

The Urban Rock Gardener



Volume 33, Issue 1

January/February 2020



Primula elatior (Oxlip)

FEBRUARY MEETING
Monday, February 10 at 6 p.m.
NYBG Midtown Education Center, Room D

TALES FROM THE PRIMROSE PATH

Speaker:
Elizabeth Lawson
Writer, Naturalist and Gardener



Primula japonica (Japanese primrose)

Primroses are an iconic group of plants, often the first to welcome the end of winter, with species and hybrids that satisfy a variety of garden settings. They have exceptional character, their presence conferring a sense of homeplace in those who cultivate them. They are easily grown from seed, naturalize when happy, and multiply through division as well. I will share my experiences with primroses – as a horticultural student at Kew Gardens, as a home gardener growing them from seed, and as a writer doing research for *Primrose*, published by Reaktion Press in spring 2019, a title in their Botanical series. Each volume in the series covers the botanical and horticultural, as well as the social and cultural, history of a group of plants.

Primroses have a long history in horticulture, folklore, and as medicinal plants. They have been the favored subjects of poets and botanical artists. References to species widespread in Europe – the common primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), the cowslip (*P. veris*), and the oxlip (*P. elatior*) – appear frequently in the plays of Shakespeare, who invented the popular phrase “the primrose path.” They were also the favored “prey” of undaunted plant hunters in high-elevation sites in India, Burma, Tibet, and China.

Primroses are ideal plants to share. As they pass from friend to friend, they carry stories and new names. While no doubt many MCNARGS

members are already conversant with primroses, or primulas, as they are often called, I found during my research that everyone has a primrose story, so I look forward to hearing tales from the audience. As the current president of the American Primrose Society, I will share highlights of the work of the society, such as the quarterlies and the seed exchange.



ELIZABETH LAWSON received her B.A. in English Literature from Bryn Mawr College, an M.A. in Botany from the University of Texas at Austin, a Ph.D. in Plant Biology from Cornell University, and an M.F.A. in Nonfiction from Southern New Hampshire University. She has worked at Kew Royal Botanic Gardens and Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and devoted a decade of work each to the Botanical Society of America and the

Ecological Society of America. She completed her career with another decade in the Writing Department at Ithaca College, where she taught Professional Writing, Academic Writing, Writing in the Workplace, Personal Essay, Science Writing, Technical Writing, and Writing as a Naturalist. She now writes as a naturalist at www.elizabethwinpennylawson.com. Copies of her book *Primrose* will be available for sale at the meeting.



Primula x polyantha



Primula acaulis 'Blue Zebra'



Primula vulgaris (Common primrose)

NYBG Midtown Education Center is located at 20 West 44th Street, 3rd floor, between 5th and 6th Avenues (General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen Building). This location is two blocks from Grand Central Terminal and near several subways.

OUR FAVORITE TOOLS

We asked our members to expound upon their favorite gardening tools, and here are some responses.

THE DIBBLE

Ellen Borker



My favorite tool is a dibble, also known as a dibber. This is an ancient tool, dating back perhaps to Roman times. I've had my dibble for years. Traditionally it is used to make holes for planting seeds and seedlings. I have always, however, used my dibble in a way I do not remember seeing, i.e., to

make holes to plant bulbs.

I push the dibble all the way into the ground. If it's a small bulb, like a crocus or grape hyacinth, the hole is big enough so I can just drop the bulb in and push the soil back. If it's a larger bulb, like a tulip or daffodil, then after I push the dibble into the ground, I swirl it around to make a larger hole at the top. Then, either with my hand or a trowel, I enlarge the hole at the bottom. Finally, I place the bulb in the hole and push the soil back. This past November I planted over 750 bulbs, almost all of them larger ones, with my wonderful dibble.

The advantages of the dibble for planting bulbs are twofold. First, it is very fast. Second, it does little, if any, damage to the roots and bulbs underground in an existing planted garden. It simply pushes them to the side. The only time I have done damage is when I directly plunged my dibble into an old bulb underground, which rarely happens.

