

# Newsletter

*North American Rock Garden Society  
Berkshire Chapter      October 2011*

## Next Meeting:

**Saturday, November 5**

**Annual Lunch** at the Red Lion  
Inn, Stockbridge  
**preceded** by our lecture at BBG  
10 am coffee, 10:30 am program  
**Bill Cullina:**

"Woodland Plants for New  
England Gardens"

William Cullina Currently Bill is the Director of Horticulture/Plant Curator for one of North America's newest and most exciting public gardens, The Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Boothbay, Maine. A well known author and recognized authority on North American native plants, Cullina lectures on a variety of subjects to garden and professional groups and writes for popular and technical journals. His books include Wildflowers, Native Trees, Shrubs, and Vines, Understanding Orchids, and most recently, Understanding Perennials, published in 2009. He and his wife, Melissa live with their three young children on Southport Island along the central Maine Coast.



## FALL



**A**s the BNARGS year comes to an end, so does our outside gardening. All around leaves are turning brilliant shades of reds, oranges and yellows, then fluttering to the ground like brightly colored snow.

Soon enough winter will be here. Time already to finally plant the cactus and succulents that I brought home from New Mexico this past Spring. They are all in a giant deep blue stoneware trough, top dressed with small white granite chips (aka Gran-I-Grit). I am using a new growing medium called Sunshine Advanced Coir. It contains both peat moss and coir fiber, plus perlite, organic nutrients and mycorrhizae. It is much closer to the consistency I go for in potting mixes than most bagged ones I have tried. We will see how the plants fair over the winter, but so far they seem very happy, and look quite pretty.

Colchicums have long since faded back into the ground, but a few other plants are in their glory. Some, like asters and orostachys, have been waiting all year for their time to bloom. That time is now. *Orostachys* 'Jade Mountain' must have wonderful nectar, because it is attracting more bumble bees than the brightly colored annuals nearby. Meanwhile, *Orostachys*

*fimbriata* is a pretty shade of red, a bit like the color of pale bricks, while *Orostachys iwarengae* is almost grey in color. These are the colors of the leaves. The flower stalks, though, generally have these colors too, and have a somewhat whimsical look, a bit like something you might expect to see in a Dr. Seuss book.



*Orostachys 'Jade Mountain'* – image by Erica Schumacher

It's moments like these that remind me why I love to garden so much. No matter how many years I garden, or how much things change from year to year, there is still that sense of wonder and delight, that beauty is all around us.

*Erica Schumacher*

## AUTUMN

BY DEAN EVANS

When my days on earth are over,  
And I lay beneath the clover,  
And any memory of my being here is  
gone,  
Then let it here be so recorded  
If that privilege be afforded  
That I sought to have some fun along  
the way.

DLE

In the parlance of Shakespeare I am but a poor player that struts and frets his hours upon the half-embedded rock of my rock garden, removing the labels from dead plants.

All in all it's been a pretty good year. It started off with the Stonecrop plant sale. This was

dominated by hours of cold rain, interspersed with periods of windy drizzle. The dedicated, obsessed, hardy and insane mingled in close proximity. They sought shelter beneath an overhang on one of the buildings, where a vendor dispensed cold cups of coffee at exorbitant prices to round out the experience. These rain-soaked people looked like wet dogs, the only discernable difference among them being who had bathed most recently. Since discomfort is not foreign to me, I took full advantage of the opportunity to stock up on Wrightman's plants. Through the winter I had marked one of his old catalogs with my choices. Unfortunately this soon became so wet the pages stuck together and my marks ran. That in itself created a problem. Then I looked over at the crowd of people shaking, wriggling, and squirming to get warm. They looked like a group of salmon spawning. Unlike salmon, these people hopefully didn't die!

