



Newsletter

North American Rock Garden Society
Berkshire Chapter July 2007

Next Meeting

A Special Picnic/Meeting/Plant Sale



Our next meeting, Saturday July 14, will be held at the Zander's gardens in Goshen, CT. It will be a potluck picnic lunch, and Rod will give the presentation, entitled:

A Construction in the Rock Garden

Rod, just returned from a comprehensive tour of Czech gardens, will speak about making rock garden structures on flat plots. There will be a digital presentation, so **please** let us know you are coming (if you were not at the June meeting) or bring your own collapsible chair.

Contact Rod (rod@rodzander.com) or Elisabeth (canbya@gmail.com) 860 491-3329 to let us know you need a chair. Additionally, Rod will demonstrate his approach with a Czech style addition in the rock garden sand bed.

127 North Street, Goshen CT 06756, one half mile north of the rotary on Route 63. Please park in the church lot across the street.

**PLEASE REMEMBER TO BRING
PLANTS FOR OUR PLANT SALE**



Chairman's Message – 6/15/07

By Peter F. George

Can I dream? Right above these words is one of my dreams, *Cremanthodium reniforme*, which I have germinated but cannot grow. If it were native to my woods, I probably wouldn't have any interest in it, but since it only grows in the Himalayas I lust after it. I think many of us suffer from the same unnamed syndrome, and to some degree it keeps the European seed purveyors in business. We dream, we buy, we plant, and then we mourn, only to dream again in the dark days of December.

This issue is mostly about *The First Czech International Rock Garden Conference*, which was attended by several of our chapter members. The contrast between the two articles is startling, and shows in the most vivid way how different we are as we pursue our obsessions. I often forget that what I love and value in my gardens may not actually thrill and delight anyone else, and although that is to some degree disappointing, it also makes what I do exciting, and incredibly personal.

As May moved into June I noticed, to my surprise, plants that in previous years had languished were now doing remarkably well. Rather than damaging (or killing) my plants, our strange winter and spring seems to have actually motivated them to put on astonishing displays, making each morning tour a new and utterly satisfying experience. Right now my *Opuntias* are bursting with buds, and their other spiny cousins which I've obtained from John Spain over the years are all either flowering or in bud, and it is amazing my neighbors, friends and family. Most people won't believe we can actually grow cacti in this climate, let alone get them to flower. On this success alone my reputation as a horticultural Merlin is growing. Of course if you listen to John, read his book, and actually follow the directions, growing these cacti is easy, but not many visitors know that simple truth or actually believe it when I share it with them.

The preparations for the Winter Study Weekend are moving in fits and spurts, but I remain optimistic that we will stun everyone and pull it off beautifully. We are set for the weekend of March 28, 29 and 30, and we are collecting a very impressive group of speakers. I will entertain volunteers for all of the committees we need, a list of which I'm going to ask Pam Johnson to post on the website. Please visit there often to see the great work Pam is doing!

I am looking forward to the picnic and lecture at Elisabeth and Rod's house and gardens, and I hope to see many of you there. Robin Magowan has visited it, and strongly endorses a



visit. He informs me that Rod has done incredible things with stone, mostly done in the Czech style, and that Elizabeth matches Rod with her exquisite plant selections. They have a beautiful woodland garden as well. Please remember to bring plants and food, and use whatever magic and/or prayer power you have to assure us a sunny and warm day.

PFG

The First Czech International Rock Garden Conference

By Robin Magowan (*Part 1 of 2*)



In the last twenty-five years the Czechs have emerged as the acknowledged masters of rock gardening. *The First Czech International Conference*, sponsored by the Prague Rock Garden Club under the leadership of Vojtěch Holubec and Zdeněk

Zvolánek and held in the ancient royal town of Beroun outside of Prague, offered a rare occasion to learn what their revolution has been about. The price was reasonable, less than a hundred dollars a day for both the conference and hotel

accommodation and the five subsequent days of bus trips to Bohemia's gardens.

Despite the early May date—a crucial time for a rock garden—the conference, limited by the lecture hall's 175-seat capacity, was fully subscribed. As we registered, we were handed a journal, edited by Joyce Carruthers, containing the whole 136-page Conference Report. With the matter thus digested, we delegates could sit back and let ourselves be tantalized by the slides: places we would never get to, and plants impossible to obtain, much less grow.

