



Newsletter

*North American Rock Garden Society
Berkshire Chapter February 2014*

Next Meeting:

Saturday, March 1, @ 10:30 AM

Berkshire Botanical Garden Exhibit Hall
BBG is located 2 miles west of Stockbridge,
MA at the junction of Routes 102 & 183



AM: Adam Wheeler: Propagation of Woody Plants

Adam is a plant fanatic. As propagation and plant development manager for Broken Arrow Nursery, he oversees the woody plants and is responsible for acquiring and developing new plants.

Lunch – BYO

We welcome dessert contributions. Lunch will be followed by our Plant Sale

PM: Adam Wheeler: A Look at Witch Hazels



Hamamelis x intermedia 'Harry'

LATE WINTER MUSINGS



TEXT AND IMAGES BY PETER GEORGE

It's It's late February, which means for me that winter is almost tolerable. We have two feet of snow on the ground, which is great for my garden, but makes walking the dog a serious challenge. The traditional February thaw is almost over and it's about to get cold again, with single-digit nights this week. I have dozens of seed packs ready to open and a couple of hundred plastic pots ready to go; but my planting medium is frozen solid, and I have trouble handling seeds with cold fingers. My wife won't let me use the dining room anymore, and the shed is unheated, so I'm putting off my seed-related jobs for the moment. Maybe next weekend?

It's been an eventful few months for me. I got a new knee in December, and I'm walking pain free for the first time over 20 years. Dean Evans got a new hip a few days before I got my knee, and he's doing well too, also pain free for the first time in many years. I don't believe either of us decided to have joint replacement surgery merely to make gardening more pleasurable; but

I think we both chose December for the procedures because it gave us plenty of time for rehab before real gardening begins in late March.

We have a full schedule of BNARGS programs this year, plus a NARGS expedition in early July, which will start in Reno and end up in Yosemite. There are just a few openings left, so don't delay if you want to go, because once we hit 24 enrollment will be closed.

The NARGS Annual General Meeting will take place in Santa Fe, New Mexico in late August. It's going to be a really interesting meeting, the first of its kind we've ever held in the Southwest. Check out the NARGS website in the next week or so for a full schedule and registration information.

This newsletter has less about gardening and plants than I'd like, but February is a difficult time to come up with garden photos and observations about our plants. However, in light of the current condition of BNARGS, the articles about membership are well worth reading and thinking about. Our chapter is not yet at a tipping point, but if we don't find ways to increase our membership, and also to get more of our members to join NARGS, we are facing a bleak future.

I hope to see many of you on Saturday.

WHERE IS THE NEXT GENERATION OF ROCK GARDENERS GOING TO COME FROM?

There is a certain unease detectable between the local chapters of NARGS, and the "Mother Ship" and it seems to be getting worse all the time. What I have observed is the shrinkage of membership inside the chapters, at the same time that NARGS is trying to corral more members from its chapters. NARGS feels the members of chapters owe it to the Mother Ship to sign up, chapters find it

harder & harder, if not downright impossible to entice new members with the double price tag attached.

For almost 2 decades now I have fought the "Good Fight" to bring the gospel of NARGS to the people. By people, I mean those who aren't members of anything. Since I work at a nursery & give demonstrations & talks all the time, I figured that this might have a small modest impact. Well, not that I have noticed. Whenever I have a "show" to put on for a garden club of other group I will inject "the commercial part of our program." I will hold up a Quarterly, a Trough Handbook, I will pass around contact info, speak of camaraderie, garden visits, plant sales, and all that jazz. People's eyes sort of glaze over. One idea I thought would work was suggesting that the garden club join as a group with just one membership, dip their toes into the alpine water, try us out. How hard should this be? Here are 7 or 12 or 23 humans *already* in love with gardening and interested in troughs enough to come and hear a talk. They should be apples (or is it fish?) in a barrel. And radiating out from Fairfield there are 6 or 7 local chapters accessible within a two and a half hour drive. I have even typed up entire seasons worth of events of local chapters (where I could nail down programs) and even resorted to the trickery of tucking a brochure into our Oliver Catalogs from time to time. I shake my head unbelieving as I watch and hear, season after season: *this* customer designing dozens of troughs, *that* couple returning again from the alps (with seed in their luggage) and *that* landowner with gardener in tow wanting wagonloads of alpines because they are building a sunny rock garden. *None* of them belong to NARGS, or to a chapter. They are happy with what they are doing. I, with perhaps a misguided sense of what could be, am not.

