



Rock garden in woods

I have had another busy week with much of it spent away from the garden. I was over the hills at Explorers, the Scottish Plant Hunters Garden at Pitlochry Festival Theatre helping to present two one day workshops - SRGC



Members may have noticed the advert in the back of the club journal 'The Rock Garden'. One of the workshops was on building a rock garden and as I was driving over I noticed this massive pile of large rocks in the woods by the side of the Upper Deeside road.

What a great rock garden you could build with these great rocks some of which would weigh several tonnes each. I once read that the best and most natural way to build a rock garden was to have a load of rocks tipped and then tip a load of soil over them.

My eye was then drawn beyond the pile of rocks by a massive slab of rock forming a sheer face.



The sheer face turned out to be a **quarry face** and as I approached the edge I could see that it was now filled with crystal clear water and unfortunately a lot of rubbish including old fridges. It is only a few miles to Balmoral, the Queen's holiday home, and I wonder if this was where they quarried the stone for that building.

Rock Garden Workshop

Here is the rather smaller pile of stones that we formed into a rock garden for the workshop. It may not look much but there is over two tonnes of sand and at least the same weight of rocks in it – all of which we moved by hand to the site. Everyone on the workshop got



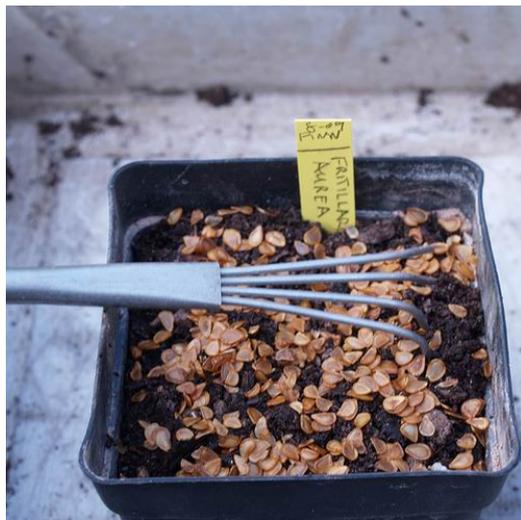
involved most of them were heaving rocks and sand about. I had intended to make the bed twice as long but had to reduce the scale as we were running out of both time and materials. The aim of the workshop was to demonstrate how both rounded boulders and flat rocks could be used in rock garden construction depending on what material people could get hold of so it ended up as a mixture employing both crevice style and the traditional boulder construction.



Demonstration rock bed.

The other side of the bed made use of the rounded boulders and obviously it is a long way from perfect but in the time we had available I think we gave a good idea of how to use stone in rock garden construction. I would love to be able to spend the time to fine tune the construction and plant it up – maybe it will happen. The important thing

was that people who took part were enthused and had a new confidence that they could go off and build their own rock garden in any available site in their own gardens. The site we used was far from the ideal site recommended for rock gardens as it was under some large yew trees and quite shaded for most of the day and it was never intended to be a permanent feature of the garden but I got quite excited at the prospect of planting it up. I am always very positive and never see ‘problem areas’ in gardens just opportunities for special plants so as we worked on the construction we started to discuss what plants could be suitable for a shaded rock garden that was underneath trees. The list included Cyclamen, Hepatica, the dwarfier forms of ferns, Hosta, and Epimedium,



Sowing Fritillaria seeds

Once I got back home I had received a lovely package of seeds including some Fritillaria so I decided that it is the ideal time just to sow them now. If you have plenty of time and patience it is ideal to place each seed on its edge into the surface of the compost. I do not have that time so I scatter this type of seeds on the surface of the compost, then with a small home made rake I work them into the top layer of the compost so many of them do turn onto their edge – then I will top the pot of with the usual layer of 6mm gravel. The reason I believe they do best when sown on their edge is they are less inclined to rot off with excessive damp in the winter or at the other extreme to dry out and desiccate on a prolonged dry period.