The dibble is an underutilized and little known tool in this country, but it is available on the internet. I saw several that were made of solid wood with metal reinforcement like mine.

Finally, I just love the name of the tool – the dibble.

HORI-HORI KNIFE

Judi Dumont



It was a challenging "tool-off" between my beloved Hori-Hori knife and the almost equally loved Fiskars pruning snips, but the sharp-pointed, serrated-edged Hori-Hori took the honors. For digging, lifting, weeding, root pruning and

bulb-planting in small spaces it's a near perfect multi-purpose tool. (And if you garden in a tough neighborhood it's useful for self-defense as well!!)

LONG-HANDLED EDGING SHOVEL

John Tweddle

My favorite tool is a long-handled edging shovel. I love naturalistic gardens, but in public gardening there is nothing like a clear edge line to establish order. Currently I'm using an ice chopper on a volunteer project. It's not deep enough. At my partner's garden, I'm stuck with a short-handled shovel, which takes its toll on one's back.

When I worked for the Parks Department, I had a set of tools that made me feel assured that I could get all my projects done well. That edging shovel established gardened beds where neglected areas used to be.



Photo by Wendy Smith

LONG-HANDLED TWEEZERS

Abbie Zabar

My long-handled carbon steel tweezers with angled pointy tips are perfect for transplanting seedlings. They also remove weeds, cultivate soil and nick out holes where space is impossibly tight. In forty years of gardening I've never found a less complex or more dexterous tool for container gardening. All it needed was for me to add some markings because even the most precious tools get lost in the garden.



STAINLESS STEEL TRANSPLANT SPADE

Steve Whitesell



I swear by this tool from Lee Valley. It's compact, easily stored and can give you access to a plant without destroying everything else around it when you dig it out. The handle is comfortable to use, the narrow blade can be sharpened, the stainless steel surfaces won't rust, and they clean up easily. They are currently \$46.50 and used to come with a lifetime guarantee against breakage, but I'm not sure if that is still in effect. I broke one many years ago and received a new one quickly without question.

ANVIL HAND PRUNER

Lola Lloyd Horwitz

While this may not be my favorite tool, it was and remains a very necessary one. When my right thumb required basal joint arthroscopy in 2013, I needed a tool that would help my hand make pruning quicker, more effective and far less painful. I found the website www.tgfproducts.com and chose the anvil hand pruner. It was immediately helpful. In fact, I use it regularly because I believe older hands need all the help they can get. However, there are certain tighter situations when my trusted No. 2 Felco or snips are the better tools, or for larger branches, a ratchet lopper.



Having looked closely at my hand tools, I see that they all need a good winter cleaning. Bravo for this topic so that we all get around to cleaning and preserving our tools for another year in the garden!

SERRATED TROWEL

Ernest Cavallo



My favorite garden tool is a trowel that I got at the NYBG Shop two years ago on sale. Did I need another trowel? Not really, except I had volunteered and came without my gear. There is no maker label. It fits my hand like a trowel should. There is an indentation for my thumb and a substantial handle with non-slip rubber. I appreciate the inch markers which help me when I plant my bulbs.

Best of all is the very sharp serrated edge (left on the photo) which cuts through roots when I am planting in my wooded area.

My Least Favorite

SINGLE CROCUS BULB PLANTER



I admit I bought this at Lady Bamford's Conspicuous Consumption Market (not its real name) in the Cotswolds just so I could show and tell my friends how ridiculous the world has become. Can you imagine wandering your estate planting croci one at a time with this?

Head shaking,
Ernie

MY SWIRLING-SKIRTED SOUTHERN FRIEND

While my friend does not wave her hand in greeting, she makes herself known in many ways that endear her to me. Her name is *Cyrilla racemiflora*, and she is native to the southeast coastal region of North America. I met her in the Woodlanders catalogue back in 2000 during a phase in my plant collecting when fall color topped my list of required attributes, and, I must add, when I had lots of space to try new species. Two of her common names are Leatherwood and Titi. What's more, she can be found not only in the southeast, but in Mexico and the Caribbean, even Colombia and northern Brazil! I certainly hadn't yet grown a shrub that was known in such a wide range of habitats.

