

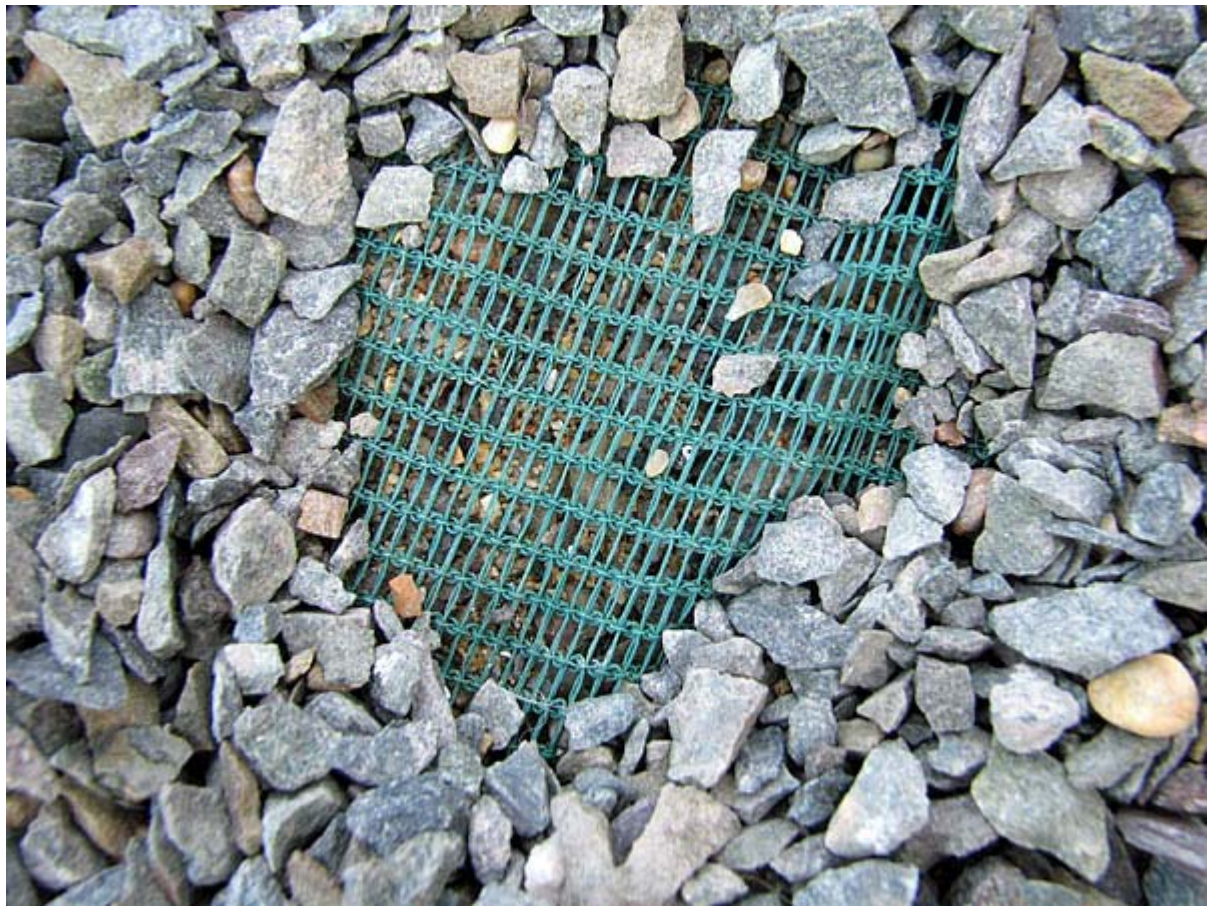


As I have reported before in these Logs, Sunny the beloved Wisley cat has one un-redeeming feature – repeatedly digging in areas you would rather she did not and there leaving you ‘presents’ of the unwanted kind! Over the past year she has made a particular nuisance of herself on one of the sand beds, using one part of it as a toilet about twice a day. As a result, the sand is so badly fouled that nothing will grow. You can see the bare area in this picture, around and to the left of the green bed label:



I have tried just about every so-called cat deterrent – all kinds of smelly chemicals and compounds as well as the expensive ultrasonic scarers. None of these seem to have the slightest effect on Sunny (or indeed any other cat I have ever tried them on). Because the sand beds are key features in a well-used part of the garden, I simply had to find a solution that would keep her off them. And I think I have!