The agenda was perhaps overly ambitious. The daily programs, which began the second day at 8:30 a.m. and were still going at ten in the evening, could leave one a bit numb. Unlike Holubec, who offered talks on the Caucasus and China-Tibet, I don't find it thrilling to be in high mountains. The landscapes that speak to me are man-influenced ones: steep, olive-terraced Mediterranean hillsides; alpine meadows ornamented by the noise of streams and cowbells; the vast, continually changing garden that is rural France. Gardening is my way of putting down roots. My plants are the travelers, messengers bringing news from heights impossible to traverse.

Yet there were speakers like Finn Haugli, the retiring director of the Trømso, Norway arctic rock garden, who made the gardens there, and the regional ecology of plant communities, seem well worth visiting. At the recent winter study weekend in Rochester I had heard Henrik Zetterlund's account of the various expeditions organized by the garden he directs in Göteborg. Using many of Zetterlund's slides, a young Dutchman, Gerben Tjeerdsma, gave a lively talk on the rationale behind several middle eastern forays: what they were looking for, what they discovered. Would you go

looking for *Dionysia* in post-Hussein Iraq? It was instructive to see botanists wading through a minefield, gingerly hopping from one semi-safe boulder to the next.

The venerable plantsman Fritz Kummert showed us a number of rarities he grew on his four-acre South Austrian garden. His notes are such that each plant came with a pedigree: where collected and who gave it -- a memorial made all the more memorable by the old sticky slides that confounded the projector. Finally, at nine in the evening, there was the man who pioneered Czech crevice gardening, Josef Halda. What would he talk about? Some of the five hundred gardens he has built? The plants of Mount Evans in Irian Jaya for which he has been compiling a flora? The volcanic Kamchatka of a remembered postcard? Josef astonished us with a tour of the plant eccentricities of Mount Kilimanjaro, a flora well worth



experiencing, if a little outside our growable range.

Along with the reports from far-flung expeditions, there was a definite messianic tinge to the conference. We were there, after all, to be converted. In this line we heard a brilliantly illustrated "History of Growing Alpines Outdoors in England" given by John Page, which might have been subtitled "from the Czech perspective." Even more

germane were Zdeněk Zvolánek's two talks on Czech gardening: one, a history of rock gardening in the Republic; the other, on the evolution of crevice design in which he has played a leading role.

I had long assumed that the extraordinary success of the Bohemian Rock Garden Society, with its fourteen chapters, its intrepid seed collectors, its famous shows and publications, was a Cold War phenomenon, prompted by the availability of travel in the unexplored reaches of the Soviet Union. After all, the Society only came into existence in 1970, two years after the failure of the Prague Spring.

Broadly speaking, I may have had a point. A closed society, with professional possibilities limited by the need to belong to the ruling party, could make for a dispossessed elite throwing themselves into one or another obsessive pursuit; what jazz was for the novelist Skvorecky, and romance for Milan Kundera's characters, rock gardening could be for other Czechs. Cram enough good people together and a discipline can take off. Plant exploration, too, created a fraternity. Travel in the Soviet Union required permits, but a number of gardeners, among them Zvolánek, never succeeded in acquiring any. While regional cities could be reached, the mountains remained everywhere off-limits (if guarded by military personnel easily bribed). Nor was the formation of the Rock Garden Society, Zvolánek explained, a reaction to the events of 1968. To get ahead, let alone function in your profession, you



had little choice but to belong to the Party. Some seventy to eighty per cent of the Club were, at one time or another, party members and, like everything else, the meetings were monitored by the secret police.

It is difficult to reconstruct the history of rock gardening in the Republic, as the Communists destroyed the archives of the aristocracy. But the country is well suited to rock gardening, with cool summer nights and the kind of continental winters that have fostered a nation of excellent hockey players. Much of the perimeter is mountainous, sealing off a Celtic people, the Boii as they called themselves, from neighboring Poles, Germans, Austrians, Hungarians and Slovaks. The mountains are granitic, with acid soil foothills that do not encourage plant diversity. But Bohemia and Moravia's lowlands boast considerable limestone or karst foundations, ideal for rock gardening.