I was pushing my luck when I planted one (no longer "her") upstate in Warwick. Not only did the deer love it to death, but the zone was beyond its limits. Nevertheless, I had it long enough to know that I wanted one back in Brooklyn. This time I heeded what I had gleaned from Google about its native habitat. It went into a wet spot not far from the glass of my attached greenhouse, somewhat shaded by one of my pawpaw trees, and there it has grown and flowered happily for the last five or six years. And quite happily for me, it happens to be where I can see it from my kitchen table, clear through the greenhouse.

But what about those skirts? I chose *Cyrilla* for its fall color, but now I love it for the bunched four to six-inch dried seed capsules that take on the appearance of a raffia skirt. In late spring, the new buds stretch out, opening to many small white flowers that attract small insects. I visit it often to take in its subtle fragrance, but so much is happening in that season that once it has bloomed I don't give it much attention. In fall, as other flowering plants subside and my pawpaw trees start dropping their leaves, the sun angles in to spotlight *Cyrilla*. What's remarkable is that those elongated seed capsules remain attractive right through November and December with a backdrop of red, maroon and semi-evergreen leaves.

So, I hope some of you will get to know *Cyrilla racemiflora*. If you don't find it, ask those in the nursery business to get it. There should be a niche in your garden where my friend *Cyrilla* will add color and swirling skirts!

LOLA LLOYD HORWITZ



MCNARGS WELCOMES OUR NEW TREASURER KAY SPURLOCK

In 2019, Brendan Kenney appointed Kay Spurlock to be MCNARGS' new treasurer, a position that had remained vacant since the departure of Yukie Kurashina. Kay was formally elected to the post at our Annual Meeting in November.



My education includes a B.A. in Economics from Hunter College and a paralegal diploma from NYU. I am a bookkeeper by trade and work for small business clients and individuals. I have served as treasurer for the New York Mycological Society for five years. Although I am not a gardener, I'm in love with alpine plants and can contribute

to MCNARGS in a number of functions. I'm looking forward to learning more about seeds!

For the last twenty years I've visited Alaska at least once a year and discovered alpine plants and the Alaska Native Plant Society. Founder Verna Pratt was my teacher and friend and also an avid rock gardener. After she passed away, I joined other Alaska friends for a botanical trip in Newfoundland in 2018, which coincided with the NARGS Annual Meeting. That is how I first learned about the Manhattan Chapter and your wonderful lectures and programs.

KAY SPURLOCK

2020 NARGS ANNUAL MEETING CORNELL UNIVERSITY Ithaca, New York, June 18-20



Speakers include

**HARRY JANS, KAJ ANDERSEN and
CORNELL BOTANIC GARDEN HORTICULTURISTS**

Field trips to Cornell's gorges, three private gardens, the Adirondack Chapter's public rock garden, and the Cornell Botanic Garden

**Optional Pre-Conference Tour:
SYRACUSE AREA GARDENS
Thursday, June 18**

See the NARGS website for info: www.nargs.org

ANOTHER HOOSIER IN MANHATTAN

by Brendan Kenney, Chair



OBSESSION IS SEEMINGLY THE HALL-MARK of a rock gardener. The dedication required to maintain alpine plants inevitably leads to obsessive behavior. Would we want it to be otherwise? Lori Chips, artist, designer and horticulturist epitomizes the best of obsessive rock gardening. Lori's inspirational talk to the Manhattan Chapter earlier this month was followed by enthusiastic discussion. Her promotion of the boundless creativity of trough-making and alpine gardening delighted the audience.

Raoulia australis beautifully grown in a trough brought back memories of my own failed attempt to grow the stunning New Zealand plant which forms an absolutely flat carpet of lead-grey foliage that will creep in between and over small rocks. I followed the instructions: "this plant offers a challenge to the gardener to find just the right spot with perfect drainage" to no avail. Lori explained that protection from winter moisture is essential for success. The image of this beauty turned to mush is etched into my brain – a true horror story.

