

The Urban Rock Gardener



Volume 33, Issue 4

November/December 2020

A LETTER TO THE MEMBERSHIP

As the months of Covid-19 stretch from 2020 into 2021 it is imperative that we continue to connect in this time of increasing isolation. Please attend the MCNARGS Annual Meeting on Monday, December 28 at 6 p.m. via Zoom. It will give us a chance to virtually interact briefly before we hear the financial report and vote for the 2021 Board of Directors.

Many thanks to Kay Spurlock for serving on our board in 2020, a difficult year for us all. Abbie Zabar is joining the board, pending ratification by the membership, as Co-Chair of Programs. She and Susan Steinbrock are planning an exciting lineup of webinar programs in 2021.

We welcome additional board members. Please let a current board member know if you are interested in joining the board or would like to nominate another member.

Do consider writing something for the *Urban Rock Gardener*. It is a good way to share what you have been up to in your garden.

And there has never been a better time to join our parent organization, NARGS. All who attended "Taproot 2020," the informative and fun virtual conference held in June, as well as the recent trough seminar, gave them rave reviews.

While we all miss our in-person meetings and the lively discussions before and after, we can look forward to connecting with one another via Zoom. Stay safe until we can all get together again!

Brendan Kenney, Chair
Manhattan Chapter of NARGS



LIVE FROM LOWER MANHATTAN OUR CHAPTER'S FIRST VIDEO PRESENTATION FEATURES TOUR OF IRISH HUNGER MEMORIAL

On Saturday, October 10, MCNARGS made history with a live, on-location tour of the Irish Hunger Memorial in Battery Park City. While MCNARGS members watched, glued to their computers, smartphones and tablets, the Memorial's curator, Richard Faraino, accompanied by Nancy Crumley, led our viewers through this unique space. We began at the entrance to the Memorial, a passageway under the elevated park, which introduces visitors to the tragic history of the famine that killed over one million people and forced the mass migration of Irish to America in the early 19th century.

On emerging from the passageway, we entered a stone cottage that had once housed a family in Carradoogan in County Mayo, and stood abandoned until it was taken down stone by stone and reconstructed as part of the Memorial. The cottage vividly reminds us what a spartan life the Irish farmers led.

Upon leaving the cottage, we entered the elevated part of the Memorial, which was designed to recreate an authentic Irish land-

Photos above by Sandra Power

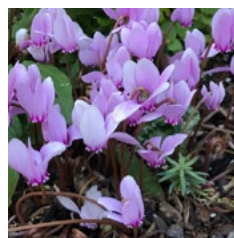
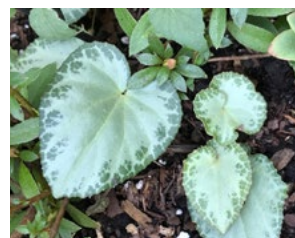
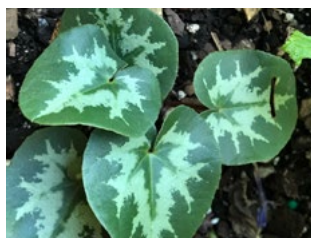
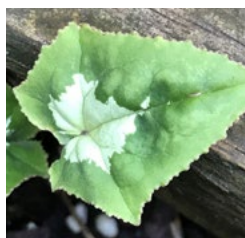
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CYCLAMEN HEDERIFOLIUM AN UNASSUMING STAR OF THE FALL SHADE GARDEN

It's fall, and how I'd love to have billowing bright blue asters and glorious goldenrods in my garden. But I have neither the space nor the sun. However, in mid-September, the flowers of *Cyclamen hederifolium* (pink or white) begin to emerge, and continue well into November, at which point their leaves take the starring role. In my garden, *C. hederifolium* thrives with root competition, acting as "shoes and socks" for dying foliage of various herbaceous perennials and deciduous woody plants. As the sun diminishes and the long shadows increase, this little plant stars in my garden.