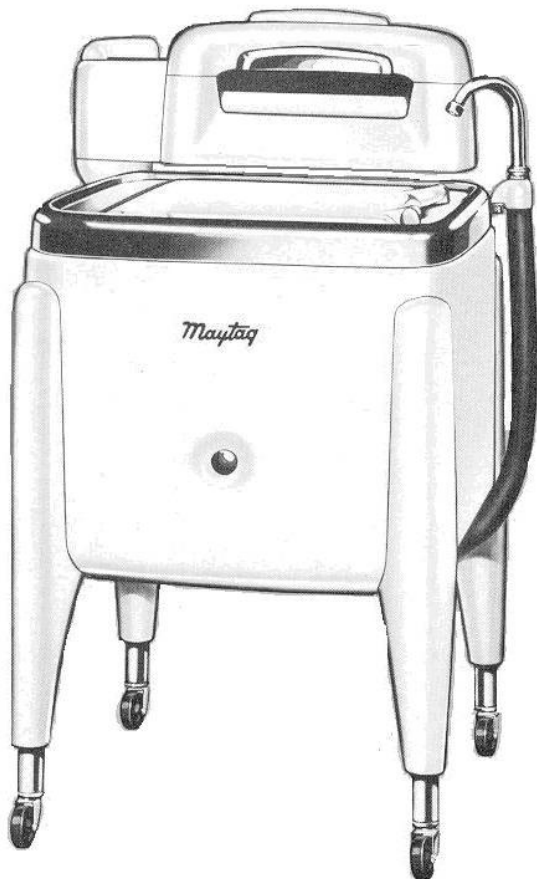


Before joining them, I happened to look down the inside of my raincoat. After doing so, I realized I was a little gamey. I smelt like a buck coon who had hibernated in the attic of an abandoned farmhouse up behind Cobleskill. I looked in the cab of my truck where I keep quantities of apparel. I have three total sets of clothes including sweaters, coveralls, coats, raingear, boots, work shoes and a large assortment of tools for every purpose. I never know how long I'm going to stay out on the road, or where I might go. Looking in the glove compartment, I found two unopened cardboard evergreen-shaped, spruce-scented automobile air fresheners. I put one in each pocket of my shirt, and joined the crowd myself. I then could rest assured that I smelled somewhere between an Adirondack woodsman or a workman who had fallen off a catwalk into a vat of Pinesol.

Autumn is the grandest time of the year. As James Whitcomb Riley wrote:

*“There’s something kindo’ harty-like about the  
atmufere  
When the heat of summer’s over and the coolin’  
fall is here—  
Of course we miss the flowers, and the blossoms  
on the trees,  
And the mumble of the hummin’-birds and  
buzzin’ of the bees;  
But the air’s so appetizin’; and the landscape  
through the haze  
Of a crisp and sunny morning of the airy  
autumn days  
Is a pictur’ that no painter has the colorin’ to  
mock—  
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder’s  
in the shock.”*

Of course there are not enough good days left to complete what needs to be done before the snow falls – generally around the middle of November.



My activities have been hampered by a pain in my right hip – I made my own diagnosis as

some kind of a groin pull but when it continued to get worse I finally went for an x-ray and found out that I have severe arthritis on that side. There was a significant difference in the amount of space between the bones on the left and those on the right – the space on the right being much smaller. Eventually I will have to have it replaced. I nicely got home, filled up my 1940’s Maytag wringer washer (located outside in my rock garden) to do a load of work clothes when the washer’s belt broke. These are two obvious examples of planned obsolescence for products made in the 1940’s! A new 3L300 V belt cost me \$4.60 – God only knows what a new hip will cost!

I accumulate wringer washers - I use them for trade goods, swapping with the Amish for cheddar cheese. They set 2 of them up on a skid and run them at the same time using a 7hp Honda motor. One young man pulled the needle out of the bottom of the bowl on the carburetor and ran a hose from a small propane cylinder into that port. He was busy so he couldn’t explain to me what he had done to the carburetor internally, but I have to find out because it would be a useful piece of information for me.

My justification for writing this is – if any of you have a wringer washer in your barn I’ll trade you fair value for tufa, and will deliver it. My dealing with the Amish is a form of entertainment for me when I take my little post-project trips.

This offer also applies to 1970’s John Deere, International Harvester, and Wheel Horse riding mowers, running or not. Also, any Troy Bilt product made in Troy, NY before MTD bought the company and moved it out of New York State. My generation was raised by parents who lived through the Depression, resulting in some of us being very frugal. Or as my father used to say, “You’re not what you make, you’re what you save.” and “Opportunity comes to money.”



## REPORT ON THE OCTOBER TRI-STATE MEETING

Years ago, 5 Chapters took turns organizing a free annual regional meeting. These Chapters were Connecticut, Hudson Valley, Long Island, Manhattan and Watnong. Hence, the name 'Tristate'. These were rather formal one day affairs complete with lectures, plant sale and, yes, plant shows. With time, things changed, perhaps because of the increasing difficulty of



finding places where one can accommodate 60 to 100 persons, of easy access and parking, where one can consume food, sell plants, etc, all for a reasonable fee. Nowadays, these chapters do not take turns but informally pool their resources;

they try to stage the meeting where it had worked the year before. Also the program of activities is a bit lighter, but the name hasn't changed.

