



Wisley's Alpine Log

By Paul Cumbleton

Log 10 ... 7th May 2009



The alpine phloxes are rightly one of the mainstays of the rock garden. They carpet the ground and light up large areas with their eye-catching displays of colour in April and May. This year at Wisley they seem to have been better than ever.



These are two examples of *Phlox bifida*. There are currently about ten cultivars of *P. bifida* available in the U.K.

Left is *P. bifida* 'Alba' which is pure white

Right is *P. bifida* 'Petticoat'. The flowers start out with a flush of pale pink then fade to white



Perhaps the most familiar of all these carpeting phloxes is *Phlox subulata*. This can make extremely large mats 2 metres or more across, but can be kept in bounds and its performance improved by annual clipping back just after the flowers have faded. A large number of colours and forms have been selected over the years and the new 'Plant Finder' lists 46 varieties as

currently available. Here is a taste of just some of those which can currently be seen flowering on and around the rock garden:



From top left to bottom right these are: Emerald Cushion Blue, Rose Mabel, Marjorie, Scarlet Flame, Tamaongalei, Purple Beauty, Ronsdorfer Schöne, McDaniel's Cushion, and Oakington Blue Eyes. It is common with many of these that they open a deeper colour then fade. I have tried to picture flowers which have not been open long. Also, they are not to scale so it is not obvious for example that one outstanding feature of McDaniel's Cushion is that its flowers are much larger than those of the other varieties shown.

Close-ups are great for showing the features of the individual flowers, but of course it is the mass effect that these make that really gives these phloxes their appeal. Here are just a couple in all their glory:



Above: *Phlox subulata* 'Emerald Cushion Blue'

Below: *Phlox subulata* 'Tamaongalei'



One other Phlox I want to mention which must have the brightest colouring of all is *Phlox caespitosa* 'Zigeunerblut' which is a vibrant, hit-you-in-the-eyes red: –



My camera never seems to get the colour quite right with this one so I have “Photoshopped” the above image to get the colour as near as I can. All these phloxes are easy to grow in a sunny, well-drained spot and must be among the greatest value-for- money rock plants you can get. One final thing about these – they are not the kind of plant you would first think of to put in tufa but I tried a *subulata* type to see if being in tufa would curb its rapid spreading habit. The result has been really good. This plant has been in the tufa wall here for 5 years now, with no pruning and has only reached a few inches across:



Keeping momentarily to the subject of massed effect, just outside the boundaries of the rock garden, on the edges of Weatherhill, a large number of camassias were planted in the grass a couple of years ago. These have established well and formed a fantastic blanket of blue:



Back on the rock garden, in the wet ground next to the feature we call The Grotto, the unfurling fronds of *Osmunda cinnamomea* look just superb:



It is the brown colour of the spores that give this fern its specific name. It spreads easily in damp ground to make large colonies and the bright green emerging fronds really stand out against the

dark background of the grotto.

Finally this week, some “aahh” factor. A Mallard duck decided to make its nest among the plants in our large poly house. Last Friday the eggs hatched and it gave us all a treat to see them:

