

Wisley's Alpine Log

By Paul Cumbleton

Log 25 ... 11th December 2009



A recurrence of my back problem kept me off work last week and also unable to do the log, so apologies that we are now a week late with it.

December isn't a month that comes to mind when thinking of times of colour in the open rock garden. If you cast an eye out over the whole thing the overall impression may seem quite bleak. Gladly however, a closer inspection reveals more than you would imagine and there are plenty of things to bring a little cheer. There are some plants that we can usually rely on to be in flower during the festive season and one of these is *Clematis cirrhosa*. The red-speckled flowers are always a winter treat.



This particular plant scrambles up an oak tree at the top of the rock garden. It isn't an ideal site for it as the tree keeps the surrounding area rather too dry for the Clematis' liking and at some times of year the poor plant looks more brown than green. We should really remove it and plant something more suited to the spot. But each year we see the flowers at this time and then a great reluctance to remove it overcomes us. It is one of those things that often happens to gardeners – jobs you know you should do but for which you can always find an excuse for putting off!!

At the base of this same tree, right under the *Clematis*, is another plant that can be relied on for some winter colour – *Iris unguicularis*.



Providing the most wonderful sweet perfume as well as winter flowers is *Lonicera x purpusii*. Planted next to a path, you cannot fail to notice the heavy scent as you pass. It even manages to attract a few late bees, which always seem a strange sight at this time of year:



Of course it is not always flowers that bring colour in winter – foliage can be just as important and impressive. Really striking, especially when caught in winter sunshine, is *Sarracenia purpurea* ssp. *purpurea*:



In complete contrast, but colourful in their own way, are the leaves of *Chiastophyllum oppositifolium* 'Jim's Pride'



This plant has rather succulent leaves and this may lead you to think of hot, dry situations. But it seems to thrive better with some shade and reasonable moisture – though it is a fairly easy plant that will adapt to a range of conditions.



Continuing the foliage theme, Epimediums often have good winter colour. This one is *Epimedium x versicolor* 'Sulphureum'

Conifers seem to still be out of fashion but no doubt their time will return and so it should be, as they can provide welcome colour. This one is *Thuja occidentalis* 'Amber Glow'



Moving under cover and there is still a wide range of plants flowering. My favourites, Massonias and Daubenyas have been performing for some time. This one is *Daubenyia marginata*:





Massonia pustulata usually flowers a little later than the other species, most of which are now beginning to go over.

With this species, as with all *Massonia* and *Daubenyia*, it is really important to watch out for Botrytis on the ageing flowers. You can see in the picture below that this disease can quickly take hold. Unless picked off, it may spread to the leaves and ultimately rot the bulb.



The Botrytis often starts in the area of the outermost flowers. Here the falling anthers and stigmas end up sitting in the nectar which often pools at the base of the flowers between the two leaves. This makes them perpetually wet and prone to infection. There are no sprays available to amateurs in the UK that are effective against Botrytis, so the only remedy is to remove the decaying flowers with tweezers. I also often use a paper tissue to soak up and remove the nectar. Good air movement with fans also helps reduce the problem somewhat, but in the kind of damp weather we usually get here at this time of year it is almost impossible to prevent Botrytis. Keeping a keen eye out for it and removing diseased parts at the earliest opportunity is the way to keeping your collection healthy

Narcissus bulbocodium in its various forms is still going strong. For my taste, the best of the forms we grow is *N. bulbocodium* ssp. *praecox* 'Moulay Brahim'. This has particularly deep, bright yellow flowers of great substance on stout stems that stay upright. Seen here with a shaft of sunlight backlighting some of the flowers:



There are still some *Crocus* flowering, including one or two flowering much earlier than usual such as this *C. reticulatus* ssp. *hittiticus*: (the black anthers differentiate this subspecies)



To finish this week, more flowers under cover include firstly *Colchicum hungaricum* and then *Ranunculus calandrinoides*:

