is rarely black. Gardener's red can be peony flower dark pink, in red foliage it can be rust, chocolate or burgundy. Gardener's blue ranges from the “blue” of blue hostas to the “blue” of catmint and campanulas. The former is actually a shade of green, the latter is more violet or purple. True blue has been rare throughout human history.

Everyone wants a mass of spectacular blue trumpets, and as long-suffering rock gardeners, who else better deserves it? The trouble here is not in keeping this lovely treasure alive. That is not too hard. The trouble is to flower it and to flower it well. There are a lot of theories floating around out there about why *G. acaulis* won't bloom. Doretta Klaber even goes so far as to say it is up to us to try it, on the chance that we may prove to be one of “the lucky ones.” This kind of implies that there is a smug pantheon of plant gods somewhere on high that will either smile upon us or they will not. That theory is as good as any other. But if your plant is producing only small immature leaves you probably will not get those flowers, at least the next year. In my experience the size of the current leaves indicates





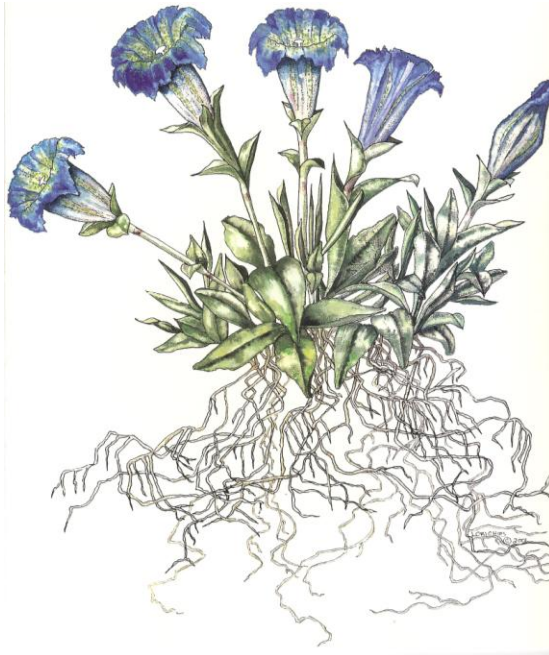
whether blooms will arrive on schedule the following spring. If you have big succulent shiny green leaves; the answer is yes. If not, it is time to take action. For what it is worth, here is my checklist:

- 1) All clones are not created equal. First and foremost obtain a known good flowering clone. Do this, then at least you can cross the potential of a shy flowering specimen off your list.
- 2) Plant firmly. All Gentians appreciate this treatment. I press these plants in with considerably more force than I use on other alpins.
- 3) Gentians are heavy feeders, so feed them generously. Which fertilizer you choose may be less important than that you are consistent. Initially prepare a rich soil that is not too dry. Then feed regularly. I have had good luck with a fertilizer that includes beneficial mycorrhiza. Then again, I know a man (not a rock gardener) who has veritable swathes of *G. acaulis* at the base of his foundation planting. They bloom extravagantly every spring. When questioned about his amazing success he says the plants get hit with granular lawn food by the spreader as he goes by.
- 4) If it does not bloom in a given spot: move it. Even moving the plant just a few feet can do the trick. I have no idea why.
- 5) *Gentiana acaulis* seems to love fresh soil. Or root disturbance. Or both. This is not the same as fresh food. Perhaps it

needs lightening of the soil structure. Maybe more aeration in the soil. Fresh soil always seems to improve the plant.

This last tip seems to run counter to the legends we have all heard about handsome patches habitually slept on by dogs, or of people tromping on their plants with good effect. There are people who swear by these methods.

I grow *G. acaulis* in monoculture in several large, round stock troughs. They appear to be happy. If I don't touch them for a year or two the blossoming lessens. I therefore try to replot them almost every year; once a trough of them has reached 15 or 18 inches across, it is no longer "up" potting. What I do is gently tip the plant out, tease out a reasonable amount of soil, add fresh mix to the trough and resettle the plant back in its home. These are the plants I use to propagate from each year. Divisions can be made, but for best success should be done in May. That is why I don't do divisions. May is too demanding. To quote a friend: in the world of horticulture there are only two seasons. "There is May. And May-not."



So cuttings are my method of choice. They can be done a bit later and will produce more plants. Ever since Rick Lupp of Mt. Tahoma enlightened me about a gel hormone he uses (Clonex) that is what I use. I get much better success than with liquids or powders, at least with gentians.

I currently have a new experiment I am trying. This applies to *Gentiana acaulis* that is in the ground. I have seen patches dwindle and produce smaller and smaller leaves but



sometimes lifting the patch, feeding and resetting just seems like too much work. So this summer I sprinkled on a nice dose of fertilizer. Then I took a two-pronged hand fork, slid it under the roots of a portion of the plant and pried, lifted and jiggled the patch gently. My aim was mild

disturbance, not tearing any roots. I repeated it here and there. Some particles of fertilizer slipped underneath. I was careful to not leave any on the top of the leaves. Then I pressed it all down firmly again and watered in well. Next season will tell if it has the desired effect. Which, of course, is lots of flowers.