The Republic has the enviable situation of being smack in the middle of Europe, and the disadvantage of having as its neighbor a big, 'win at all costs' ruthless Germany. Yet the pre-war culture that embraced Paris and was as advanced intellectually as any in Europe had an international bias favorable to rock gardening. When I asked Zvolánek what distinguishes the Czech mentality, he gave a one-word reply, "Hybridization." One is reminded of the fertile clash of German, German-Jewish and Czech cultures in pre-war Prague. Czechs can be nomads in the same way that the Swiss are, curious as to

what lurks outside their mountain boundaries.

We know that the great emperor, Rudolf II, had a garden. On an outcrop? But rock gardening certainly goes back as far as Gregor Mendel, a monk from Brno who discovered the principles of genetic inheritance by hybridizing peas. We know that Count Sylva-Tarouca constructed a very large “alpinum” in Pruhonice at the turn of the last century. Perusing Bohumil Hrabal’s novel I Served the King of England, a sub-rosa indictment of the apparatchik mentality, one gathers that no grand hotel was without its rock garden. The wife of President Edouard Beneš was herself an avid rock gardener. The demand for plants was such that the country had four specialized rock garden nurseries. Karel Čapek’s charming The Gardener’s Year (1929), a classic of garden writing, provides a witty view of the rock gardening ferment.

The Communist take-over in 1948, with the brutal defenestration of Čapek’s great friend, Masaryk, tossed everything topsy-turvy. With all exchanges with the West forbidden, and no way to pursue a calling, non-Party members were reduced to a species of bricolage, experimenting with anything that might make ends meet. Josef Halda is an outstanding example, an intellectual of very wide interests who pioneered a revolution in garden design.

While progress in this period was made in tufa gardening and the hybridization of certain species—saxifrages notably—garden rockwork remained in the state Čapek described fifty years earlier:

It is called the Alpine garden probably because this part of the garden gives its owner opportunity for performing hazardous mountain feats... in order to be

able to plant, till, poke and weed among the picturesque and not altogether firm stones of the garden.

“Picturesque” is the key word here. Garden stonework figured as a form of punctuation, more ornamental than structural. Hence the hazards of gardening among insecurely wedged boulders. The placement of stone did little to give high-altitude plants the cool root run and protection from winter wet they need to survive in a lowland environment.

The showcase for rock gardening over the years has been the May show of the Prague Rock Garden Club. One of three events the Club puts on—the others are in late March and early September—it takes place in a yard rented from a church in mid-town. As many as 250,000 people have been known to attend and the shows, with their plant sales, pay for a full-time gardener and finance the Club publications.



The 2007 edition, which we visited the second morning of the Conference, featured a woodland garden put together by the seed collector, Jiří Jurasek. It contained the buoyancy of a circulating stream, beautifully disposed rocks, and such tiny gems as *Corydalis rusbyi* set back from the path, yet

strikingly visible. I've never seen woodland better integrated in a rock garden setting.

This was the venue for which in 1980 Josef Halda, assisted by Zdeněk Zvolánek, created a crevice garden that revolutionized Czech gardening. As a young man, Halda spent summers in the mountains and did a lot of athletic rock climbing. When he came to botany and a career as a taxonomist, he brought a mountaineer's perspective. University herbariums had their uses, but to differentiate plants you needed to experience them in their multiplicity in the wild. Plants grew, he believed, where they did for a reason and, in making a garden, it behooved one to reproduce the same mountain conditions.

It may be argued that the crevice garden Halda built, based on geologic principles of rock stratification, was not exactly novel. In a talk later the same afternoon John Page showed that as early as 1831 Lady Broughton of Hoole House had:

a precariously built rockwork wall representing a mountain panorama in Savoy complete with a "Mer de glace" fashioned from limestone, quartz and

spar to represent the eternal snows. She had done the Grand Tour and, having carefully observed the various ways in which plants were growing in the French Alps, she adapted her cultivation methods to suit her selection of the most beautiful and rare alpines. Each species was given its own pocket of suitable soil and there was a top-dressing of fragments of stone and clean-washed river gravel if evaporation

was a problem, or moss if the object was to retain moisture. If she wished to keep the soil relatively warm, she used dark fragments of rock; and to keep the soil cool, she gave it a covering of white pebbles that reflected the light and heat.

