

# May 2018 PVC Bulletin

Potomac Valley Chapter(PVC)  
North American Rock Garden Society  
(District of Columbia, Maryland & Virginia)

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**Note new web address:** [www.rockgardendcmetro.org](http://www.rockgardendcmetro.org)

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*Pasqueflower*



Phlox

## Spring- Summer 2018 Events Calendar

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Programs are Saturdays at 10am (coffee at 9:30 am), unless otherwise noted.

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**May 19, Plant Sale,** Green Spring Gardens, Alexandria, VA  
<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/green-spring>

**May 26, Plant Exchange,** home of John & Beth Willis, 8135 Ball Rd., Frederick, MD  
BRING YOUR LUNCH!

**June, Date and location TBD:** Tony Dove on Rhododendrons

**June 2,** Garden Conservancy Open Days, Frederick, MD For more info, go to:  
<https://www.gardenconservancy.org/open-days/open-days-schedule/frederick-county-md-open-day-2>

**June 10,** Garden Conservancy Open Days, Washington, DC, and vicinity  
<https://www.gardenconservancy.org/open-days/open-days-schedule/district-of-columbia-area-open-day>

**June 23,** Music in the Garden Twilight Walk, Surreybrooke Nursery, 6-9pm., Tickets are \$10, must be bought by June 22<sup>nd</sup>. <http://www.surreybrooke.com/workshop-events-registration.html>  
Call or text: 301. 606.3310 (Jim Dronenburg will be playing his harp.)

**Annual Membership Dues: \$15.** Please send checks, payable to PVC NARGs, to:  
Margot Ellis, 2417 N Taylor St., Arlington, VA 22207 4pvctreas@gmail.com

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Spring has finally sprung! So much to do with weeds (that have also sprung) and all those plants arriving from mail order nurseries that were ordered last winter during the winter doldrums. How could I have ordered so many? The ground is erupting daily with plants and it's gratifying to see that most of my treasures have survived the winter.

Please consider volunteering for the Green Spring Plant Sale on Saturday, May 19<sup>th</sup>. We need bodies on the 18<sup>th</sup> to help with setup and on the 19<sup>th</sup> with the sale itself and takedown. This sale is our biggest fund raiser of the year and provides the money for our speakers, food and workshops. You can also help by providing plants from your garden that we can sell. If you can't deliver them to Greenspring, we'll find a way to get them there. Many thanks to Judy Zatsick who has been organizing this sale!

A week after the Green Spring sale, we will have our Spring Plant Exchange at the home of John and Beth Willis. This is not to be missed as John and Beth have a wonderful garden and we will be auctioning off Terry Partridge's troughs via silent auction. There are 5 planted troughs, all quite large but light-weight due to their construction over Styrofoam boxes and 1 large unplanted trough. Please bring your lunch and stay a while to chat with your fellow gardeners! We will be sending out details on the Plant Exchange soon.

Well, time to get back out into the garden.....

Kevin

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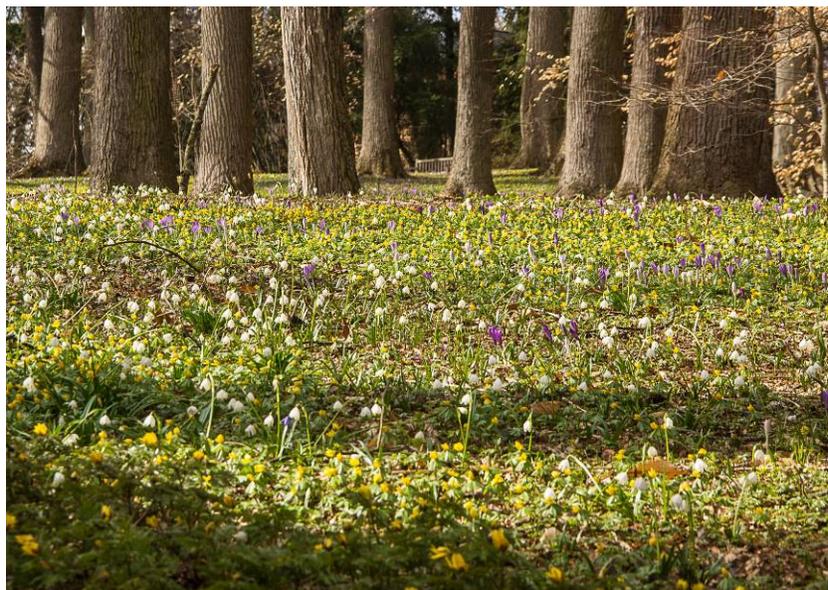
## Snowdrops and Aconite, Oh My!