Gentiana acaulis, whose trumpets really are the blue against which other blues are judged, is worth every effort. So whether you walk on your patch, try one of my (or someone else's) tips, pray to that pantheon of gods for luck or wheel out your rotary spreader, I applaud you and wish you success. You see, besides being honestly, really blue, Gentiana acaulis is truly a perennial plant. For once in our generally azure starved life we can luxuriate in this rare and beautiful color. Amidst the heartbreak of so many difficult Classic Alpines, this can be one of the recurring miracles in the intrepid rock gardener's life.

Lori Chips ©

## October Meeting Notes

Jacques Mommens

The October meeting opened with a short segment reserved for chapter business. First Pam Johnson presented the highlights of the Treasurer's report. The good news is that the chapter's treasury is in good shape, especially after the latest very generous donation from Geoffrey Charlesworth's estate. The not so good news is that last year expenses exceeded the regular revenues. That aspect of

the business will be carefully looked at by the Chapter's Officers and the rest of the Administrative Committee.

Then Peter George announced the following nominations: to serve in 2011 as President, Erica Schumacher; Vice-President, Joyce Hemingson; Secretary; Carol Hanby; Treasurer, Pam Johnson. These are elected positions, i.e. positions required by the bylaws. Other essential positions will be filled by appointment, in particular the important job of Program Chair. Elizabeth Zander volunteered for that position, an offer which was received with enthusiasm and gratitude.



*Enkianthus perrulatus* 'Compacta'

After the business segment we were treated to two very different but equally interesting talks. First, Andy Brand presented "Cool and Unusual Plants for the Rock Garden". He showed pictures and discussed 34 plants that are propagated and grown at the Broken Arrow Nursery. Most of the plants under consideration were either dwarf trees or small shrubs, distinguished by unusual foliage, variegations, shapes etc, but there were also a few spectacular perennials such as *Amsonia* x 'blue Ice', or *Sedum sieboldii*. A few of us do grow some of these plants and that made for many interesting exchanges between the speaker and the audience. But wait: having discussed the plants and shown gorgeous pictures, Andy Brand produced the real things - no seedlings, no rooted cuttings, but specimens ready for to go in our gardens. (Yes, they were for sale). And so we had a great opportunity to look carefully at the like of *Enkianthus perrulatus* "compacta", *Kalmia latifolia* f. *myrtifolia*, *Pinus contorta*

"Chief Joseph' and about twenty other plants including a very full and fully bloomed *Gentiana scabra* Zuikorindo.



*Fritillaria sewerzowii* – photo by Russell Stafford

If Andy Brand stayed in our backyard so to speak, our second speaker Eric Breed took us overseas, 'Going Wild with Bulbs'. Eric has traveled in many places in Europe or Asia in search of bulbs in their native habitats, looking for special forms or for rare or new plants. He shared his experiences with us, showing pictures of spectacular fields with thousands and thousands of bulbs in bloom, but also many close ups of plants of great beauty. Some of these plants are commercially available, many are not, although there are specialists who try to grow and propagate some of these new bulbs, especially corydalis.

## Flotsam & Jetsam

Our Annual Luncheon marks the end of another wonderful year of gardening, Chapter meetings, newsletters, and the excellent camaraderie of our varied and always interesting fellow members. November brings a certain sadness to us gardeners, but also an excitement. We are beginning the annual process of accepting our losses and considering whether to replace them with other examples of their

botanical race, or to move on to something more challenging, or, more modestly, something more amenable to our particular location and circumstances. The arrival of seed catalogues is imminent, as are the NARGS seed exchange offerings, and we will spend some time imagining the potential results of serious seed purchases and timely planting out in the pots destined to be buried in the snow for (hopefully) a few months. But we have one more meeting, our Annual Luncheon, and then we can relax and start the waiting.

This newsletter is obviously a bit longer than any I've edited. It seems that as the end of the year approached, people who promised me something earlier, and then found that they didn't have the time, have now ... well, found the time. This issue does have a theme, which I will leave you to work out for yourself. But we're lucky to have contributions from so many people who know so much about our plants and our people, and who have lived among those whose names are associated with the early years of rock gardening and of NARGS. Phyllis Gustafson, whose contributions to rock gardening are second to none, provides us with a look at two of the icons of our special botanical avocation. David Sellars, a gardener of the first tier, converses with us about Silver Saxes, a subject so dear to many of us and so important to our gardens. And our own Lori Chips, poet, artist and writer, when she's not making troughs or taking cuttings, offers us a look at a wonderful plant that we all want, and that some of us are lucky enough to grow successfully. The beautiful illustration on Page 17 is hers, by the way.

There are other contributors as well, and they are familiar to us as they have contributed to our newsletter in the past, and brought us insights and images that we use as we grow as gardeners.

Again, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve as the editor of our newsletter, and I look forward to starting again in February, 2011.

PFG

## **Positions of Responsibility**

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