The same principles were not unknown in America. In Rock Gardening, Lincoln Foster provides a sub-chapter giving a number of examples of how to build a stratified rock design.

Halda's contribution lay in bringing the whole look of the mountain into the design foreground. Instead of setting off plants among receding boulders—smaller plants up front, larger ones behind—he brought the mountain forward so that the plunging strata of the rock formation, with its niched plants, confronted the viewer directly. Parallel



slabs replaced rounded boulders. The slanting rows were laid in layers of closely wedged stone. Water was brought in from behind so that the roots would extend reaching for it. Crevices were then filled with the exact combination of minerals and earth

a plant required. Given quick enough drainage, true alpines stood a better chance of surviving the summer mugs and winter wet. We often wonder why mountain geophytes choose such unlikely niches. How can there be soil on which to feed? As it turns out, the important thing for a seedling is drinking, its long delicate tendrils reaching through the clefts in the disintegrating limestone to garner moisture.

Rock gardens are notorious for requiring an inordinate amount of attention. Fine, if like me, you enjoy finding excuses to spend each available minute in the garden. It helps, too, to have a pair of knees still capable of crawling about. But Halda and Zvolánek are plant explorers and wanted a “lazy man’s garden” that they could leave without their plants suffering disaster. A garden that contained more rocks than plants, like the one Zvolánek made for himself in a family-owned quarry, might look a trifle severe; but it stood a chance of being relatively weed-free. With a crevice garden, British growers may find that they can dispense with their beloved cloches and plates of glass.

A well-designed crevice garden possesses a beauty that suits its site and a coherence that translates us to a mountain realm even before a plant is inserted. Nor does a crevice garden have to consist of three-quarters buried pieces of upright slab. On the bus tour’s second day, Halda showed us a garden of enormous slabs of stratified ledge he designed for a nearby farmer, Zdeněk Čančara. Rocks were chosen for their irregularities, the wavering lines in their surfaces, and then carefully wrapped in hay to withstand transportation. In Halda’s design the massive elements flowed together, horizontally and vertically, to create the illusion of a slowly descending mountain site. I’d love to have a garden of exactly that kind placed outside my front door.



Bringing Home The Saxi-Bacon

By Elisabeth Zander

A feature of the Skalnicky *First Czech International Rock Garden Conference* extravaganza was choice plants offered for sale. We were bussed to the Skalnicky Main Spring Plant Show in Prague. How fortunate they are to have such a lovely courtyard in front of the church to transform into a three week horticultural display! Just inside the gate, behind the shed, rows of "treasures" priced to sell sang their siren songs. Oh I am sure you know them - oriental gentians, porphyion saxifrages, select little daphne cultivars... There were these three irresistible rows, and then others with stuff, albeit choice, I could find at home. What's a plant addict to do? Of course, I loaded up.

During the post conference bus trips, we went to sax Mecca several times. Karel Lang, one of the finest growers, bar none, anticipated our arrival with rows and rows of delicacies. When you buy a plant from him, there is just one plant in the pot. Other growers may prick off a whole thumbful of seedling into the pot, which make them saleable much earlier. But a large healthy plant from him is just one. Unfortunately, I was not quick enough to get some of Linc's hybrids that he still maintains. But now I know where he lives! As a side note, his way of marking selections to keep is unique. Little cocktail

swords in the color red mean they were to go to the compost pile. I never did find out what a blue and a green one meant! Oldrich Maixner too had a choice row or two for sales. Frantisek Holenka's collection is in the hands of Karel Pech, who also raises them



for sale. What bounty!

Prior to my US departure I checked with APHIS for policy about carrying plants in baggage. Turns out, one may carry 12 plants (bare rooted with a phyto) through customs. Naturally, Rod and I each anticipated our limit. I helped him with choices, of course, to know my favorites. I had written to Vojtech Holubec (president of Skalnicky) about arranging for phytos at the conference. I printed out the regulation to show to other US attendees. All went as planned.