JUDI DUMONT



REAL DEAL FISH BOX TROUGHS – A NEW YORK TAIL

When visiting Scotland on the NARGS tour in the spring of 2019, we witnessed “fish box troughs” in the gardens of several members of the Scottish Rock Garden Club and found ourselves making silly and superfluous exclamations such as ... “they look so real!”

The concept of growing alpine and rock garden plants in polystyrene containers was not a new one because we had been hearing about them from Ian Young and others for the past ten to fifteen years. However, many of us had never actually seen them finished, painted and planted. I recall visiting the terrace of MCNARGS member Ellie Popper a number of years ago and noting that almost all of her pots and other containers were sitting in white Styrofoam coolers. While not particularly pretty, they did provide a buffer to the winds and temperature fluctuations that we experience on city rooftops and terraces. I began using this method to insulate my rooftop plantings, even for concrete and hypertufa containers, and this provided one more measure to get them through adverse times. I also made note of the much lighter weight bearing down on the heads of the residents in the apartment below.

However, a bizarre thing was happening to my white coolers: they were visibly “disintegrating” over the period of a few years. One day I saw a flock of pigeons (not welcome gardeners) pecking at the containers and realized that *they* were causing the deterioration – but where was all the little “white stuff” going? It turns out they were eating it! I consulted Mr. Google and found the story of a man who had built a chicken coop and lined it with white polystyrene panels which the chickens proceeded to DEVOUR. Apparently there is no proof that this is detrimental to the birds and perhaps has something to do with aiding their digestion (like chicken grit?) but this gave me even more reason to make the containers look like real troughs, which would, hopefully, outwit the pigeons!

I found several sets of instructions and adjusted them according to what I thought would produce the best results for my project. First of all, I started with a polystyrene container with substantial thickness to the walls and bottom of about 1" to 1½". When the purpose is to duplicate the strength and insulation of a stone trough, heavier is better. It also provides the artist with more material on which to unleash his wrath in attempting to make it look “real” (more about this shortly). Many of the containers that I was already using were too large, considering the ultimate weight and size of making a moveable trough. The cost to buy new containers was prohibitive and besides – why not reuse something that is routinely disposed of and cannot be “recycled” for environmental purposes? Short of going through all the dumpsters in the neighborhood, I looked on Craigslist for “Styrofoam Containers” and much to my surprise, there was a woman not six blocks away from me who was offering 10 x 12 x 8 containers for FREE. My new friend Nicki had a charming little 13-year old dog named Jojo who required medication shipped to him monthly in these nice insulated containers. Fortunately for everyone, Jojo’s health persisted for nearly a year and I would regularly receive emails from Nicki announcing “one more cooler.” We are all indebted to Jojo for his contribution to the world of rock gardening. Nicki had little familiarity with our usage, but will be reading this to understand our full appreciation. Thanks, kids!

My ultimate objective was to make these white boxes look like stone

livestock troughs – a messy job due to the carving involved. Fortunately, I could work on the roof, where I could try to contain all of the flying pellets and pieces of polystyrene (I would not have liked to have done it in my living room!). The more savage the attack on the polystyrene, the better. I started with a bread knife and ended with a wire brush, all the while looking over my shoulder to see if the police or men in white coats were coming to lock me up. Drainage holes punched into the bottom were essential, as was rounding off the corners – each was an exotic sculpture and Abbie Zabar suggested that I sign them!

To dress up the boxes, I used commercial masonry paint, which is a water-based latex. My paint store mixes colors to order, so I chose a neutral color and bought a package of sand to enhance the texture. The sand turned out to be superfluous and subsequently was not used, and the solitary color did not reflect the rugged texture I wanted. I ultimately bought three shades of neutral colors and started with the darker shade

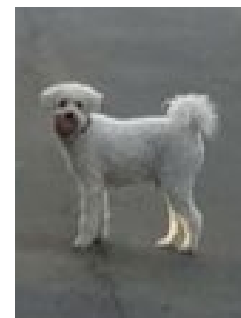
first, to fill in the deeper cavities, then progressed to the lighter shades to highlight. Essentially, the three coats of paint provided a substantial surface in terms of durability. After a year on the roof, the only place there is any white showing through is where I bumped one of the troughs with metal chickenwire fencing and it was easily dabbed with a magic marker to cover. Because it was not white, it did not attract the ever-present pigeons for feasting.

