

Newsletter

North American Rock Garden Society
Berkshire Chapter February 2006

Next Meeting

Saturday, March 11 at 10:30 AM
Berkshire South Regional Community Center – this facility is located at 15 Crissy Road off Route 7 in Great Barrington. Check the website, www.berkshiresouth.org for instructions or call 413- 528-2810 for directions.

Chapter Business: Show & Tell, Ask The Expert, and any other relevant (or irrelevant) issues of concern to our members

AM - My Nursery and Propagation Techniques

Janis Ruksans

Lunch: BYO and Desserts Welcomed

PM – Bulbs of the Former Soviet Union

Janis Ruksans

Janis Ruksans is one of the great plant collectors and nurserymen in the world. He started his nursery in Latvia over 40 years ago, when Latvia was a part of the Soviet Union. Against all odds, he has built his nursery into *the* premier supplier of rare and unusual bulbs. His variety and his quality make his nursery unique, and make Ruksans one of the most interesting people in gardening today.

His specialties are allium, corydalis, iris, crocus and species tulips of the Caucasus, Middle East and Siberia. His new catalogue will be available at the meeting.

This is a once in a lifetime program.

PLEASE make every effort to attend.

NARGS and Robin Magowan are to be thanked for their efforts in bringing Ruksans to the United States, and to BNARGS in particular.

Chairman's Message

By *Peter George*

Snow has come and gone and all within one week. On Valentine's Day the snow was 19 inches deep, and now, 6 days later, it's a frozen, barren (snowless) wasteland on my property. This has truly been a strange winter. I hope my plants (and yours) are not as bothered by the weather this year as I am.

My 'winter' seeds are planted and outside, hopefully getting vernalized and preparing to germinate for me this spring. The waiting now is pretty much all I do until I can actually go into the garden and do something. Of course it gives me a lot of time to edit this newsletter and do a bunch of other administrative things I didn't know about when I accepted the Chairmanship. I am finding that these jobs are much more challenging than I realized, and a bit more time consuming. There really should be an apprenticeship for the job, since mistakes are difficult to avoid if you don't know what you're doing, and it's often very difficult to overcome them. But I will slog on, and hopefully we'll have a really successful year of programs, plant sales, increased membership and general gardening camaraderie.

Our first program is a must, so please try to come. It's at a different location, so check out the website or call for directions. In addition, there are some unusual scheduling changes. Our

programs are **NOT** all going to be on the 1st Saturday this year, so please pay close attention to the schedule which is in this newsletter and will be posted on our website. Questions? Call me at 978-724-0299.

This issue has the usual mix of the informative, the entertaining and the unusual. I'm interested in your reactions to the material, so please feel free to email me with your thoughts about the newsletter, the schedule or pretty much anything else rock gardening related. My email is: petergeorge@verizon.net.

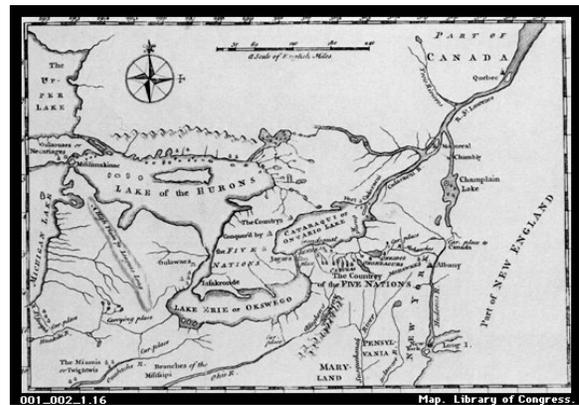
Finally, our newsletters are available on our website in PDF format. Thank Pam Johnson for the work she does in maintaining the site. I hope to see you all in March.

Using What's Out There

By Dutch Uncle Dean

I'm off for breakfast and will stop to get the rest of the knotty pine paneling that some new people pulled off their cathedral ceiling. I can use this scrap to dress up my back porch. The boards are sealed with shellac. I'll lightly sand them and then paint with a coat of high gloss barn red. I had a distant relative whose name was Martin Murlmelstein. He came to upstate New York in the early 1600's. He left New York/New Amsterdam with a horse and a wagonload of goods. He peddled these to the farmsteads up to around Kingston or Newburgh before he decided it was too difficult to take the wagon much further. He broke it down, sold one axle and set of wheels for what he had in the whole rig and started on with the horse pulling a jig. He made some major trades at Fort Orange/Albany, got out to Schoharie, a little beyond Schaugnatada (Schenectady), before the trails made going