Jim Dronenburg

I work in season for a nursery. In the fall they sell snowdrops and aconites as dry bulbs. I got my first snowdrops that way, as end of season pity puppies. But quite a few were dead on arrival—at least, they never came up.

I've since learned that snowdrops, and *Eranthis*, the winter aconite, resent such (dried off for sale) treatment. What the specialty nurseries that sell rare snowdrops do is to sell them while green and growing, taking care that the roots do not dry out.

*Eranthis*, in my experience, are in a class by themselves, as far as cultivated flowers go. But snowdrops are amaryllids—as are quite a few



Snowdrops, Crocus and Winter Aconite at Winterthur

other garden bulbs, like *Crinums*, snowflakes (*Leucojum*), *Hymenocallis/Ismene*, and *Lycoris*. With the notable exception of daffodils, which I have never had a problem with as dry bulbs, you can take the amaryllis tribe as having rather fleshy roots coming out of the basal plate, and they tend towards the perennial—as opposed to, say, tulips. These roots, I repeat, should not dry out.

The lesson to be learned? Dig them up and plant them in the green.

Wait until your snowdrops have passed their flowering, when the blooms are tired and (you hope) the ovaries are swelling. If you have a clump that has multiplied nicely, dig the clump and plant them as *single bulbs* about 6" apart at the least. In about three years they will all be nice clumps. You can plant the larger bulbs singly, but where there are small grassy leaves on small bulbs (and there will be small bulbs and large in any clump) I like to plant the small ones two to a hole. Put them anywhere the soil is moist. You don't need to water during the summer—the ones in my lawn don't get watered—but they don't want to be baked like tulips, most of which actually resent summer water.

I have, myself, the snowdrop *Galanthus elwesii* v. *monostrictus* from Nancy Goodwin at Montrose; they increase nicely, and bloom religiously at Thanksgiving. I do keep track of the clumps of those, and when the time comes I will make room for the increase by taking up daffodils in the same bed and putting the snowdrops where the daffies were. For the spring, I have a few ordinary double snowdrops, and a few that are supposed to be *G. transcaucasicus*, but otherwise I have at least two types, one twice as big as the other, and I flat out don't bother with keeping them segregated, or for that matter, identified. I am not a galanthophile, but I have Ambitions. Sincere Ambitions. Anyone who has seen the rivers of tens of thousands of snowdrops running for hundreds of feet through the woods at Montrose knows what those Ambitions are aiming at. (It would help to have forty acres of oak woods, but I persevere without them.) Nancy Goodwin and her staff replant thousands yearly; we were just there in late February and they had just completed a new river 10 feet wide by 200-plus feet long, some 4600 bulbs. I just replanted a mere hundred and twenty, (stab-with-trowel, drop-bulb-in, push-soil-closed, move on) and when I have completed a stretch of several feet, I water them in with plant starter. That is probably not *needed*, but I've always regarded plant starter as insurance-in-a-bottle.



Winter aconite and Adonis

I rarely put snowdrops IN my beds any more; I have found that just OUTSIDE my beds (edged with stone or somewhat raised railroad ties) in the lawn is the perfect place. Come Christmas or a little before, I scour along them with a weed whacker, making sure that the lawn edges are short to nonexistent. This lets the snowdrops come up in January with nothing to hide their glory. In spring, when I start to mow, I leave the edges—about 6" out from the beds—with the snowdrops, alone. It's a bit unsightly, but my garden is a flaming mess anyway, and the snowdrops go down reasonably early. It's not as if I'm waiting until June and haying the meadow.