Of course, fish boxes (“dressed up” or not) can be used not only to insulate plants, but as “faux” hypertufa troughs. Ian Young has been the pioneer in this practice, specializing in shallow pots. Some of these are very artistic, but he is in Scotland with milder winters and I think deeper containers offer better protection to the root zone, providing insulation from the heat, cold and moisture retention in our U.S. Zone 6-7. When planting the hardy troughs, I put mostly sand in the bottom (thank you, Peter Korn), as large a chunk of tufa as I can fit inside, and a minimal amount of organic soil, topped off with a medium gravel. I did make a shallower container, with no drainage holes in the bottom, for half-hardy plants which I bring inside when the temperature goes below about 28 degrees. The substrate in this one is a peat block which stays moist all year, with some large chunks of tufa embedded.

This project is fun and creative and horticulturally sound for providing the ultimate “situ” for your plants. If you don’t find a “Jojo” in your neighborhood, you might stalk the trash of neighbors who eat lots of imported fish and meat. Outside my local fish market I saw two boxes the other day that were four feet long – I could hardly resist the temptation to salvage them! But if you aren’t into scavenging, I have several troughs stored in my apartment that I had made for the MCNARGS plant sale this past spring. If you are interested, let me know. These “priceless pieces of sculpture” can be yours for a \$25 contribution to MCNARGS, but in making them, the fun was mine!

MICHAEL RILEY

Here is a link to Ian Young’s article on fish box troughs:
<http://files.srgc.net/general/FishBoxTroughs-JIY.pdf> – Ed.



Left to right: A hardy fish box trough from start to finish. Far right: the invaluable Jojo.



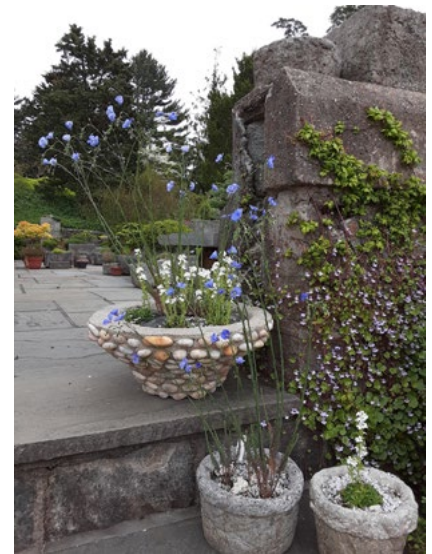
THE HOLIDAY ITCH (SEED-SORTING CAN GET UNDER YOUR SKIN!)

It seems like once you get the itch you don't lose it. Earlier this fall, some of our most devoted seed processors had already stepped up for more work. I guess those dark winter evenings without a pile of "sleeves" in front of them just don't command the proper holiday cheer. Bring on music, a plate of homemade cookies and those seeds of known or unknown species and the "seedaholics" are set for some joyful or at least interesting hours. By the way, "sleeve" is the term for the deep cardboard pocket that all donations of the same species are mailed in.

It goes without saying that nature has given us many, many species of plants to grow, love and want to share with others. We do this by way of the NARGS Seed Exchange. In the recent past our chapter has handled 200 sleeves each winter; the seeds within are sometimes tiny, easily blown, sometimes bouncy, sometimes hard to separate. By now, our members know that facing off with these seeds is a crazy, fun experience.