farther impossible. He sold the horse for what everything had cost, including the goods. He sold one wheel and made a wheelbarrow with the other. He cut the traces down for handles and pushed on down into the Mohawk Valley, just east of The Nose, the prominent limestone ridge that dominates the skyline east of Fort Plain and Canajoharie. Starting west along the Indian trail he came to a Mohawk village, named Onekagonka. It was on the bank of the Wasontah creek. The Mohawks were a peculiar combination of shrewdness, semi-civilization, and childishness and practiced the most fiendish savagery. They were the keepers of the Eastern door for the Iroquois Confederation.



The Senecas guarded the Western door. The warring skills of the Mohawks were constantly being tested by the Hurons of the North, as both peoples claimed overlapping territory. The Mohawks claimed as far North as the St. Lawrence and somewhat beyond and this put them in conflict with the Hurons. It was from the Mohawks that the war chiefs for the Federation were chosen. They cultivated the native vegetables on the river flats and some of the native fruits on nearby slopes. They made maple sugar, raised tobacco, trapped, fished and hunted. They lived in longhouses made from saplings and poles covered with bark. Some were of considerable size, as much as 100 strides in length. Oftentimes these houses

were placed in rows with a street in between, surrounded by a crude stockade. This is how they became known as “Indian castles”.

Martin traded with these Indians and pushed on West for a Dutch half mile to Canowarode, (A Dutch mile equals 2 ¼ English miles) then on West to Senatsycrosy, near present day Sprakers. The next castle was named Canagere. A Dutch half mile beyond it was Sochanidisse, which contained 32 houses and was built on a high hill. It was on a projecting point of land in the Happy Hollow district west of present day Canajoharie. The fourth castle was Osquage – its chief’s name was Ognoho (The Wolf). Its location was Prospect Hill, near Fort Plain. The last castle was named Tenotoge. This was the largest village in the valley at that period. There were 55 houses – the whole site covered about 10 acres of ground. It was getting to be late fall so he knew he should be getting back to civilization to hole up for the winter. But trading with the Indians was like taking candy from a baby. He worked out an arrangement with them to stay until spring. He gave them a half-yard of cloth, two axes, two knives, four awls and a pair of shoes in return for lodging. The Indians were enthralled with the awls. They recognized that these sharp pointed tools allowed them to punch precise holes on the edge of fur pelts. The pelts would then be laced together to make warm clothing. As things happen, he got involved with one of the Indian girls. The Iroquois made it a policy that girls could not be taken from their villages, but had to be an extension of their mother’s clan. So if a boy, say of the Seneca tribe, were to meet a girl of the Oneida tribe, he would have to stay with her people. This was the main factor that made for peace in the Iroquois Federation, as people would think twice before they had

conflicts with a tribe that may contain their relatives. It turned out that the Mohawks could not say the word “Murmelstein”, just as some Scandinavian people can’t pronounce the letter “w”, so they took to calling him by a native American name. Since Marty was married to Dancing Fawn, they gave him a deer-related moniker. That is why I descend from Dancing Fawn and Marty Murmelstein, *aka* Tight with a Buck. I am always out looking for things that people discard. Because of the cost of labor or storage, businesses often either scrap valuable and useful materials or sell them for a pittance. Oftentimes because of standardization wonderful products are no longer available. People throw away things that can’t be replaced.



Speaking of wheelbarrows, you can still buy a good one if you get a construction grade model. There are cheaper models that look similar but they have thinner metal pans, handles that are of poor quality wood, wheels that are smaller in diameter, have bronze bushings versus bearings, and are unable to be greased. If you go to the Grainger website (www.grainger.com) you’ll see what a good wheelbarrow should have. The hardwood handles are graded lower than furniture boards, but all hardwood is quarter-sawed so it is strong. If you look at the handles you’ll see that there is evidence of cross graining – it’s like the fletches you see on a tiger maple bureau drawer. The handles are the first part of a

wheelbarrow to wear out. You can maintain them by keeping them sealed from moisture through the use of a urethane spray or shellac. You could also thin out some oil-based paint and apply it to the handles. At the homepage of the website mentioned above choose the category “Outdoor Equipment”, within that category choose “Lawn & garden”. Next click on “Wheelbarrows” and if you look at Model #3ZC35 and read you will see that it is a very well made tool. The wheel is large, allowing you to roll over uneven ground. The hub is drilled and tapped for a grease fitting. By filling the cavity along the axle you can lubricate the balls in the bearing race, making the wheelbarrow much easier to push. It also seals out moisture, dirt and sand that would be abrasive. This abrasion is what wears out the bronze bushings on cheap wheelbarrows, causing the wheel to wobble.