My idea was to put a layer of shade netting buried just under the gravel topdressing. My thought was that as she started to dig, her claws would catch in the netting and this would annoy her, as well as making it so she could not reach the sand. Here is a small patch of the topdressing scraped away to show the netting underneath:



Before going ahead with this properly I did a trial first in the worst affected area to see if it might work. I learnt a couple of useful things. Firstly, the gravel topdressing should be put on as thinly as possible – just enough to hide the netting from sight. If put on thickly, she just used the gravel layer anyway without bothering to try and get at the sand underneath. Secondly, because this first attempt was just a trial I had used a few scraps of netting and overlapped these on the bed. Sunny proved remarkably adept at finding the joins where she could pull the netting out of the way and get at the sand as usual! So if you try this, use a single piece for the whole area, cut to shape and without overlaps.

Having replaced the scraps with a single piece and covered it thinly I then monitored it for a while. For the first week it was obvious that each day she had tried to find her way through to the sand – but given up in exasperation and not actually left any ‘presents’ for me. She seemed to have learned that it was no use trying here any more and she stayed off the bed entirely for the next two weeks.

Cheered by this I felt confident enough to do the whole bed like this and to put some new plants in the bare areas. First though we dug out the old fouled sand and replaced it with fresh.

Because plants seem to establish better in the sand beds when planted young, I had previously always put small ones in. This was another reason why Sunny was able to use this area – there were no big plants to put her off and she would not notice the small things I put in, often digging them out or burying them in piles of sand. This together with her fouling meant nothing could establish. So came the second part of my plan to put her off – I would put in larger plants and would make them of a kind she could not ignore. So this is what is now occupying those bare areas.....



.....Cacti! Regular readers may remember that I reported a couple of years ago I had put a hardy cactus in the bed but that this had been dug out and stolen. I have decided to try again, this time with bigger plants. These are my own plants from home – I have decided they are too big for me now and taking up a lot of space there. I have kept cuttings to start them off again.

It may be surprising to some that cacti can be hardy, and I see this planting as a good opportunity to educate our visitors about this. Surprisingly large numbers of cacti can happily take below freezing temperatures, especially given winter protection from the rain – it is usually the wet that kills them, not the cold. As our sand beds are covered for winter, this is an ideal position for them. Many cacti are genuinely alpine, growing at elevations of up to 11,000 feet (3350 m) in the mountains of north America and even higher – up to 15,000 feet (4500 m) in the Andes of South America. So having them in a bed for alpines is not as out of place as at first may seem. Recognition of the alpine status of many cacti species is at last being demonstrated by their increasingly frequent appearance on the alpine show benches where some have even been winning prizes. Personally I think this is a very welcome development – even if the judges are a little unsure about how to rate them!

The three you can see in the picture are actually hybrids between *Chamaecereus* and *Lobivia* species and so are often called x *Chamaelobivia*. Some botanists would call them *Echinopsis* hybrids but that's a whole other minefield! All have large, brightly coloured flowers with that 'sumptuous' appearance for which cacti are deservedly so popular.

The first is x *Chamaelobivia* 'Meryl Sweeney' with blooms that open mid orange, fading to a paler shade as they age:



This is towards the end of the flowering season so there are few flowers out right now, but this is the kind of thing they can do at their peak: (this picture taken 3 years ago):



The other two are x *Chamaelobivia* 'Ralph's Orange' and the fiery red x *Chamaelobivia* 'Susan Dace':



These types of cacti are easily available from any cactus nursery for just two or three pounds.

On the opposite corner of this bed was a spot where Sunny loved to sleep – squashing all attempts to get plants growing there too:



This is what is there now:



This *Echinocereus triglochidiatus* var. *neomexicana* has a name as long as its spines which should be an effective deterrent against future sleep-overs! This plant also has attractive and elegant flowers:



The plants have only been in for a few days but so far so good and no signs of attempted digging. I will keep my fingers crossed!

To finish this log I'd like to show three of the *Calochortus* that have recently graced the Display House. The first is *C. clavatus* var. *clavatus* with wonderful yellow, hairy blooms:



Next up is *Calochortus nuttallii* :



Finally, I flowered for the first time this year the yellow form of *Calochortus kennedyii* which is called var *munzii*. It is as striking as the orange type species:



[Notice from RHS Wisley- Opportunity to Study Alpines at Wisley](#)

Just before I close this week's log may I draw your attention to an opportunity to come and study alpines for a year at Wisley.

Click on this <http://www.srgc.org.uk/smf/index.php?topic=5672.0> for the thread headed "[Notice from RHS Wisley- Opportunity to Study Alpines at Wisley](#)" in the SRGC Forum