This year we must process seeds in isolation of each other. It pains me, but at least I know we have members willing to do so. As this newsletter goes to press I am happy to write that our chapter will do its bit to disseminate seeds among the "grow-it-from-seed" enthusiasts of NARGS. As one of those enthusiasts, I hope our numbers increase!

LOLA LLOYD HORWITZ



All of the plants pictured were grown from seed acquired through the NARGS Seed Exchange. They were cultivated at Wave Hill by horticulturist Susannah Strazera, who manages the alpine collection. Clockwise from the upper left: *Aquilegia flabellata* var. *pumila*, *Lewisia cotyledon*, *Lewisia cotyledon* showing root system, *Linum lewisii* and *Erinus alpinus*, *Arabis bryoides*, *Campanula saxifraga*, *Penstemon hirsutus*, *Pulsatilla nigricans*. (Photos by Susannah Strazera)

A NOTE FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

Per a decision by the MCNARGS Board of Directors, **all MCNARGS memberships have been extended by one year.**

If you have any questions, please contact Membership Secretary Nancy Crumley (nancycrumley@gmail.com).

We regret to announce that Steve Whitesell has decided not to continue writing his "Why Don't You?" column. We will all miss the helpful advice he has offered over the years. However, we have not heard the last of him, as he will continue to contribute occasional pieces. Thank you, Steve, for your devotion to MCNARGS, its members, and the *Urban Rock Gardener*.

THE EDITOR



The Social Hall abuts a low hill. Note the large rock.



The retaining wall – a possible home for rock garden plants?

FROM OVERGROWN MESS TO FOCAL POINT (WITH YOUR ADVICE)

I spent most of the summer of 2020 at Reynolds Hills, a cabin community in Peekskill. It sits on fifty acres of land, and is home to seventy-one seasonal cottages, one of which belongs to my partner. The community has an on-site caretaker, but as you can imagine, with so much acreage, volunteers are welcome in all arenas, including gardening.

To that end, I've been working with a couple of neighbors to clean out an area near one of the few large buildings in the community, the Social Hall, which is host to yoga classes, potluck dinners and meetings. The land we are working on is a low hill about thirty feet long, and is accessible on all sides. It deserves to be a focal point of the community, but has long been left to its own devices. The land has some beautiful, big rocks, as well as a number of trees. It is dry and shady, in a region in which deer and woodchucks abound.

Our soon-to-be garden was jam-packed with barberry, winged euonymus, bittersweet and honeysuckle, most of which we have removed. There is still some pachysandra growing happily, but we are hoping to get rid of it, too. I'd like to try a weeping redbud over the largest rock (see photo). We are interested in also incorporating mounding shrubs, stalwart perennials and groundcovers, and there is a retaining wall which

could possibly be a home for rock garden plants. We welcome any and all suggestions. I can be reached at jftnyc@verizon.net.

Peekskill is easily accessible by train or car. If any of you would like to check out the area, let me know. Manitoga (the Russell Wright home-
stead), and Stonecrop Gardens are nearby. There are also many hiking trails around, some with expansive Hudson River views.

Thanks for your thoughts on our planting. We hope to hear from you soon.

JOHN TWEDDLE, AS TOLD TO JANE DEL VILLAR

Reynolds Hills has a fascinating history. It was founded in 1929 as a campground for Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Many were garment workers in New York City sweatshops and were members of the Communist Party. They called the settlement "Followers of the Trail," and it began with tents and a communal dining hall, and eventually grew into a bungalow colony. With the passage of time, the residents' adherence to Communism waned, and in 1952 the community was reorganized and renamed Reynolds Hills.

IRISH HUNGER MEMORIAL

Continued from Page 1

scape, featuring plants that would have been found on an abandoned farm and environs in the 1850s. Making liberal use of his shillelagh, imported from Ireland and fashioned from wood of the blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Richard pointed out some of the plants that bloom at different times throughout the year and include sweet clover, heath and heather, leucanthemum, silene, *Campanula rotundifolia*, poppies and ranunculus, and grasses such as carex, sheep fescue and rushes.