THE GARDENER'S "NORMAL" OBSESSION takes on new dimension in Jessica Hausner's *Little Joe*, a horror film about a genetically-modified plant that renders those who whiff its pollen happy and protective of it. The visually stunning movie is a commentary on mood-stabilizing chemicals but plant aesthetics alone are enough to evoke those same feelings in the obsessive gardener.

Other plant trials in the film's lab lack the charm of the titular "Little Joe." A blue tulip with *Dieffenbachia* foliage? *Quelle horreur!*

EXILED BY NAPOLEON, Anne Margu rite Jos phine Henriette Rouill  de Marigny, Baroness Hyde de Neuville (1771-1849) arrived with her husband in New York in 1807 and remained until 1813. Plants, people and places were the subjects of her obsession. Her beautiful watercolors and drawings filled a recent exhibition at the New-York Historical Society.

READING THE GREATEST NOVEL about obsession, *Moby-Dick*, led Gilbert Wilson to a lifetime drive to illustrate it. The Hoosier artist was born in Terre Haute in 1907. After creating many murals in the 1930s, he worked as an assistant to Rockwell



Gilbert Wilson's rendering of Moby-Dick



Crataegus sp.
(Baroness Hyde de Neuville)

Kent, the most renowned illustrator of *Moby-Dick*, at Kent's estate in the Adirondack Mountains. Wilson disliked Rockwell Kent's woodcuts of Melville's classic, so he developed his own plans to share the tale of obsession. Wilson spoke with John Huston about his ideas for the movie. He corresponded with composers, including Shostakovich and Samuel Barber, about the opera. He thought about a play, a ballet, a TV show. Sometimes his ideas almost came to fruition. Despite encouragement from Pearl S. Buck, Alfred Stieglitz and Eleanor Roosevelt, his many plans came to nought.

Several years after his death in 1991, his personal paintings went to the Slope Art Museum in Terre Haute, Indiana. With the publication of *Moby-Dick: Illustrated by Gilbert Wilson* (Hat & Beard, 2019), his obsessive vision can now reach a wider audience.

In 2020 follow your obsessions!

Becoming subservient to a plant is no horror show. It is a rock gardener's destiny.

Brendan Kenney

WHY DON'T YOU?

by Steve Whitesell



Do some structural pruning on a sunny winter day. There is no better time to closely observe and remove crossed, dead or misshapen branches on trees and shrubs than when leaves are down, there are fewer pressing garden tasks and you can take your time and achieve a good result. While you're outside, look for gaps that can be filled with new plants and prepare lists. If anything on your wish list is unusual or difficult to source, start combing catalogs and websites and order them early to avoid disappointment.

Complete and submit seed exchange requests and start assembling the materials you'll need for planting – pots, trays, soil, grit for top-dressing (fine granitic turkey and poultry grit is available at Agway and online), labels and wire grid hardware cloth to cover trays and protect against marauding squirrels, which will dig through every pot if given the chance. Store materials indoors at least two days in advance of when you'll use them so they will be thawed. There usually are some warm days in mid-February when you won't mind sitting outside long enough to fill pots, plant seeds, topdress with grit and cover with protective wire grid. Leave them outside to stratify and wait for germination later in the spring, or in successive springs for seed requiring multiple stratifications. Growing by seed is fun, easy and the best way to get unusual plants, especially species you can't obtain commercially.

Clean, sharpen and oil your tools to get them ready for the new season. A couple of passes with a file or sharpening stone will work wonders on pruning shears, shovels, trowels and knives. You may want to try a new tool based on the recommendations in this newsletter.

Continue flipping covetously through the catalogs flooding your mailbox. You may not need every item on offer, but you definitely need one or two.

ABBY JANE BRODY'S WINTER WONDERLAND

Winter often gets a bad rap. Here in the northeast, it's generally considered the time of year when our gardens sleep and we dream of spring. But out in East Hampton, Abby Jane Brody's garden is alive with color, showing that even when the days are short and the temperatures fall, there is plenty to enjoy if you choose the right plants.



Hamamelis x intermedia 'Jelena'



Chimonanthus sp.