The night before we returned to the US, I was on the bathroom floor, wallowing in mud. Turns out, Czech toilets do not have much of a bowl for washing roots. So I would knock off as much dirt as possible into the trash. Then I would dunk in the stoppered sink. Sounds like it should be clean doesn't it?

The problem came getting the dirt out of the sink and into the trash. This had to be done every few plants. Sax roots cling tenaciously to dirt. Deceived by the sink lip, I scooped the sludge right onto the floor, missing the trash by several inches. By the end of the 24th plant, I did get the touch, a learning experience, but the bathroom was a mud hole.

The entire bathroom was tiled, which was good and bad. When the sludge hit the floor it splashed onto the walls two feet away. Cleanup was easy, though I did go through a whole roll of toilet paper. Imagine the face of housekeeping as they lifted the trash sack. It did weigh a ton. I worried - did they know we were Americans?

Customs in NYC was a breeze. Declaration forms were handed out on the plane. We dutifully filled in rock garden plants and declared a value. Upon arrival we (should I say Rod - they were only interested in one member per family) merely gave them our form. We were herded through check lines



and onto our connecting flights. I breathed a big sigh of relief. Then I wondered why I had even been concerned.

But I heard from a fellow attendee. She flew in to Logan at Boston. Custom officials there, to use her words, gave her the "plant-Nazi"

treatment. She dutifully declared her plants and presented her phyto. Customs, now part of Homeland Security, found no problem with the plants. But they denied the plants entry because the Czech's had not stated on the phyto the earth it was grown in was free

from potato nematodes. The supervisor was called and showed her the specific regulation. Plants stay out! When she called USDA Washington the next day, he bemoaned the loss of staff and supervisory control of plant inspectors transferred to Homeland Security. He confirmed the guy at Logan was technically correct. My friend was in shock.

I immediately emailed the woman at APHIS who worked with NARGS for import permits. A little time lapsed and I received the following nice note from her colleague. There is hope.

"I work with Bonita at USDA. I'm on the port operations side of the house, and she thought I might be able to provide some insight. In the cargo environment, live plant shipments are not cleared at the port by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) but are moved for inspection at the USDA Plant



Inspection Station near the airport. This is because clearance of live plant material is more complicated, and the entry requirements are not completely clear to every CBP inspector. So, the plants come to USDA.

In a passenger environment, CBP is asked to clear the plants if there are less than 12. IF they are unable to understand the clearance directions provided by USDA, they should be contacting the local USDA Plant

Inspection Station and get some assistance. They could send the plants over there, and you should have the option to pick them up from them. Destruction is unfortunate.

Every CBP person has a supervisor. If that supervisor did not think to contact USDA, then maybe your folks should carry the phone numbers and more or less recommend/demand that they call USDA. Our PIS telephone numbers/locations are available at the website listed directly below:

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/plants/plant_imports/plant_inspection_stations.shtml

Sorry for the confusion and frustration. If you know you will be arriving sometime in the future with plant materials, make contact with the local USDA PIS ahead of time and ask them for some guidance on what to do if CBP refuses your shipment when you come back later in the month.

Candace Funk, USDA APHIS PPQ QPAS
301-734-8295

Photo Credits

Pages 2, 4, 5, 6 and the bottom photo on 8, by Juliet Yli-Mattila, taken recently during the Czech Conference and the subsequent garden tours.

BNARGS Meeting Notes 6-2-07

Chairman Peter George called the meeting to order. Peter commented on the low attendance and requested input on possible causes, meaning etc. for this trend. The July meeting plans were refined with agreement that the date be moved from July 7 to July 14 due to the National Holiday on July 4. The July meeting will be held at the home of Elizabeth Zander who requested a head count of members planning to attend for planning purposes. This event will be potluck with Elizabeth providing paper plates, napkins and some minimal eating utensils. Members attending should bring plants for the usual plant sale.

Don Dembowski and Erica Schumacher provided extra material for this meeting's plant sale at the request of Peter George. Members arrived with a good number of interesting plants from their gardens in support of the club's self-financing methodology.