As we walked the curving path that led upwards through the Memorial we passed many rocks, thirty-two in all, with the names of the counties of Ireland engraved on them. We had a look at the potato field, which demonstrates how farmers cultivated their crops using "lazy beds" – rows divided by furrows that allowed rainwater to collect around the plants, easing the need for irrigation. (But no, Richard does not grow potatoes.) We also had a close-up look at the smaller plants, such as sedums, thyme, herb robert (*Geranium robertianum*) and grasses, all growing in the stone walls that line the pathway – the closest thing to alpine gardening one can find in this exposed and windy site.

A massive stone engraved with a facsimile of a Celtic cross marks the highest point of the Memorial. Here, visitors can enjoy an expansive view of the Hudson River before turning around and descending the path for another look at this patch of Ireland, with time to think about the lives that were lost – and are still being lost – to hunger today.

This initial venture into "live broadcasting" did not go without some glitches. The constant wind at times rendered Richard's narration difficult to understand, and other visitors to the Memorial created some unwanted distractions, but on the whole, most viewers would agree that Richard's tour was fascinating and whetted our appetites for an in-person visit.

Thanks also go to Nancy, for assisting with the tour and asking some pertinent questions, and to Sandra Power, who skillfully managed the camera under challenging conditions.

For those of you who missed the tour, it is available by contacting Brendan Kenney at ManhattanNARGS@verizon.net.

JACK KAPLAN

ANOTHER HOOSIER [BACK] IN MANHATTAN

by Brendan Kenney, Chair



THE VERNAL EQUINOX, summer solstice and autumnal equinox were all spent in Indiana this year. Covid-19 and preparing the family home and landscape for sale kept me away except for two brief road trips back to NYC. I gardened for the last time in the Hoosier state from March 11 through October 13. It was a long, but good farewell! Fittingly, my last night in Indiana was at my cousin's sixty-five acres in Nineveh (formerly Williamsburgh), birthplace of one of my favorite painters, William Merritt Chase, another Hoosier drawn to New York.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE CITY, Manhattan Chapter members had been busy! I was delighted to open the fall issue of the NARGS *Rock Garden Quarterly* and find articles by some familiar names ... "From Alpines to Bogs: Gardening in Pots and Troughs in a Brooklyn Garden" by Judi Dumont; "Rooftop Conifer Garden" by Colby Feller (May 2018 MCNARGS speaker with Bruce Feller); and "Trough Gardening Among Skyscrapers" by Josie Lawlor (September 2017 MCNARGS speaker). Josie, a long-time Manhattan Chapter member, was also a featured speaker at the recent NARGS trough seminar. In addition, Abbie Zabar was a NARGS photo contest winner with "Fall Wall: Trougherie on Ledge" in the category "Best Use of Troughs in the Garden."

OLIN STUDIO had also been busy with a marvelous transformation of the landscape in Lower Manhattan on Pier 26, a 2.5-acre ecologically-themed pier on the Hudson River. Woodland forest, coastal grassland, maritime scrub and rocky tidal zone are included. *Spartina alterniflora* grows once again in an [artificial] salt marsh and *Opuntia humifusa* graces the shore, evoking an earlier ecological time.



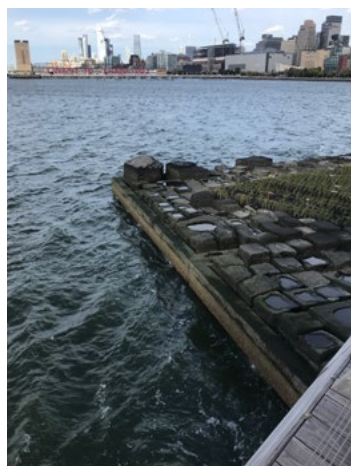
"Fall Wall: Trougherie on Ledge" by Abbie Zabar

© Abbie Zabar

AFTER MONTHS of battling voles, moles, chipmunks, squirrels and deer in Indiana, a recent Linnaean Society webinar, "Rats in the City: Ecological and Conservation Implications of a Global Pest" by Matthew Combs, Ph.D., made me feel like I was finally home again and up against a proper garden foe. Here is the link: <https://www.linnaeannewyork.org/matthew-combs-ph-d-rats-in-the-city-ecological-and-conservation-implications-of-a-global-pest-7-pm-11-10-20/>

I am looking forward to the winter solstice in Manhattan where a Hoosier with New Netherlands ancestors belongs.