Crocus sp.



Galanthus sp.



Daphne kamtschatica



Hamamelis mollis 'Wisley Supreme'



Right: *Helleborus* sp.
Below: *Ilex* x 'Rock Garden'



MANHATTAN CHAPTER NARGS

MEMBERSHIP & RENEWAL FORM

Date: _____

If you haven't yet paid your 2020 dues, please complete this form and give it with your payment (cash or check payable to MCNARGS) to Nancy Crumley (Membership Secretary).

Or, mail a check with the form to Nancy Crumley at:
324 Seventh Avenue #4R
Brooklyn, NY 11215

Check one:

1-year Membership \$30

3-year Membership \$75

PLEASE PRINT NEATLY:

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Check all that apply:

I am renewing my membership I am a new member

I would like to receive a paper copy of the newsletter

I would like my newsletter via email only

We are a volunteer organization and would like your participation in our activities. How can you help?

Help with Plant Sale Help increase our presence on Social Media

Serve as Webmaster Contribute articles to the newsletter

Other: _____

OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS 2020

CHAIR

Brendan Kenney ManhattanNARGS@verizon.net

PROGRAM CHAIRS

Brendan Kenney ManhattanNARGS@verizon.net
Susan Steinbrock ssteinbrock@gmail.com

TREASURER

Kay Spurlock kayspurlock@gmail.com

SECRETARY

Lola Lloyd Horwitz llhorwitz@gmail.com

DIRECTORS

Nancy M. Crumley nancycrumley@gmail.com
Judith Dumont judi.dumont@gmail.com
Michael Riley riley2362@aol.com
Susan Steinbrock ssteinbrock@gmail.com

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

Nancy M. Crumley nancycrumley@gmail.com

TOUR DIRECTOR

Brendan Kenney nycbeard@gmail.com

NEWSLETTER EDITOR

Jack Kaplan jkaplan1313@gmail.com

NEWSLETTER PROOFREADER

Nancy M. Crumley

NEWSLETTER FOUNDING EDITOR

Lawrence B. Thomas

THE MANHATTAN CHAPTER of the North American Rock Garden Society, founded in 1987, is a group of gardening enthusiasts who are dedicated to the propagation and promotion of an eclectic range of plants, with emphasis on alpine and rock gardening selections. Our Chapter programs, designed for a sophisticated mix of professionals and amateurs, cover a broad spectrum of special interests such as rock and alpine, woodland, bog, raised bed and planted walls, as well as trough and container gardening.

The Urban Rock Gardener is a newsletter published by the Manhattan Chapter of the North American Rock Garden Society.

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UPCOMING MEETINGS

Monday, March 30

**Native Species, Selections and Cultivars:
How Do I Make the Best Choice for
My Garden and for the Planet?**

ULI LORIMER

Director of Horticulture

Native Plant Trust, Framingham, Massachusetts

April date and speaker to be announced

THE NORTH AMERICAN ROCK GARDEN SOCIETY



JOIN TODAY. NARGS is for gardening enthusiasts interested in alpine, saxatile, and low-growing perennials and woody plants. Annual dues in the U.S. and Canada are \$40, payable in U.S. funds. VISA/Mastercard accepted.

Benefits of membership include: *Rock Garden Quarterly* with articles on alpine and North American wildflowers; annual Seed Exchange with thousands of plant species; study weekends and annual meetings in either U.S. or Canada; and book service.

Join online at www.nargs.org. Or write: Bobby J. Ward, Executive Secretary NARGS, P.O. Box 18604, Raleigh, NC 27619-8604.

The NARGS *Quarterly* is now online and members have free access at www.nargs.org/rock-garden-quarterly.



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WE HOPE TO SEE YOU AT ALL THE UPCOMING MEETINGS

Submission deadline for March/April issue: February 20

MANHATTAN CHAPTER OF THE NORTH AMERICAN ROCK GARDEN SOCIETY

5½ Jane Street #4R
New York, NY 10014

Memo:
**Be sure to pay
your 2020
membership
dues!**

FIRST CLASS MAIL