This year's Tri-State meeting took place again at Lyndhurst in Tarrytown, NY. It is one of the big estates on the Hudson River, maintained by a conservation trust. There we can have a room in one utility building not open to visitors. The room is barely adequate but there is no special fee and all our other requirements are met, including this important one: we can sell things. There was one speaker: the renowned Malcolm McGregor. He gave two talks, or rather one talk in two parts entitled "A Rock Gardener's Eye".

No other title would have described better what he said. It was not a formal scholarly lecture on some narrowly defined subject, which of course he could have delivered as well as anybody, but rather a friendly chat. Forget about the basics,



*Gentiana paradoxa*

about things that seasoned rock gardeners know or are expected to know. He was not here to teach us what we can find in books or on websites. Instead he did what the best teachers do; he gave us a lively account of things which have caught his eye, along with his thoughts, speculations, reminiscences, even literary quotes. It was most interesting and hugely entertaining, Part II in particular which dealt more with places in the USA or the UK.

There was a plant auction and a nice raffle with plenty of good interesting plants. The plant sale was great and plentiful. Oliver's Nursery had sent hundreds of super plants, and Lori Chips and Melanie Fox were there to give expert advices. Several members had tables full of what they grow best, and, aren't they good! Bill Peron was offering a large sample of his cyclamen collection. A few regrets though: due to the configuration of the small room, and also a rather fluid organization of the gathering, several things were not displayed or announced adequately: who could see and appreciate Harvey Wrightman's plants? Who knew that the books for sale were basically from Dick Redfield's collection? Who knew that in the parking area there was a truck full of tufa? Come on now, just a little salesmanship and self promotion wouldn't have ruined the party.



*Editor's Note: There were quite a few plants left over from the meeting, so I'll be bringing them to the Luncheon. We'll be running a raffle rather than a sale, given the prices of some of the plants, including several Adonis vernalis*

# WHAT IS NARGS?

BY PETER GEORGE

Ever since I joined NARGS in 1996, I have observed that many members (and even more non-members) have an extremely narrow, and therefore fundamentally mistaken, concept of what the organization represents. A lot of people think of NARGS as an “alpine plant” society. Others believe that if something grows more than a foot tall, it’s “not a NARGS plant.” I have heard that chapters in the South and the Midwest are convinced that their members cannot grow “rock garden” plants, so they increasingly view themselves as garden clubs focused on hardy “perennials.” Of course, this leads to fewer and fewer chapter members joining NARGS or, having joined in the past, keeping their memberships active.

So, what’s the truth about NARGS and rock gardening?

Our Web site describes NARGS as an organization “for gardening enthusiasts interested in alpine, saxatile, and low-growing perennials. It encourages the study and cultivation of wildflowers that grow well among rocks, whether such plants originate above tree line or at lower elevations.” I looked up “saxatile” and found that it means “growing on or living among rocks.” We all know what alpine means, and no one can misunderstand “low-growing.” Thus, we are an organization of people interested in perennial plants that grow well among rocks and that are relatively short. That sounds pretty inclusive to me, and it certainly doesn’t in any way imply that the plants must be alpine, or tiny, or even particularly rare. It certainly does include plants that are native to every region of the world. For example, I grow townsendias native to Kansas, campanulas native to Turkey, epimediums native to China, a *Calceolaria* native to South America, and alpine plants from the Alps, the Rockies, the Caucasus, and the Adirondacks among others. I have lime lovers, ericaceous plants, and plants that ask only for some sun,

some water, and a bit of soil. I also grow all over my property tall plants, such as Echinacea and asters and bushy plants like Buddleja. So what am I? Well, my major interest is growing plants that like to live among rocks, which makes me a rock gardener as far as I’m concerned.

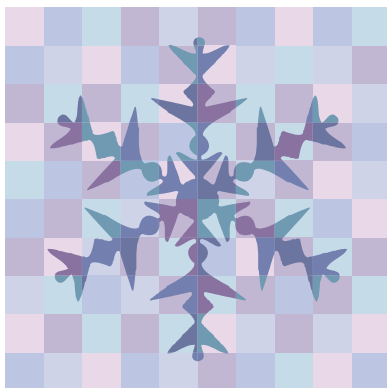
Why are so many people convinced that drabas are real rock garden plants and that epimediums are not? Or that salvias and hellebores are forbidden because they are not included in some mythical list of approved “rock garden plants”? Far too many of us seem to think that, because the British named their organization the Alpine Garden Society, this limitation somehow applies to us. It does not. We are the North American Rock Garden Society, and our approach to what we love and what we grow is inclusive, not exclusive. We understand with absolute clarity that many gardeners cannot grow *Astragalus utahensis*, but that almost all of us can grow *Gentiana acaulis*, or *Penstemon ovatus*, or *Sedum kamschaticum*. And those, among literally thousands of rock garden plants, can be grown in all climates, at almost all altitudes, and on virtually every continent.