Brendan Kenney



Left: Part of Pier 26's tide deck, which submerges with the tides. Above: *Opuntia humifusa*.

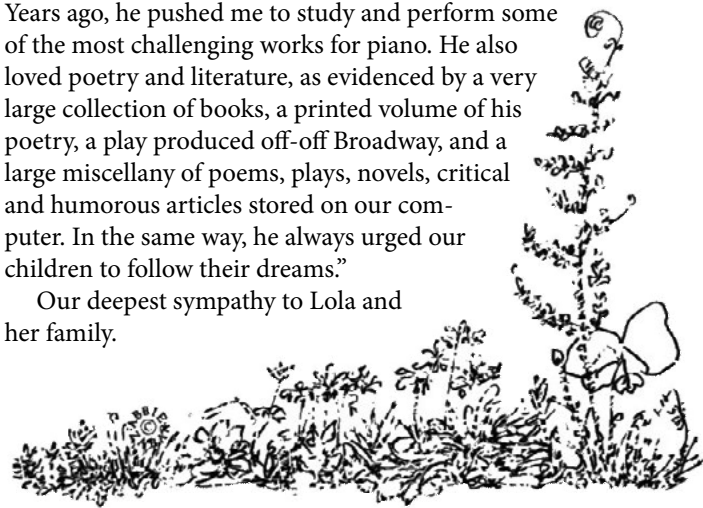
DONALD HORWITZ

1933–2020

We regret to announce the passing of Lola Lloyd Horwitz's husband, Donald Horwitz, who died of pancreatic cancer on May 31, at home, surrounded by his family.

Donald was Lola's life partner for nearly sixty years, and would have turned 87 on his birthday this November. Lola says, "Music brought us together and gave us pleasure throughout the years. Years ago, he pushed me to study and perform some of the most challenging works for piano. He also loved poetry and literature, as evidenced by a very large collection of books, a printed volume of his poetry, a play produced off-off Broadway, and a large miscellany of poems, plays, novels, critical and humorous articles stored on our computer. In the same way, he always urged our children to follow their dreams."

Our deepest sympathy to Lola and her family.



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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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Our gratitude to Michael Riley for donating the printing and mailing of the *Urban Rock Gardener*.

UPCOMING VIRTUAL MEETINGS

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MANHATTAN CHAPTER OF THE NORTH AMERICAN ROCK GARDEN SOCIETY

**Monday, December 28 at 6:00 p.m.
via Zoom**

MCNARGS members will elect the Board of Directors.
Please contact us if you are interested in running,
or want to nominate someone who would like to serve.

Up for election:

Nancy Crumley, Judi Dumont, Lola Lloyd Horwitz,
Brendan Kenney, Michael Riley,
Susan Steinbrock, Abbie Zabar

Monday, January 25 – via Zoom

The Alpine Collection at Denver Botanic Gardens

MIKE KINTGEN

Senior Horticulturist

Denver Botanic Gardens

Monday, February 22 – via Zoom

Evolution of My Garden – From Old Garden to New

ELISABETH ZANDER

President

North American Rock Garden Society

*Links to Zoom meetings will be emailed
to the membership prior to the event*

WE HOPE TO "SEE" YOU AT ALL OUR UPCOMING VIRTUAL MEETINGS

Submission deadline for January/February issue: December 27

MANHATTAN CHAPTER OF THE NORTH AMERICAN ROCK GARDEN SOCIETY

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