So what can we do? We are an aging society. Finally, I have come to the conclusion that recruitment is a dead end. The best way to get new rock gardeners is to *beget* them. To have a new generation we must set out as soon as possible to breed them. Our best bet is to select mothers & fathers from lovers of the Great Outdoors. Those interested in the Sciences. And

they need to be strong, all those rocks will need moving. And smart, think of the monographs they must write, the latin & botany they must learn. The mothers really should complete their pregnancy at high altitude, the babies will already be used to the thin air. I know that some of you reading this are already leaping ahead to the idea of the petri-dish, but I think this would be a mistake. One or two prolific doners could result in an explosion of half-brothers and sisters. Siblings who didn't know they were siblings. Think of the disasters that have befallen royal bloodlines since, well, since there have been royal bloodlines. It is hard to imagine anything worse than a hemophiliac, certifiably crazy and/or epileptic Sherpa.

Geoffrey Charlesworth once said to me that I should: "enjoy being the new kid on the block at meetings, because it seems like a blink of an eye and one is the elder." He was right, of course, but I thought that meant the next generation would be coming up behind me. I turn 61 this year and as I look around me, you know what? I am *still* one of the younger ones.

So unless someone has a brighter idea, if we put my plan into action we should be feeling the effects of the fresh tide of members by about 2034. Give or take. To steal the line that Huxley stole from Shakespeare:

"O brave new world, to have such people in it."



Lori Chips © 2014

A PUSH FOR NEW MEMBERS



In 2013 we talked about BNARGS' need for new members. Nancy Chute has offered to notices of our meetings to local papers, radio stations, plant societies, and garden clubs. Lori Chips has been creating a brochure that publicizes BNARGS and our activities.

If you have contact persons for your local plant societies or garden clubs, please send their names and email addresses to Nancy at nchute@earthlink.net.

Lori is getting prices for the printing of the brochure, and I can't wait to see her latest artistic creation.

If you have friends who might be interested in rock gardens, please invite them to a meeting. Tom Flanigan brought friends to the November meeting and luncheon, and we are hoping that they become members.

If you have more ideas about how we can increase our membership, please email me at jloveys@nycap.rr.com. We certainly don't need to lower our dues, which are a bargain at \$10 for individuals and \$12 for a couple. Which gives me the opportunity to remind you that it is time to pay your 2014 dues at the March meeting or by mailing them to Pamela Johnson.

See you on March First!

Judy Brown - Chairperson

PROGRAM NOTES 2014

ELISABETH ZANDER – PROGRAM CHAIR

As I write this in mid-February I am snug, like my garden covered in over four feet of snow. The weather keeps dancing to the beat of the latest snowstorm with its never ending samba. Good for the garden! But old man winter is getting a little long in the tooth. Huge icicles drip from the roofline, so maybe it is warming up...somewhat. Hopefully, it will give us a break for our March 1st meeting. Adam Wheeler of Broken Arrow, will be presenting us with an optimistic program - propagation for the AM lecture, and a look at witch hazels in the



Hamamelis mollis 'Sweet Sunshine'

afternoon. If you are worried about the weather causing a meeting cancelation, email/text/call me or a board member for an update.

As you may remember, this year we are making rock gardening and ourselves better known to the local gardening community. New members will not only keep our group alive, but contribute new ideas and interests. We will kick off this membership drive with a trough workshop in April. Please check with your gardening friends to see if you can interest them in trough gardening with a rock garden bent. Prospective members can join the workshop for \$25. Come yourself to help and make one for the

chapter (and/or yourself)! We can sell them at our September plant sale. The second part of the workshop is at our July meeting when we plant the cured troughs with succulents. How much better can you get than our own John Spain speaking on succulents followed by a plant sale and trough plant-up? Of course we need materials, so please, everyone: **take a few pups off your succulents** as soon as the snow recedes. By July they should be of size to offer at our July plant sale for the troughs. So how do we give people some ideas about our group and our interests? The June meeting will be all about rock gardening as presented by Anne Spiegel and myself. So hopefully we can interest new members by our workshop, get them to come back to hear about rock gardening, and come back yet again for the trough plant-up. By then they should have a taste of our outstanding plant material and come for the big plant sale in September.