A good wheelbarrow for a gardener is like a stalwart friend – it shares in each garden project until their gardening days end. With a wheelbarrow you can work in tight spaces – it turns with ease. It’s like dancing with a big woman who loves to dance – you can’t help but marvel at how much you can move around! I also have the model with the two wheels in front and the plastic tray – it’s cumbersome and offers few advantages over a single-wheel model. They try to promote it as being more stable – I don’t find it so. One wheelbarrow that I like which is a little hard to come by is the platform model. It is made with a wooden platform and a front upright. It is easy to load and off-load because there are no sides, you can pile things on it well, such as wood. I routinely move large pots on it as well as carry bags of grain. By placing a mortar pan on it, it becomes a standard wheelbarrow. I bought mine from a roofing supply house – the people who put on build-up roofs on city

buildings move the tarpaper rolls on them. When I brought it home I wiped it down with mineral spirits to clean it up and then painted it with two coats of urethane. That has protected the wood and it still looks new.

Everybody understands the value of coaster wagons– they are still the cheapest way to carry something. Many nurseries have them for customer use – places like Blanchette, which by the way, is an excellent nursery close to all of you. It’s good to wash the wagon out on a hot summer day, after lightly sanding rusted spots. Follow this with a coat of red spray paint. A thing of beauty is a joy forever – who doesn’t have great memories of pulling a wagon around as a child? Form some newspaper to the shape of the inside, transfer to a piece of cardboard and keep for a pattern. Make a double thickness of cardboard padding to protect the inside of the wagon – it also makes it a little less noisy.



Recently I was given a worn-out wheelchair – I folded it up and put it in the back of my truck. I stopped at a hardware store and bought three galvanized bushel baskets – these will outlast those plastic tubs from Wal-Mart 10 to 1. I use a bungee chord to hold these baskets in place on the seat of the wheelchair. The top one holds trowels, weeders and whatnot. The second one I use to hold pulled weeds. The third one is in case I have a “bionic” day, which has not yet occurred. In truth, I spend as much time down on my knees pulling weeds as I do sitting in the wheelchair, looking at the beauty around me.



Our 2006 Schedule

1. March 11, 2006 - **Janis Ruksans**, one of the leading bulb propagators and nurserymen in the world. His nursery is in Latvia, and he has been collecting, propagating and selling bulbs from Asia and Europe since the 1970s. **The program will be at the Berkshire South Regional Community Center.** Starting time is 10:30 AM. The morning program will be about his nursery and propagation, and the afternoon program will be about bulbs of the former Soviet Union.
2. April 1, 2006 - **Larry Thomas** from NYC will talk about troughs. We intend to have a trough soil program in the afternoon as well. This program is at the Berkshire Botanical Garden, as are all of the subsequent programs.
3. May 6 - **Don Dembowski** will talk about woodland plants and plant photography. David Gehr, another of our members, will also be speaking about plant photography.
4. June 10 - **Michael Peden** will be speaking on plants of the North American West in anticipation of the international gathering in Utah in July.
5. July 1 - **David Robinson** will be speaking on Garden Structures.
6. August 12 - **Darrell Probst and John Bieber** will be speaking on Daphnes and other things yet to be determined.
7. September 2 - Big Plant Sale and speaker yet to be determined.
8. October 7 - **Kristl Walek**, proprietor of Gardens North, a Canadian seed house is tentatively scheduled.

9. November 18 - Our Annual Luncheon will feature **C. Colston Burrell**, a world renowned garden designer, photographer, naturalist, and award winning author. The lunch will be a 'Potluck' meal and will be at the Berkshire facility.



Anchoring Flowers In The Rain

By *Robin Magowan*

Call up the source of light,
That flood of eye-drenched inquiry.

I drink of an earth so mired
In desire it no longer holds me.

Within the gathered sky,
Under clouds, I welcome the inexpressible

As it bursts from shattered hillsides.
What sets a torrent raging?