My results have been spectacular. I started transplanting five or six years ago and have not bought snowdrops since 2001 or 2002 (except from Nancy Goodwin). Two (?) Februaries ago I put rows along the edge of one bed- they are clumps of eight or so each now. Another year or so and I'll have to go along those clumps and divide. I wouldn't have to, you understand—it's just greed. The ones I planted last February are all up and mostly blooming—I assume the ones that aren't were the tiny bulbs last year. Certainly they came up with no holes in the progression of bulbs down the walkways. They should all bloom next year, and those that bloomed, in addition to increasing from the bulb, will increase mightily from seed.



One other especially good place to put snowdrops is under shrubs which, when they leaf out, will cast too deep a shade for other things to thrive. (Think spring ephemerals here, too). They're up, they've bloomed, they've stocked up and are back to sleep before the shrub has had its first cup of coffee, you could put snowdrops around them; as the snowdrops faded, the *Hostas* would come up and cover them.

Now for *Eranthis*. I've never bought any; I got my start as a flatful of dug sods, in the green, from a friend (Carol Allen). The clump has spread from a flat's worth to about six feet in every direction, and this is *after* I give away substantial chunks of them each year and transplant two or three flats'

worth around in my own garden. When you transplant, do it not singly but in small clumps. These tend to have seedlings coming up in them, putting me rather in mind of alfalfa sprouts. Don't bother with trying to separate them into singles; you will get far more increase if the seedlings are undisturbed enough to grow on. *Eranthis* are a ray of buttercup-yellow brightness popping up hither and yon in the beds, under my dogwood tree, and under my star magnolia, and again I wait for the ones in the grass to go down before I mow.

For the most part I've planted both snowdrops and winter aconites where they get summer shade and winter sun; I am now experimenting with planting them where they are shaded in winter by buildings and evergreens, to see if I can stagger the progression a little bit. They still have clear sky above, so they should do as well, just later. I hope.

So go to your friends. Beg some snowdrops in the green. Beg some aconites in the green. Most people with established plantings of these will cheerfully part with some—always assuming they aren't special varieties, hideously rare and hideously slow, and even more hideously expensive. Plant them – I guarantee results.

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## First Peony of the Season

Chris Herbstritt

*Paeonia mairei* often opens its leaves in very early spring, and will even bloom here in March, if the temperatures are warm enough. The plant in the picture bloomed on April 4th, 2018. It weathered our cold spells very well, but a cloche protected it on the coldest nights. I did not protect its sister seedlings and they fared just fine.



Other notable gardeners have reported that this species is the earliest peony to bloom in their gardens as well.

*P. mairei* is native to China and is also known as the "beautiful peony." There are many other species I consider equally beautiful, so I don't know why this one gets this title.

It prefers high shade, with well-draining, limey loam. I add plenty of inert grit, limestone chips, and slow release fertilizer each time I plant one. I've grown several, over the years, with the oldest plant being about 10 years old. I can't report that

this peony is robust, but it does slowly increase in size each year. I haven't lost one yet.

This is a woodland plant, so full sun exposure is probably too much for it in our metro area. However, in dense shade it can be shy to bloom, so be sure to give it some bright indirect light.

Aside from its early blooming proclivity, the most unique feature of this plant is its leaves. The veins are reverse embossed or debossed. In basic terms, the veins are sunken, which gives the leaf an interesting 3-D texture. You might think that all peonies have slightly sunken veins, but on this one it's more extreme.

I have noticed a wide variation in the size of the flower petals on different seedlings. Some have "scrunchy", cupped-shaped petals, while others have large, flat blooms. The plant pictured has blooms that are about 4" in diameter, which is the largest I have seen on a *P. mairei*. The smallest bloomer consistently has flowers that are about 1" in diameter. I call that one 'Pipsqueak.'

All the *P. mairei* I have observed have reddish pink to magenta blooms. The flower petal color is generally solid, but occasionally one will have a flare, a gradient of color starting with white in the center to darker pink on the edges. I like this trait and hope to get seedlings from this plant.

I have purchased plants from a grower in the UK that no longer ships to the US, but have also had success buying seedling plants from Far Reaches Farm (a west coast mail order nursery). They tend to have them available in fall to early spring.