Sempervivum trough by Gwen Moore – image by P. Kelaidis

For the trough workshop, Rod Zander will be bringing his cement mixer and the sand. Dean Evans will get the peat and sift. We also need plastic or canvas tarps. And we need help with overseeing the group, so please contact me (Elisabeth) as soon as you can to sign up.

Keeping in mind we were formed as a study group, this year we have an exciting lineup:

- Broken Arrow Nursery's own propagation & plant development manager, Adam Wheeler speaking in March,
- Todd Boland, research horticulturist at the Memorial University of

Newfoundland Botanical Garden speaking for our big plant sale in September,

- Panayoti Kelaidis, worldwide plant guru and evangelist talking on Ironclad succulents for October,
- Mike Kingten, Denver Botanic Garden's rock garden curator speaking for our November luncheon

Yes, there is plenty of study to be had here. And plenty to be had around the coffee/tea table as we have such a knowledgeable group. See you there.

Visit Elisabeth Zander's blog, called 'Seed-aholic Times' @ <http://www.seed-aholic.com/>

NOTES FROM THE OCTOBER MEETING

JACQUES MOMMENS - MEETING RECORDER

The formal business part of the meeting was dispatched within minutes. Pam Johnson, Treasurer, summarized the financial situation: it is sound. However since 2011 the Chapter's assets shrank, the expenses (program, rent) exceeded the revenues (membership, sales) by \$1900 in 2013. Then the Chair announced that the current Officers had agreed to keep their respective positions for one more year. Would the members of the Chapter reelect them? Yes, they did, unanimously. (Unanimity of these members present, who regrettably were very few.)

To put this in a proper perspective, Peter George offered a few remarks about the state of NARGS and its Chapters. NARGS memberships peaked in the late nineties, reaching about 4750, dropping by more than 40% during the next decade and stabilizing around 2650. Such an evolution is not unique and other many plant societies have experienced similar changes. NARGS of course is trying to react appropriately, changing its programs, adapting them to the times and the needs of the gardening

members. In doing so, NARGS is keeping in view the stated goals and mission of the Society, rather than stubbornly stick to calcified traditional activities.

According to the bylaws, to further its actions NARGS will organize groups of its members into chapters. How is that working? Not as well as it was doing years ago. Today we recognize 38 chapters. In recent years we had to disband of few chapters, because they had become so small that they were not viable, nobody was willing to share the work and the load was resting on just one or two old timers who eventually were burnt out and gave up. On the other hand some chapters quietly became some sort of garden clubs with no relation to NARGS but in the choice of their name and the fact that they are entitled to shares of surplus seeds at the end of the seedex, stellar speakers from the NARGS Speakers Tour. In such chapters, the percentage of members who are also members of NARGS is well below 50. Perhaps this is not the place to discuss such problems in detail. Peter George was just mentioning them (and more) to give us a broader picture.

One puzzling aspect of the Berkshire Chapter is that relatively few of its members are local: many of these regularly participating have to drive 2 or 3 hours one way to attend a meeting (they are from Vermont, lower or western NY state, Eastern Massachusetts, coastal Connecticut.) This is a strong indication that our activities are interesting and that our group counts a good number of great gardeners worth spending time and sharing plants and information with. Why then so few local active members? Aren't they interested in what we are doing? Or don't they know what we are doing? Trying to understand this, Elisabeth phrased a few more questions.

People belong to several organizations and that put conflicting demands on their time and created scheduling problems. Should we cut the number of meetings? Coordinate with other groups and societies or/and have joint meetings? Just to reduce the possibilities of overload and conflicts? Are our meetings at the wrong time of the year (winter travel may be tricky... in the

spring we have too much to do in the garden, in Summer were are on vacation, trips here and there...). Are meetings too long , could we do with just one speaker? This might suit a few local members, but would it please these who drive two hours +, one way? Should we have more meetings without speaker, some kind of workshops? Extended beefed up Show & Tells ? Garden tours? Should we publicize more and charge admission to non members?