Rampant tears?
The water I own I give

Encircled by all my plants
Hover over, rivulets issuing

From night's longing.
I spread my hands and a line

Of waving irises lifts off,
Memories sparkling in the wind.

The Kenners On Gardening: *Two Different Perspectives*

(Alexandra) Fifteen years ago we decided that because of the value of property in our area, continuing to remodel the house we lived in was no longer economically feasible. So we set forth to find the perfect place for ourselves, our collection of azaleas and rhododendron and our aged, beloved cat.

After two years of searching we concluded that the only way we could have both the house and the property we wanted would be to find some land and build our own home, and so we embarked on this continuing adventure. After an additional two years we finally found the perfect place for all of us.

My husband, the lover of rocks, has this amazing rock outcropping that takes up much of our backyard. I have almost enough sunlight to plant my vegetable garden and enough shade for my rhododendron and azaleas and the cat lived out her life happily hunting rodents and sitting by our pond watching the fish.

One would think that we would be happy leaving well enough alone; not us. First my husband decided that we could not leave this rock alone. There should be something that we could plant on this piece of solid granite. With my experience from our previous garden, in which my husband took little interest, I decided he really was clueless. He then proceeded to show me magazine photos of rock gardens, all the while not hearing my explanations of how one could not grow anything on rock.

During one of my many expeditions in search of unusual plants we had the good fortune of meeting Midge Riggs who seemed to agree with my husband. She sent

us to Stonecrop Gardens in Cold Spring, N.Y. where I learned that you could, with some modification, indeed plant on rock, and so my rock garden began.

I learned that although I had no crevices between my rocks, I could create crevices by backfilling the flat areas with sand into which I stand rocks. I then fill to the top with more sand and cover with gravel. And that as long as I provide ample drainage my plants will thrive.

I also learned that all beds do not grow all manner of rock garden plants but most will handle some unique and lovely plants of one type or another and it takes experimentation to determine which plant is best suited to which site. Giving up is too often a missed opportunity to grow some wonderful plants. If *Lewisia Tweedii* will not grow in



a sand bed, try growing it in a wall as the English do. Sometimes we are fortunate to find the perfect place immediately and other times we need to just keep trying and speaking to other gardeners looking for clues to success. Being a good rock gardener is often just being a good forensic detective.

Most importantly, I learned that my husband is not the gardening dingbat that I sometimes think he is, and is always happy to encourage me in my next insanity. The only payback he requires is that I continue to help him place the rocks he provides so that

together we can create beautiful gardens, him and his rocks and me and my plants.

(Lynn) I believe rocks and rock outcroppings make a landscape and a great garden is a combination of rocks and plants. The goal is not to imitate nature but like an impressionist's painting of flowers, to remind people *of* nature.

Rocks are dramatic, they don't need watering or fertilizing; if you have the strength you can move them anytime. There is no need to worry about zones, microclimates, sun or shade. Most importantly, rocks are the only things in our garden that are truly deer-proof.

In our garden I contribute the rocks/boulders. We are fortunate that nature gave us a rock ledge of about 150 feet long and 20 feet high, which is the garden's spine. My job is to drag the rocks and help Alex place them for maximum effect.

Sand, gravel and troughs are covering the rock ledge, which dominates the back of our property. This is my fault; I told Alex that we should grow some plants on the ledge. She told me I was nuts; you can't grow plants in granite. But I am a husband; I had to prove that sometimes I could be right. I made the mistake of showing her some pictures of some plants growing on rock ledges. That started it. Since we are on granite, and don't have crevices, we started laying soil, sand and gravel on our ledge.

Depending on our mood, we laugh or cry about our mistakes and lay claim (disputed by many) of having the most expensive mulch pile in the state. We were told to plant in sand and gravel, but we knew better. Put some topsoil and manure in the mix; and those poor little plants would really thrive.

If you need sand, just go to the building supply lot and buy some beach sand and the many other mistakes made by people who try this unique type of gardening without a clue as to what they are doing.



We have learned a lot and enjoy our garden. We know how to plant gardens on granite, we learned that some plants want water in the spring, but not in the summer, what works for one gardener in one locale does not work in another and that different types of plants require different types of care and conditions. Our garden is still a work in process as we try new plants, techniques and ideas. Has anyone else tried growing an azalea in tufa?

The basic lesson we have learned is that a garden is a living thing; plants grow, die, spread and conditions change. A real gardener guides this process; a poor one fights it.