So if you want to be the talk of the neighborhood, with the first spring blooming peony, *Peony mairei* is the one you are looking for! Good luck!

## Kew Visits

Robert Faden, 27 April 2018

I have mixed feelings about visiting renowned public gardens. They certainly can be enjoyable, even inspirational, and if they are in your hardiness zone they may feature plants that you lust after. But such gardens can also be depressing because they demonstrate what may be possible only if you have the necessary resources of space, time, energy, concentration, determination, horticultural skills and finances.



Euphorbia rigida

For more than three decades I have been visiting the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, just outside of London. My visits to Kew have not been horticultural, but rather for my research. Using herbarium specimens--whole plants or their parts that have been pressed (i.e. flattened), dried and attached to standard-sized sheets of stiff archival paper--I study plants of the family *Commelinaceae* (spiderworts, dayflowers and their relatives) worldwide but mainly those that are native to Africa. My goal has been to identify, characterize, separate and provide a means for others to recognize all the species of this family in a given geographic area. My account of this family added to those of other botanists for other families, when published, collectively result in a flora of the area.

My horticultural interests have taken me well beyond the walls of the herbarium and around the 330 acres of Kew. My favorite places are the Woodland Garden, Mediterranean Garden, a grove of *Araucaria araucana* (monkey-puzzle) trees in the Arboretum, Rock Garden, Plant Family beds, Princess of Wales Conservatory (several different habitats and special plant collections maintained in separate rooms), herbaceous borders along the Great Broad Walk, the gravel garden (in the Duke's Garden) and Davies Alpine House. There are many, many more attractions, e.g., the recently renovated Palm House and the Temperate House, which is scheduled to reopen in May of this year, but not being a full-time tourist, I tend to visit the places I like best, according to the season. There are more than 40,000 taxa of living plants at Kew, representing about 25,000 species.

The displays at Kew that will be of greatest interest to rock gardeners are the Rock Garden and Davies Alpine House. The present rock garden at Kew was constructed in 1882 to display 3000 alpine plants received as a bequest on the condition of their immediate transfer. It was excavated from level ground in the form of a winding path 540 ft (165 m) long, suggesting a rocky stream. Banks were built up on both sides to a height of approximately 10 ft (3 m). Different kinds of stone have been employed at various times, most recently Sussex sandstone in the form of large rectangular blocks. Several years ago, the plantings in part of the rock garden were reorganized geographically, by region of origin. The rock garden occupies over an acre and includes a variety of habitats.

The Davies Alpine House was built in 2006 to replace the old alpine house. It is essentially a laterally flattened glass dome with modest space for growing and displaying alpine plants that would not be hardy outdoors. It has a limited display space but certainly was a unique addition to the landscape.

I am rather fond of a gravel garden within the Duke's Garden because it is on a modest scale and does not have many visitors. Although most of its plants are not likely to be hardy here, the concept of the garden is transferrable, and I know that there are many suitable species for growing here in the same way.

The climate at Kew most closely resembles that of the Pacific Northwest in the U.S. Despite the frequent rain the annual rainfall is only about 23 inches per year in London (compared with 41 inches in Washington, DC). The hardiness zone for Kew would be Z8, compared with Z7 in the Washington, DC area, although London is about 12 and a half degrees of latitude further north.



Lithodora zahnii

Kew is worth visiting at any time of year. My research stays are typically for a month or longer. I try to avoid going there in April and October, my favorite months at home, and December and January because the days are so short and gloomy. My favorite times to go are mid-February to the end of March, which is great spring weather in southern England most years. In a 'normal' year, I not only get to enjoy spring at Kew, but I also return home to spring weather and flowers here.

Last year and this year were hardly typical. In 2017 spring weather and flowering at Kew in February and March seemed to be normal during my stay. However, at home, January and February had been much warmer than normal, so when I returned home at the end of March, most of the early spring flowers had come and gone. This year it was cold on both sides of the Atlantic, at least part of the time I was away. At Kew temperatures were much colder than usual during the second half of February and the whole of March. During one period temperatures hovered around freezing for more than a week, Kew Pond (on Kew Green) froze over, and there was snow that lasted on the ground for several days. A shorter cold period with another snowfall occurred later. All in all, flowering was late, the 'February Gold' daffodils on Kew Green not opening until March and the first magnolias only starting to flower around the last week of that month. In contrast a very warm February at home, followed by a cold March, resulted in many spring flowers still open when I returned to stifling hot temperatures on March 29<sup>th</sup>.

