



BULB LOG 27 ..... 8<sup>th</sup> July 2015





It is the time of year when I look around at the multiple seasonal tasks looming before me, hedge cutting, pruning of the trees and shrubs, repotting all the bulbs in containers, lifting and dividing clumps in the garden, not to mention the ongoing weeding and all this comes at the same time as the coverage of the tennis at Wimbledon and Le Tour de France cycling that we are so fond of watching. By breaking down the tasks then tackling them bit by bit we normally manage to get through most of them. We also manage to view the best of the sports on the TV but the most important thing at any time of year is that we take the time to enjoy the plants and the garden.

We sometimes talk of our 'collection' of plants and we do indeed amass plants both for enjoyment and study but it is critical that our collecting does not dictate the look and feel of the garden.

It is nature that has the biggest influence on our garden and that was reinforced last week when I was on the SRGC trip to Golspie. Our gardens should not be filled with rarities only, as the name suggests they should be few and far between, you should have to search out such plants in the garden just as we were doing as we searched the cliff tops for *Primula scotica* or the woodland for *Moneses uniflora* growing in among the mass plantings of

the more common plants. The *Digitalis purpurea* are among the many plants that are allowed to self-seed around the garden in a semi-controlled way – we will enjoy the flowers but cut off the seed of many of them so that we do not get inundated with seedlings - then we selectively weed out those that germinate in an inappropriate place selecting which ones that we want to grow on to flower, like those shown on the cover, growing at the base of the tree along with *Tanacetum parthenium*, another volunteer plant in many gardens – both of these plants are much favoured by bees and other insects; another good reason to keep them. I would never have thought of trying to grow a plant right at the base of this *Sorbus* tree but now nature has shown me the way my mind is opened to many more potential planting opportunities around the garden. Perhaps the drier conditions of this position may prove just right for plants that we find difficult elsewhere in the garden. *Digitalis* is biennial; so it germinates and forms a rosette in the first year sending up a flower spike in the second year. The group of first year seedlings on the right are in the front garden where we cut back the shrubs last year – these seeds have probably been in the ground for many years just waiting for favourable conditions to germinate.

The common *Digitalis* ranges in colour from deep pink to white and we have no way of knowing what colour they might be when we have to select which seedlings we allow to grow. I will allow this entire group to grow on to flower next year then we will probably use this space for other plants.





Alongside the group of *Digitalis* I am planting the recently opened up areas with young *Primula* plants underplanted with various bulbous plants as we build up the sequence group plantings that we love.



The lower half of the front garden is one year ahead and now the mixed plantings are growing well but require some refining – note the foxglove growing at the base of the tree. I have too much *Corydalis* 'Craigton Blue' in this area so I will lift and thin out the clumps a bit when the flowers and foliage die back in the summer – the surplus will be planted in the upper half to create a unifying sea of blue across the whole front garden.

## **Crinodendron hookerianum**

The wonderful scarlet flowers of *Crinodendron hookerianum* bring a 'rarity' to the mass volunteer plantings up the driveway. It is there to be found and admired by those who would seek it out.



Around thirty years ago we scattered some seed of *Geranium sanguineum* into the gravel area between the slabs of the driveway leaving them to naturalise. We added seeds of other suitably low growing plants and bulbs over the years turning a boring area of gravel into a bed that gives us flowering interest for at least eight months of the year. This has become topical as the RHS have launched a promotion to green up the grey front gardens of Britain, lamenting how many of these once green and beautiful spaces in front of our homes have been turned into car parks.



Even the path along the front of the house is a planting opportunity **Pseudofumaria lutea** growing between a series of troughs. A few of these troughs are very old plantings in painted polystyrene boxes that are needing some work but for now the self-seeded *Dactylorhiza* looks very attractive.



### **Trillium ovatum forma maculosum**

Search among the abundant growth of *Corydalis* 'Craigton Blue' growing near the front step and you will find lovely fat seedpods growing on *Trillium ovatum maculosum* - the rare form with dark markings on the leaves.

Just as we had to search out the rare plants in the North of Scotland we have to do the same in the garden.