Minutes of the November Meeting

By Jeffrey Hurtig

About 35 members and guests attended the November meeting, our Annual Luncheon meeting. It was the final meeting of 2005,

and was presided over by Elizabeth Zander, who completed her year as Chairperson and Newsletter Editor. She discussed the forthcoming seed distribution



project in which we have been asked to help, and offered final instructions to those members who were intending to participate. Our speaker, Rick Lupp of Mount Tahoma Nurseries, presented an outstanding program on growing alpiners in sand. It was one of the best programs I've seen, and his slides were both informative and of excellent quality. For the entire club, I'd like to thank Elizabeth for her service to us, and Pam Johnson for arranging the event and making sure we were well fed.

Nursery of The Month

Each month I'm going to provide a link to a nursery that serves our hobby well. This month's choice is:



One of the elite seed houses in North America, **Rocky Mountain Rare Plants** offers flower seed from the high mountains and arid plateaus of the US west and from around the world. They also offer germination data and information on how to grow alpine plants. Rocky Mountain Rare Plants sells and ships seed around the world. Their website is: www.rmrp.com

A Little Geology

By *Louise Parsons*

Quarry sand is sand that has been mechanically crushed. Beach sand has rounded particles, while quarry sand particles are angular and irregular in shape. Theoretically such rounded particles would provide more interstitial space and thus more drainage, but in practice the opposite is most often true. Here's why: Natural beach processes of friction and slow grinding tend to produce sand grains with opposite sides that are flattened. You can observe this 'natural physics' at work in larger pebbles on the beach. These tend to pack more densely (they "shingle") and thus deter drainage.



River, outwash, and aeolian (wind-sculpted) sand grains tend to 'tumble' more erratically and are thus more irregular in shape, or even more evenly rounded. Crushed sand or quarry sand will be very rough and irregular in shape. Water finds its way though the irregular space between grains, which is more interconnected. Washing any sand to rid it of fines also encourages good drainage. Otherwise fines fill-in pore space and clog material. Aeolian soils have wonderful drainage because wind sorts particles by size very effectively.

Along this line of geological trivia, pumice does not absorb or hold as much

water as you might imagine, even though it is sponge-like in texture. Again, because the seemingly ample pore space is not actually very well interconnected. This is why 'porous' volcanics don't make especially good aquifers. Pumice is nonetheless an excellent material that promotes drainage in soil. And for many penstemons, it holds "just enough water". Rick Lupp of Mt. Tahoma Nursery grows many penstemons to perfection in beds largely consisting of pumice.

Remember that whatever you put into a pot, bed, or frame gravity is relentless! All materials will thus consolidate and pack-down over time.

This article was originally posted on the Penstemon-L listserv January 27, 2006 and is published here with the permission of Louise Parsons, the author.

*Her email address is: parsont@peak.org
Read the Penstemon-L archives at:*

<http://listserv.surfnet.nl/archives/penstemon-1.html>

SOMETHING NEW

By Nick Nickou

Some years ago I found a plant growing in one of my gravel paths which I had never seen before. It was about an inch high and three inches wide. After about five years, it is now about two inches by eight inches and resembles a tiny Hypericum. But, it has four petals.



I consulted Gray's Manual of Botany and went directly to the family Guttiferae (previously Hypericaceae).

Hypericum has five petals and five sepals. Ascyrum has four petals and four sepals.

Hypericums are generally called St. John's Worts. The plant I found is *Ascyrum hypericoides* var. *multicaule* and is called St. Andrew's Cross. It is found naturally from Nantucket to New Jersey and a number of other Southeastern states. How this plant got into my garden, I do not know--possibly carried on the soles of my shoes following a visit to where it occurs naturally.

A seedling, which grew in some good soil nearby, is 8 inches high and 12 inches wide. Although not spectacular it should be an interesting contribution to a dry sandy spot in full sun. I will try to pot up some of the small seedlings and bring them to a sale.



Positions of Responsibility

Chairperson – Peter George
Vice-Chairperson – Dean Evans
Secretary – Norma Abel
Treasurer – Jeffrey Hurtig
Archivist – James Fichter
Audio Visual Chairperson – Dean Evans
Greeter – Open
Independent Director – Elizabeth Zander
Newsletter Editor – Peter George
Plant Sale Chairperson – Bob Siegel
Program Chairperson – Robin Magowan
Speaker Housing – Anne Spiegel

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Please contact editor before reprinting
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