Please send your ideas and suggestions to Elisabeth.

After such true but rather depressing considerations, we needed something more uplifting. And Goodness! There is no way one cannot feel reenergized after the two superb talks Ian Young gave us. He had given them the titles "Highlands Gatherings" and "Bulbs in the Garden". Far from academic lectures focused and restricted to their single subjects, they could be compared to two chapters of a single unwritten book "A Gardener's Memoirs": they were so much richer, livelier, captivating.

He showed a lot of pictures, of people, gardens, places, but mainly of plants. The plants were photographed close enough that one has a very good view of the plant itself but not so close that one hadn't a good view on where and how it grows, be that in the wild or the garden. Unlike some speakers who show pictures and comment on them one at a time, Ian Young has a lot of information that he wishes to convey and he uses a flow of pictures just to illustrate what he wants to tell and let us draw the lessons.

What plants does he grow? There are so many of them, one doesn't want to start a list. Some very rare, some horticulturally well established. There are ericaceae, primulas, sedums, saxifrages, celmisias, geraniums, and bulbs, in the bulb house of course, but in troughs and in the open garden, where he has bulbs flowering for the longest part of the year: eranthis, galanthus, narcissus, crocus, erythroniums, corydalis (Oh! so many of them in every color), colchicums, cyclamens etc, etc.

He grows a lot of plants from seeds. Sure he

divides plants, but in the long run he much favors growing from seeds. Repeated divisions end up weakening plants and so were plants lost to cultivation. Division of virus infected plants just produced more infected plants. Plants successfully growing from seeds are certainly well adapted to the conditions of your garden, best of all if they produce viable seeds.



Rhododendron saluenense ssp. saluenense

In the garden he uses fertilizers sparingly if at all but he shreds, composts, recycles everything. (with spectacular results, and he has pictures to prove it). To accommodate many plants and provide them with optimal conditions he uses troughs. he has dozens of them, of all kind of sizes and depths, built, sited and planted in the most varied and imaginative fashion. Don't just believe me: go and visit Elisabeth's blog: www.seed-aholic.com (She had visited the Youngs earlier this spring, taken and posted pictures).

It is futile to try to summarize his talks in a couple of sentences. In the course of two short hours he gave a lot of information and practical advices, nothing too esoteric or too technical. He is not dogmatic, doesn't hand down strict rules or detailed recipes. His recommendations can be encapsulated in three verbs: observe, try, enjoy. At one point he said that Nature is *the* best tutor. If so he is a very close second best.

Thanks NARGS for having invited him and made him available to us.

NOTES FROM THE NOVEMBER MEETING

JACQUES MOMMENS – MEETING RECORDER



Tacca chantrieri – image by Simon Eade

The meeting opened with a few brief announcements:

• There will be two exciting NARGS events in 2014. In July, there will be a sponsored 8 days field trip in the Sierra Nevada, taking people from Nevada to Yosemite. The number of participants will be limited.

- At the end of August the NARGS Annual meeting will take place in Santa Fe, NM. There will be pre- and post-conference trips.

Elisabeth gave us a few tips about the planned chapter meetings in 2014: There will be a trough making workshop in April and a trough planting session in the fall. The full list of speakers for 2014 not known yet, but she can already announce that on November 2, the star speaker will be Mike Kintgen.

Anybody ever heard about "bat flower"? Well, there was one, in bloom, shown by Cliff Desch. *Tacca chantrieri* for the cognoscenti. Not exactly a rock garden plant (2' tall), spending the winter months in the greenhouse. Yet, it was very nice to actually see such an oddity.

Mike Stewart gave a most interesting talk about "Small and Dwarf Rhododendrons for the rock garden", dispelling quite a few misconceptions quite convincingly.

Dwarf rhododendrons? Yes. Of course "small" or "dwarf" is understood in relation with other members of a large group but unlike quite a few so called dwarf conifers there are many small and really dwarf rhododendrons reaching a foot or two maximum at maturity.