Arum creticum tubers

The rush is also on to finish off repotting all the bulbs as I will be applying the first storm next week when I give them all a thorough soaking. I am leaving the Fritillarias until last as for the most part they start into new growth that bit later and I can get away with not watering them until nearer October- the Asian species excluded as many of them have roots already. You can see from the extending shoot on these Arum creticum tubers that they, too, are already in early growth and will start to root soon.



Sternbergia sicula

Last year I decided to try planting the bulbs of some of my pots of Sternbergia sicula very close to the surface. My reason was since they seem to need a good hot ripening period to flower well, if I plant them near the surface they will dry out and warm up quicker as they go into dormancy in the summer.



Sternbergia sicula bulbs

The first signs are good as the bulbs appear happy at that shallow planting depth and have remained bulb shaped and not elongated in an attempt to go deeper into the compost – now I will have to wait a few months to see if they flower any better than in the past when I planted them nearer the bottom of the pot.



Sternbergia sicula 'Dodona Gold' bulbs

It is interesting that different clones of so called Sternbergia sicula are reacting differently to the shallow planting: these bulbs of S. 'Dodona Gold' are just starting to elongate indicating they may prefer to be a bit deeper in the compost. If this is going to be the case perhaps I can achieve the best of both methods by planting the bulbs near the



bottom of the pots then in the spring when the plants show the first signs of going dormant I can then tip off the gravel and some of the top layer of compost allowing them to dry out and warm up quickly.

Of course this all depends on us getting some nice warm sunny weather in the summer which is the cause of my problem of poor flowering of the Sternbergias in the first place.

In this close up of the **Sternbergia sicula 'Dodona Gold'** bulbs you can see how advanced the shoots that will form the off set bulbs are already.

Look carefully at the sides of the bulbs and you can see last years shoots starting to form a bulb are wrapped around the parent bulb and a slightly larger one that I have removed.

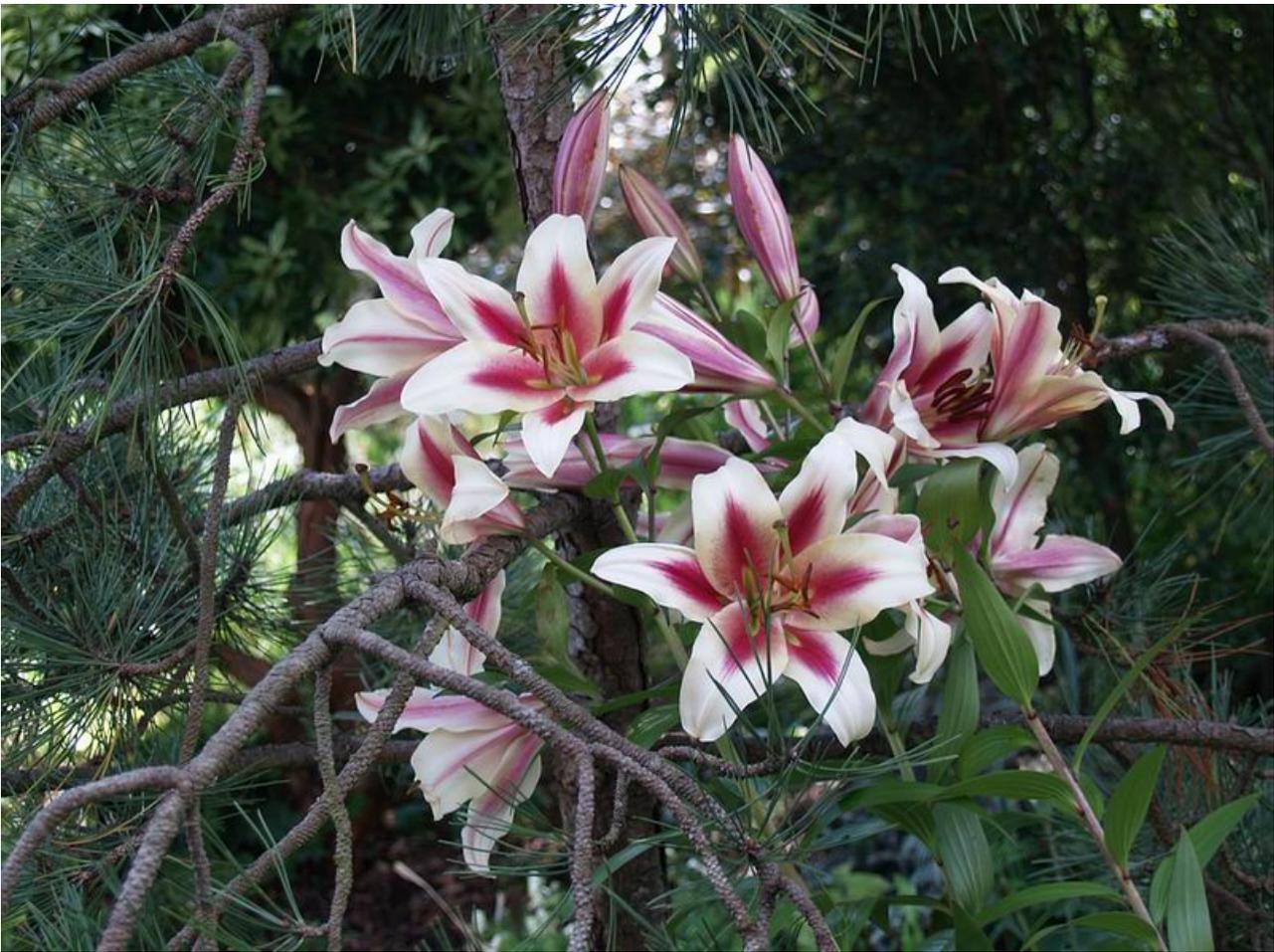
Also notice that the roots are starting to initiate as they slowly emerge exploring for moisture.