Furthermore, for most of its history, NARGS has published a journal that has focused on plants that far too many of us may have considered inappropriate for rock gardens. Before sitting down to write this, I pulled out two old issues of the NARGS publication at random, just to see what they contained. The spring 1991 issue was dedicated to primulas, and the lead article is entitled “Primulas for the Southeast,” by Nancy Goodwin. Nancy is from Hillsborough, North Carolina, a part of the United States not commonly associated with rock gardening. The second issue I selected was the fall 1985 issue, which featured an article called “Native Plants of Vermont.” Anyone who is not familiar with the botanical wealth of New England, and who subscribes to the narrow view of what a “rock garden plant” is, will be surprised to learn that the article focused on what we call “woodland” plants, including *Claytonia caroliniana*, *Erythronium americanum*, *Trillium erectum*, *Asarum canadense*, and *Asplenium ruta-muraria*. Are

these rock garden plants? Some would say they are not, but I vigorously disagree, and – more to the point – so does the NARGS journal.

So please, let's keep NARGS as inclusive as possible. To be sure, we are not simply a garden club (we are not interested in growing vegetables, annuals, roses, etc.); but neither are we an elite group of the wealthy and powerful who want to keep their organization small and exclusive. We are a large, geographically diverse body of people who simply love gardening with rocks. Let's focus on that, and work a bit harder to find commonality in purpose; by doing so, we will strengthen our organization and enhance its ability to provide valuable services to rock gardeners.

## OCTOBER MUSINGS



I just walked outside to discover that it snowed last night. Snow in October? Four inches of snow? The sun is warm, and the snow is melting now, but it feels like mid-March, and I'm concerned that the plants might get confused and start growing again! In any case, it's going to be a strange fall and winter, and I'm already looking forward to spring.

Here's a link something I wrote two weeks ago that was distributed to the Chapters and subsequently posted on the NARGS website. It got a good response, leading me to write a second installment; both parts can be found at: [www.nargs.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&id=84&Itemid=150](http://www.nargs.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=84&Itemid=150).

If you have any thoughts about the subject, I'd be glad to hear from you.

Our last meeting of the year, on November 5, will be a going-away party of sorts for Robin and Juliet; their longtime involvement with the Berkshire Chapter will come to an end in early 2012 when they move to Santa Fe. NARGS has just created a New Mexico Chapter, so Robin and Juliet will transition seamlessly as far as NARGS is concerned, but we'll miss them more than words can say, given their enormous contributions to the Chapter over the years. We will have an opportunity to see them again and to visit their new garden in Santa Fe, since NARGS is planning a Study Weekend there in late August or early September 2013. I for one can't wait, as it will be my first trip to New Mexico, and for most NARGS members it will be unusual opportunity to botanize at a time when so many of our gardens are in decline.

I want to ask each of you to try to visit the NARGS website periodically. We've worked hard to make it user friendly, and even though there's still some work to do, the website offers a wealth of information and members should be using it more frequently. Soon the Seed Exchange will be ready, and for the first time it going to be fully online. We purchased some wild collected seed from Alplains, so at least 30 unusual species will be represented. We'll have a lot of eriogonum seed as well, plus all of the surprises we hope for each year. In all, it should be a great year for quality seed, so participate!

Finally, I want to thank all of you for continuing to support our Chapter with your time, your plants and your presence at our meetings. What we need now is to increase your involvement in NARGS, without which there would be no Berkshire Chapter. Only about 55 of our 115 Chapter members belong to NARGS. The \$30 membership fee is a terrific bargain for the value that NARGS offers, so please consider joining. Membership information is available at: [www.nargs.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=94&Itemid=113](http://www.nargs.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=94&Itemid=113)

See you all next week in Stockbridge!

*PFG*

## **Positions of Responsibility**

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Vice-Chairperson – Joyce Hemingson  
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Refreshments Chairperson – Joyce Hemingson  
Speaker Housing – Anne Spiegel

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Please contact the Editor before reprinting articles

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