Aren't they difficult? Not really. In nature, most of them are to be found on mountains, quite frequently at very high elevations. This tells us that they require very good drainage, good light. They also need abundant moisture and prefer cool summers. They should be fertilized sparingly. The rock garden is just where we can find a suitable place, with a suitable microclimate for these nice plants. They are also natural candidates for troughs. Are they hardy? Generally they are. Some are 'moderately' hardy (hardy to 0F). But it should be emphasized that cold hardiness is only half of the problem. Some hot summers will be destructive to some of these species. Cold itself is not the damaging factor, but when and under which circumstances it occurs; for example, a very early frost hitting the plant before it is winter dormant. The frost doesn't have to be very severe to damage tissues beyond repair (bark splitting, etc). A nice sunny but windy day while the ground is frozen, will cause desiccation if there is no protection such as adequate snow cover.

What are these dwarf rhododendrons? Mike had made a list of over 100 of them, half of it pure species, half named forms and hybrids. Why named forms? Not to snub the taxonomists but because many variations occur in nature, and some forms although true to the species type show exceptional qualities, about size, foliage, color, and even hardiness more interesting to the gardener than to the botanist. Sometimes, what have been thought as a form of some species, is shown after further studies to be a natural hybrid between two species growing in the same region. And of course for many years hybridizers have tried to enhance natural

qualities while conserving the overall characteristic aspects of a given species. For blue flowering plants, look for *Rh. impeditum*, *Rh. litiangense*, *Rh. intricatum*, *Rh.*



Rhododendron intricatum

russatum (especially "Night Editor") However *Rh. russatum* is not dwarf, it may easily reach 4' and more at maturity. *Rh. forrestii* v. *repens* is the exemplary dwarf prostrate plant, with vivid red flowers. Crossed long time ago with *Rh. sanguineum* it produced "Carmen", which crossed with some *Rh. yakusimanum* produced "Patrick's Dream" a true red yak hybrid. *Rh. keiskei* (named form Yaku Fairy), *Rh. campylogynum* (named form 'Patricia'), *Rh. racemosum* are great plants in their own right and have been the parents of many gloriously floriferous hybrids. Look for "Wee Bee". Don't forget *Rh. hanceanum* v. *nanum*, *Rh. sargentianum*., *Rh. radicans*. Mike did show a superb picture of *Rh. radicans* growing over the edge and down the side of a trough at Edinburgh.

Are these rhododendrons readily available? Many of them are, although the chance that you will find them waiting for you at the local garden center is limited. This will not surprise rock gardeners. It is not likely that dwarf rhododendrons will make anybody rich very soon. There are a few mail orders houses which offer them, and one can find nurseries which even if they do not do the propagation themselves, maintain good selections. Some of us in the Chapter are rhododendron buffs: Cliff, Jonathan, Elliott to name three of them. They had lively and interesting exchanges with the speaker, telling him of their experience, and he was always eager to exchange notes with

skilled gardeners. The rest of us learned a lot of practical, immediately applicable information and left with quite a few more names to add to their wish list.



hybrid between *Rh. keiskei* 'Yaku Fairy' and *Rh. fletcherianum* – image by Todd Boland

After the scheduled talk, we repaired to the Red Lion for the traditional luncheon, pleasant socializing and further discussions with our speaker.

And so ended a year of good, informative and highly enjoyable meetings. Thanks Elisabeth.



“Anyone who thinks that gardening begins in the spring and ends in the fall is missing the best part of the whole year; for gardening begins in January with the dream”

Josephine Neuse

Positions of Responsibility

Chairperson - Judy Brown
Vice-Chairperson – Dean Evans
Secretary – Carol Hanby
Treasurer – Pamela Johnson/Tom Flanigan
Archivist – James Fichter
Audio Visual Chairperson - Joe Berman
Greeter – Open
Independent Director – Erica Schumacher
Newsletter Editor – Peter George
Meeting Recorder – Jacque Mommens
Plant Sale Chairperson – Peter George
Program Chairperson – Elisabeth Zander
Proofreader – Martin Aisenberg
Refreshments Chairperson – Joyce Hemingson
Speaker Housing – Anne Spiegel

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Membership is open to all members of NARGS

Dues \$10.00 single, \$12.50 Family

Payable to the Treasurer

Pamela Johnson

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Deadline for The Next Newsletter is March 20,
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Please contact the Editor before reprinting
articles

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