Peter reported on progress of the NARGS 2008 Winter Study Program to be held in late March 2008. Zdeněk Zvolánek will be one of the main presenters on the theme of using rockwork to compensate for unreliable snow coverage in the design of rock gardens.

Peter called for volunteers for the nominating committee stating that this will be his final year serving as Chairperson for BNARGS and that if no other candidates are forthcoming we will be stuck with that bearded New York resident, Harold Peachey.

Jody Payne, rock garden curator, presented the program on future planning for the New

York Botanical Garden's Rock Garden section. Ms Payne showed a PowerPoint presentation that she developed in the process of a two year planning process for the New York Botanical Garden's, seven year plan for modernization. Ms Payne emphasized her focus on fidelity to the original plan. BNARGS members actively inquired about issues of accessibility, design strategies for minimizing damage by visitors and general philosophy and direction of garden administrators. Ms Payne decried the paucity of funding for the rock garden and recent drastic cuts in personnel.

Harold Peachey



Granite Gardens Rare Plants is a small family run nursery in Sonora California specializing in waterwise plants for the rock garden. Our mission is to inspire other gardeners to create gardens that minimize the use of precious resources such as water, while maximizing habitat and food resources for native birds, butterflies and other pollinators. Our experiences in our own private gardens in the Sierra Foothills have led us to encourage the use of rock gardening techniques and plants towards these ends. The nursery initially started as a way for us to experiment with new plants that we felt might thrive in the Darwinian torture zone we call a garden. It continued as a way to make those plants available to other gardeners.

Most of our plants are selected for their ability to survive in our own gardens, located in Sonora, California in the Sierra Foothills at an elevation of 2000'. Our summers are hot and long. We have many days above 100° and absolutely no rain

during the summer. Although our own garden experiences rather mild winters with infrequent lows in the teens, almost all of our plants are adapted to much higher elevations, and most are hardy to zones 4-6. Our nursery offerings include



The Granite Gardens demonstration garden

Many western natives, as well as some choice plants from Turkey, the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and other regions of the world with similar climates. Most plants are appropriate for the rock garden setting, with an emphasis on plants for the sunny droughty garden.

Plant selections tend to revolve around whatever obsessions proprietor Rebecca Lance is nurturing at the moment. Long-term obsessions include genera *Eriogonum*, *Acantholimon*, and *Penstemon*. Several years ago, Rebecca developed a cacti fetish, and starting this fall we will begin offering an expanded collection that includes many cold hardy cacti.

We do not have a retail outlet, so most of our ordering is through our website:

www.ggrareplants.com

Rebecca Lance

*Please remember to pay your 2007
Chapter dues*



BERKSHIRE BOTANICAL GARDEN

August 2007 Programs

The Elemental Garden

Wednesday August 1, 10 a.m. - noon

Slide-illustrated lecture/Garden tour

Cost: Members \$16, Non-members \$21

All levels

Registration required

Dress for touring the garden

Watercolors in the Summer Garden

Thursdays August 2, 9, 16, 23, 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Cost: Members \$95, Non-members \$105,
Individual classes \$37.50

Participants provide their own material (list available at registration).

Beginner/intermediate

Registration required

Tai Chi in the Garden

Wednesdays August 1, 8, 15, 22, 6 - 7:30 p.m.

Cost: \$15 per class (\$60 per four sessions)

All levels

Registration required

Standing Stones in the Garden

Friday August 10, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Hands-on Workshop

Cost: \$140 Members, \$150 Non-members
(materials included in the workshop)

All levels Registration required

Bring a bagged lunch and dress for working in the open-air.

Photo, page 9, Zdeněk Zvolánek's garden
<http://home.onego.ru/~otsoppe/coll5/coll639.jpg>

Positions of Responsibility

Chairperson – Peter F. George,
petergeorge@verizon.net
Vice-Chairperson – Harold Peachey
Secretary – Carol Hanby
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Independent Director – Elizabeth Zander
Newsletter Editor – Peter F. George
Meeting Recorder – **Open**
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Program Chairperson – Robin Magowan
Proofreader – Cliff Desch
Refreshments Chairperson – Joyce
Hemingson
Speaker Housing – Anne Spiegel

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Please contact editor before reprinting
articles

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