Sternbergia sicula bulbs

These are another clone of *S. sicula* and you can see clearly the root tips slowly emerging from the basal plate at the bottom of the bulb.

I believe it is falling temperatures that stimulate this first phase of growth and as soon as moisture becomes available the second phase of rapid root growth will start as the roots explore the moist compost.



Hybrid Lily

Outside, especially in the evening, our garden is filled with the beautiful scent from these hybrid lilies whose tall stems are supported by an old pine tree.



Albuca shawii

The other day of the workshops at Pitlochry was on digital photography, picture filing and PowerPoint presentations. Unfortunately the weather was dreadful and the rain poured all day meaning that we could not get out into the garden with the delegates for the practical photographic camera handling part of the workshop that we had planned. Some of the methods that we hoped to show would have included making the most of your camera and understanding the different effects available such as using your flash as above. The picture on the left was taken using the inbuilt flash and a small aperture (f 22) while the right hand one was captured using the available light and a wide aperture (f 3.5). You can see the main differences are that the depth of field is greater with the small aperture and the back ground is under exposed helping the flower stand out in the left hand image that used flash while less of the flower is in sharp focus in the right hand picture it still stands out from the back ground which is very blurred and out of focus. Both pictures have their qualities and neither is better than the other but they do illustrate what a difference a small adjustment on your camera can make to the final image.



Albuca shawii

Albuca shawii is a lovely South African bulb that likes similar growing conditions to Rhodohypoxis which for us means keeping it completely dry all winter. It stays dried out under the benches in the glasshouse until late February or early March then I give it a good watering. It does not appear above ground until July and the flowers appear in August and last until November or until the first hard frosts.

It was a pity we could not explore the Scottish Plant Hunters Garden photographically as it would have been very interesting to see what people would have photographed. At this time of year there are not going to be masses of flowers or obvious subjects for your camera but it does encourage you to look carefully at what is there; like this group of fungi.



Fungi



Fungi

Here is another group that is a bit chewed and past its best but still makes a good subject for a photograph especially taken from a very low angle. Too many people always take photographs of plants looking down on them from above – try placing your camera on the ground for a worm’s eye view and you will enjoy the results.



Colchicums

Back in our garden I liked the sight of the back light view of these Colchicums shining through the deep shadows cast by the Rhododendrons.....now... back to the repotting before next week’s storm.