

Wisley's Alpine Log

By Paul Cumbleton

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Covered in snow and with exceptionally low temperatures, we are suffering winter with the rest of you. I always like at this time of year, when everything outside looks white, to bring some cheer by sharing lots of colour to remind us of warmer days. So this log is a rambling selection of items from both home and work.

At home, my South African bulb house is also home to a few cacti and these always bring a fantastic richness of colour when in bloom. Back in June, this *Rebutia donaldiana* was a blaze of orange:



Cacti were the first plant group I developed a special interest in. I started collecting them when I was age 12 and ended up with many hundreds of plants. Sadly, almost all of these I had to give up when I moved away from home to go to university. But a very few of the ones I have now are remnants of that collection which moved with me and are now over 40 years old. The one shown above is not one of those, being a much more recent acquisition. These days I grow my cacti in pure Seramis which they seem to love, and feed them with half strength Chempak no. 8 at every watering.

A genus I love is *Leucocoryne*, bulbous plants from South America and I grow these both at Wisley and at home. I use a straightforward mix of 50/50 John Innes and grit. They are winter growers, the leaves emerging in the autumn to grow through the winter with the flowers coming towards the end of their growing season, usually in April for me. I give them full strength high potash liquid feed from early spring until the leaves start to wither in early summer. I then keep them dry and warm through the summer dormancy. Here are some examples:



Above: *Leucocoryne purpurea*. Below: *Leucocoryne coquimbensis*



My favourite species is *Leucocoryne vittata*. It can be quite variable if grown from seed. Here are 3 varying forms:



Although some *Leucocoryne* are commonly available from garden centres, they sell them at the wrong time of year as summer growers (because this suits the Dutch suppliers). These bulbs often fail to please; they will grow when planted but often fail to flower. They then try to come back up again at their correct time in the autumn, but because they have had a short growing season and a short dormancy, the bulbs have become small and weak. It is much better to either try to get some offsets from fellow growers whose plants are already growing as winter growers, or to grow them from seed so they are in the correct season right from the start. The various species freely hybridise and these hybrids are often the ones offered in garden centres.

This one is called 'Andes' – though I am uncertain whether this is a hybrid or just a selected form of *Leucocoryne purpurea*:



Before I leave South America there is one other bulb that I adore because of the wonderful sky-blue colour of the petal tips. This is *Zephyra elegans*:

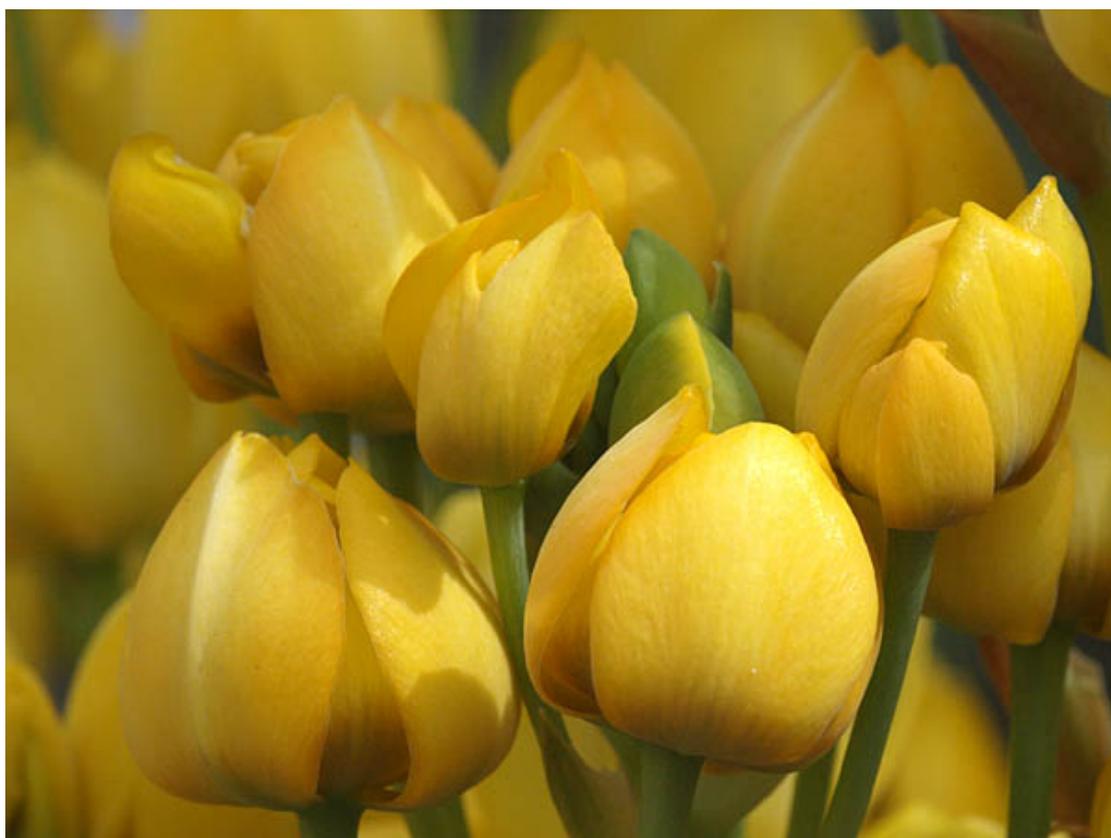


Brilliantly colourful – even if it does clash with the more muted tones above! – is this *Ornithogalum dubium* from South Africa:



Like many growers, I find this plant difficult to keep going from year to year. There is a yellow-flowered form whose flowers are smaller but which seems much more reliably perennial.

I only have a close up view of this in bud:



One orchid that flowered for me for the first time this year was *Spathoglottis ixioides*. This is a delightful, small orchid that comes from Nepal, Sikkim & Bhutan where it grows in very similar situations to *Pleione* and can be grown in exactly the same way as that genus:



To finish, and to remind us even more of warmer times, here are a couple of my decidedly warmer-growing orchids, the *Phalaenopsis*:

