

Wisley's Alpine Log

By Paul Cumbleton

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The autumn-flowering bulbs are beginning to bloom in increasing numbers. Last time I showed the first solitary *Sternbergia* flower to appear. Since then many more flowers of *S. lutea* have come out, both in the garden and in pots:



With them, the first *Colchicum* are out such as my favourite, *C. agrippinum*:



The chequered patterning of the petals is as delightful as that on any *Fritillaria*. This *Colchicum* is also small enough to grow well in a pot and is nearly always the first one to flower for us.

Of course the *Cyclamen* are also appearing more and more at this time of year. *Cyclamen hederifolium* is already making a good show on the bed at the top of the Rock Garden:



While enjoying the autumn bulbs, our major summer job re-potting all the other bulbs is still under way. So far we have completed all the South African winter-growing bulbs, as well as the *Narcissus*, the small blue bulbs such as *Scilla* and most of the *Crocus*. I have also just started *Fritillaria*. While most of the bulbs are OK, we occasionally turn out a pot that has had problems. Some of the bulbs in this pot of *Fritillaria elwesii* have completely rotted away leaving just husks:



Of the remainder, most show signs of rot starting. I do not know which disease is specifically the cause of this, so I have taken these down to my colleagues in plant pathology and asked them to see if they can identify the cause of the problem. Then we can see if there is anything that can be done to avoid the problem in the future. I will report the results in a future log.

While on the subject of problems, I think some of you can guess what this holly is doing on top of a mat of *Raoulia australis* Lutescens Group:



Yes – it is to deter Sunny our cat who finds *Raoulia* a soft and comfortable bed! She is feeling very important at the moment after she featured in an article in “Your Cat” magazine:



WORKING CAT

Sunny presides over a territory that would make any cat green with envy.



Whiskers twitch nervously with interest and admiration.



WORKING CAT

Victoria Reynolds Sunny. Far right with Paul Gardiner.

“She spends most of her days in the rock garden, where she seems to know which plants to avoid...**”**

Sunny days

Come rain or shine, the RHS Garden Wisley is truly resplendent, but it wouldn't be the same without a bit of Sunny. ANGELA LOWE meets one of their finest feline specimens.

It's an age-old tradition to keep cats at the Royal Horticultural Society garden in Surrey, and Sunny is the last in a long line of green-pawed moggies to grace its grounds.

Thousands of visitors flock to the estate every year to see its richly-planted borders, lawns, rose and rose of the air (Garden), and can't resist a stroll to the rock garden to see 12-year-old Sunny.

While the tabby and white cat is a bit more reserved than brother Tommy, who sadly died two years ago, she is known to be very talkative and will demand attention — on his terms, of course!

Sunny supervisor Paul Gardiner, says: “Sunny is very much used to the public and will often insist she is stroked. We get an endless stream of people here and she likes their attention. When she's had enough she will just take herself off into the pouring shed.”

Both Tommy and Sunny were found to

litters in a greenhouse in the Model Vegetable Garden. “I think when and where they were found had a lot to do with how they got their names,” says Anita Tomkins, marketing executive. “It was on a sunny day — hence Sunny — and Tommy was so named because the greenhouse usually houses tomatoes in the summer.”

“Sunny was not antsy because she was a lot more visible than Tom. He had similar markings to her, but was a bit bigger in size. It was very friendly and loved having his photo taken, whereas Sunny can be a bit camera shy.”

“Sunny was really affected when he died. He got out over and she just wandered around for ages looking for him.”

“I don't think Wisley has ever made a conscious decision to keep cats here on site. They have just started up somehow and staff at that time have decided to look after them.”

Angela also recalls a cat called Jasper living in the glass conservatory in the 1950s, but gardening staff members know very little about him.

Cats rock

Over the years Wisley cats have been fantastic mousers, keeping the site free from rodents along with other pest-y invaders! “About two years ago Sunny caught a brownish-looking mouse! It was nearly as big as she is!” says Paul.

“She has become less active with age and these days doesn't like to go too far. She spends most of her days in the rock garden, where she seems to know which plants to avoid (especially the peckly ones) and leaves the Toxicus Subgenus, which seems to have a similar effect to cats.”

“In the winter she likes to sleep in the pouring shed. We've had a cat flap put in there now so she can come and go as she pleases. It used to be just a hole until we got a proper flap in for her — but then she couldn't get used to it, so now it's just a hole again! We had a spell where magpies would get in through it and pinch her biscuits. Trouble is, they couldn't remember how to get out again so would get chased around the shed.”

As well as biscuits, Sunny also enjoys a diet of wet food, which is paid for by garden staff. She wears a collar that identifies her as being the ‘rock garden cat’ and is taken to the vets over a year for an annual check-up.

“She even goes over for grooming,” adds Paul. “She waddles in and mouses as if to say, ‘hey was I tickled?’, then jumps on someone's knee and goes to sleep.”

“She is a good looking cat and children love her, although it can get a bit annoying when you're just finished a display and she decides to go in the box in the middle of it!”

“Luckily she is a real favourite around here, especially with the public, and they often ask about her on their return visit so we can't be too cross with her!”

Sunny does her best impression of a mouse to worry people. But she's not thinking of!

The RHS Garden Wisley can be found at Woking in Surrey. For more information visit www.rhs.org.uk or tel: 0844 260000.



With so many pots of bulbs to re-pot and a lot of people doing the work, it would be easy to lose track of what has been done and what has not. We get around this by putting a coloured label into each pot as soon as it has been repotted

You can see then at a glance which sections of the plunge have been done:



Once a whole plunge bed is done, the coloured labels are removed for re-use on the next bed.

While on the subject of potting, I have started a new topic on the forum (under the "Composts" category) asking about the use of entirely renewable composts for growing bulbs and alpines generally. I would really appreciate it if you would all have a look at this and let me have your thoughts and experiences.

As always, I like to finish with some colour. Just outside the Display House, the *Zauschneria californica* are once again providing some late summer colour:



There are two cultivars in the above raised bed. Individual flowers are shown, left, for comparison. Top is 'Ed Carman' and bottom is 'Western Hills'. The former is a larger, broader flower than 'Western Hills'. Its colour is also a more orange-red than the more scarlet-red of Western Hills, although this difference does not show well in this photo. It is one of things that is very obvious to the eye but apparently not to a digital camera!

To finish, here are a couple of plants from inside the house. The first is a splendid pot of *Cyclamen graecum* where all the flowers are presenting at the same height:



Finally is *Berlandiera lyrata*. This is called the Chocolate Flower or Chocolate Daisy (also sometimes called Green Eyes) because the stamens of the plant give off a chocolate-like fragrance. The flowers open at night and the fragrance is strongest in the mornings. In its native south-western USA the flowers drop each day as the temperature rises, but I find in our cooler climate they can last a few days each.