### **References**

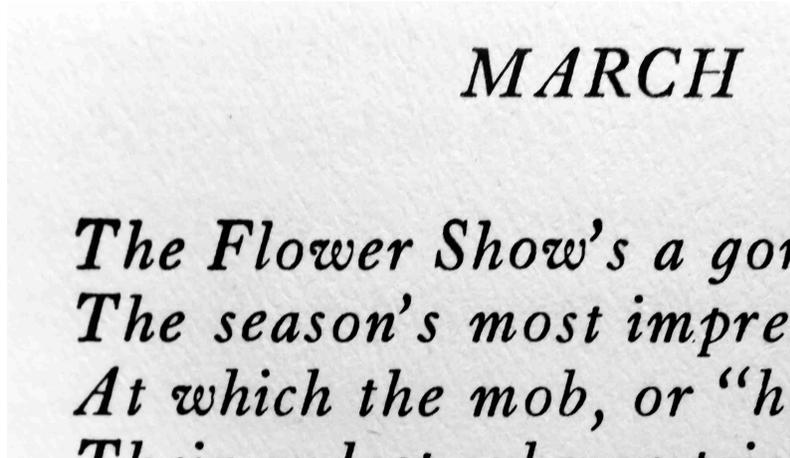
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## More Winter Reading (and Amusement)

Jim McKenney

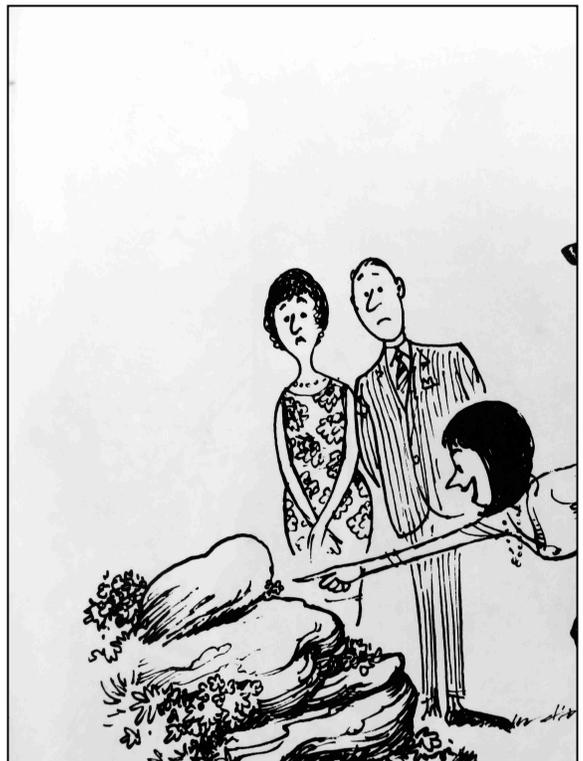
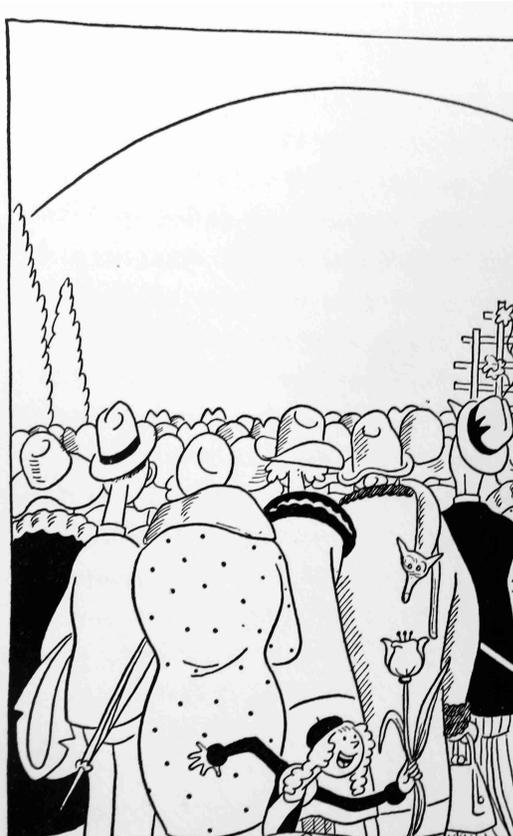
From *The Gardener's Friend and Other Pests*, George S. Chappell and Ridgely Hunt, Frederick Stokes Co 1931