We do not allow the seeds of such scarce plants to scatter we will collect it and grow it on in pots.

Here is the pot of seedlings, germinated from the single seed capsule we got last year, growing in the seed frame where we can give them special attention. One of the best things we can do to shorten the number of years it takes a bulbous plant to flower from seed is to keep the seedlings growing for as long as possible each year. To help prolong the growing season our seed frames are in a cool shaded part of the garden and every time we water them we do so with liquid tomato fertiliser diluted to less than half the recommended strength.



These Erythronium and Lilium seedlings growing directly in the sand plunge of a seed bed, mulched with shavings to keep down the liverwort, can grow on for four to six weeks after the parent plants have gone back underground for the season.



Back with the **Digitalis** I was struck by the similarity between them and the **Dactylorhiza** both in the colour and form of the inflorescence both having spikes of flowers in colours from dark pink to white – a theme was emerging that continued as I looked around at some of the troughs with **Erinus alpinus**.





**Digitalis**



**Dactylorhiza**



**Erinus**

Although very different in many ways, not least the size, these plants have all adopted a similar flowering strategy with a spike of flowers which start opening from the bottom working up.



One of the other questions that regularly comes to my mind is why do some bulbous plants form clumps in cultivation but not in the wild – I witnessed this with the many orchids we saw around Golspie; the majority were singles and the nearest I found to a clump was three stems rising together. There is one obvious factor to this and that is that if a plant forms a clump the competition for moisture and nutrient increases between the individual bulbs plus the density of the foliage increases the risks of fungal or bacterial infections as air flow around the leaves diminishes. A clump is more easily destroyed by grazing, too. Thus, in the wild any bulb that forms a clump has a definite evolutionary disadvantage, so would be less likely to persist to pass on its genes.



Why then do so many form clumps in our gardens? One factor must be that our gardens tend to have more fertile soils with much higher nutrient levels and have less competition from other plants. In harsher conditions, such as the trough on the previous page where all the orchids have self-seeded, none clump up but if we remove some of the bulbs and plant them in the garden they do form clumps. If left undivided these clumps become very congested and eventually the flowers get fewer and smaller - you also will

notice more fungal attacks on the leaves.

So in gardens we become an additional factor in the evolutionary process, favouring the clump forming plants over those that remain single, so by lifting and dividing them on a regular basis they will tend to dominate our plantings.



This group of more than one clone is at the stage where it needs lifting and dividing – the best time to do this is as soon as the flowers fade. Watch the Bulb Log for more on this in around a months' time.



You may remember I showed this pot with the black **Ophiopogon planiscapus 'Nigrescens'** when the **Dactylorhiza** was just in bud in [Bulb log 20-2015](#)– here it is again in full and glorious flower. These are just the sort of conditions where *Dactylorhiza* seeds will germinate and grow so follow nature's lesson and if you have seed do not sow it in the conventional way but scatter the seeds around troughs or pots that are well established and have not been recently disturbed. Once the plants are flowering sized they can be removed and planted elsewhere as you wish.



I hate how this trough looks in the winter - it is flat and uninteresting but I love it at this time as it reminds me so much of the wild plantings that I was seeing in nature on our trip last week.



Another naturalistic planting at the side of a path - here I allow certain of the smaller plants to self-seed.



This trough features the wonderfully decorative spun-sugar like bright red runners of **Saxifaga brunonis**. Troughs can work as isolated 'mini plantings' or I can focus in on a single plant growing within the trough landscape at the same time they can combine to form landscapes and vistas in the wider garden as shown in the next series of pictures.



A grouping of troughs combine to form a unified landscape.



The trough area leads into the wider garden offering many viewpoints where they can all merge into a single view with the troughs in the foreground and the trees and shrubs beyond.



A group of small troughs combine to form an interesting vista towards the bonsai tree. There are no rarities here and many of the plants in these troughs may be considered as weeds by some gardeners but in the right place they can work.

Remember if you would like to see the Bulb Log video Diary supplements including the ones from Golspie you can link to them through the [forum](#) or direct from my [Channel](#) .....