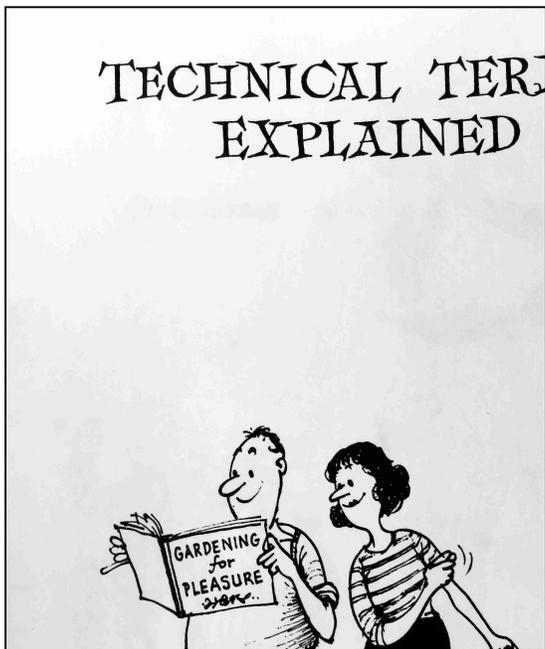
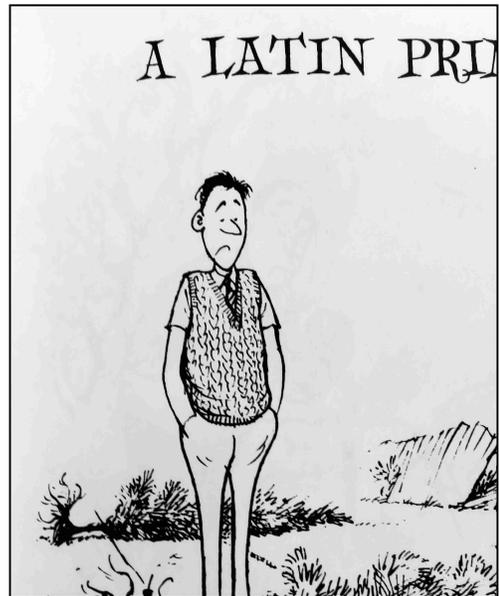
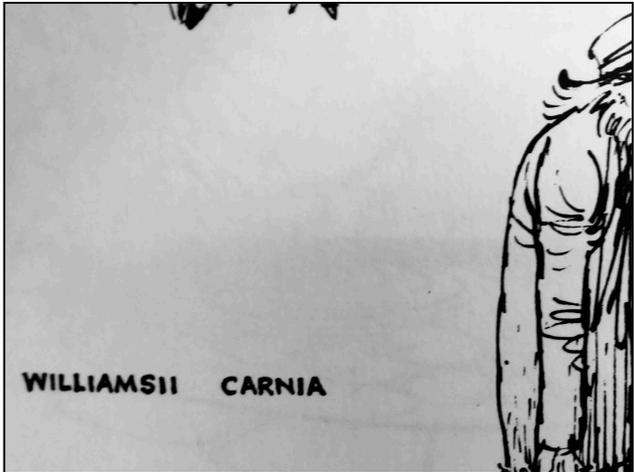
I was reading this back in late February when announcements for trips to the Philadelphia Flower Show were appearing. The March poem and the March big picture of the flower show crowd suggest that things have not changed much.



From *Up the Garden Path*, Norman Thelwell, Dutton, 1967

The book has about 125 of these cartoons. These are probably still under copyright. I've picked out some that have relevance to rock gardeners. Included is one ("williamsii carnia") which I don't get: maybe someone else will and let me know.





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