



BULB LOG 07.....16th February 2011



Bulb house plunge



It is a well used saying in UK politics to 'get the bad news out quickly' so I will start this week's bulb log with the bad news. The view of this plunge above and the picture alongside shows a lot of yellow tips to the leaves of the Narcissus. This is a clear sign that something is wrong below – the roots and/or the bulb has been damaged by the prolonged cold weather we had over December and January.

It can take some time before we see the full effect of frost damage with many plants and I have been worried about these Narcissus for a few weeks now. I continually give the leaves a gentle tug to see if they are still attached and most are – this is a good sign but does not mean that all is well below. If the basal plate has been frozen to death the bulb will die but it takes some time for this to happen and the moisture in the bulb scales continues to keep the leaves turgid and looking fine apart from the tell-tale yellow tips.



Sternbergia sicula

This pot of *Sternbergia sicula* does not look at all happy as the leaves have totally collapsed and are losing their healthy green appearance.



The next worrying sign is seen when I removed the pot from the plunge. Normally the roots would have come out of the pot into the sand plunge but none are showing.

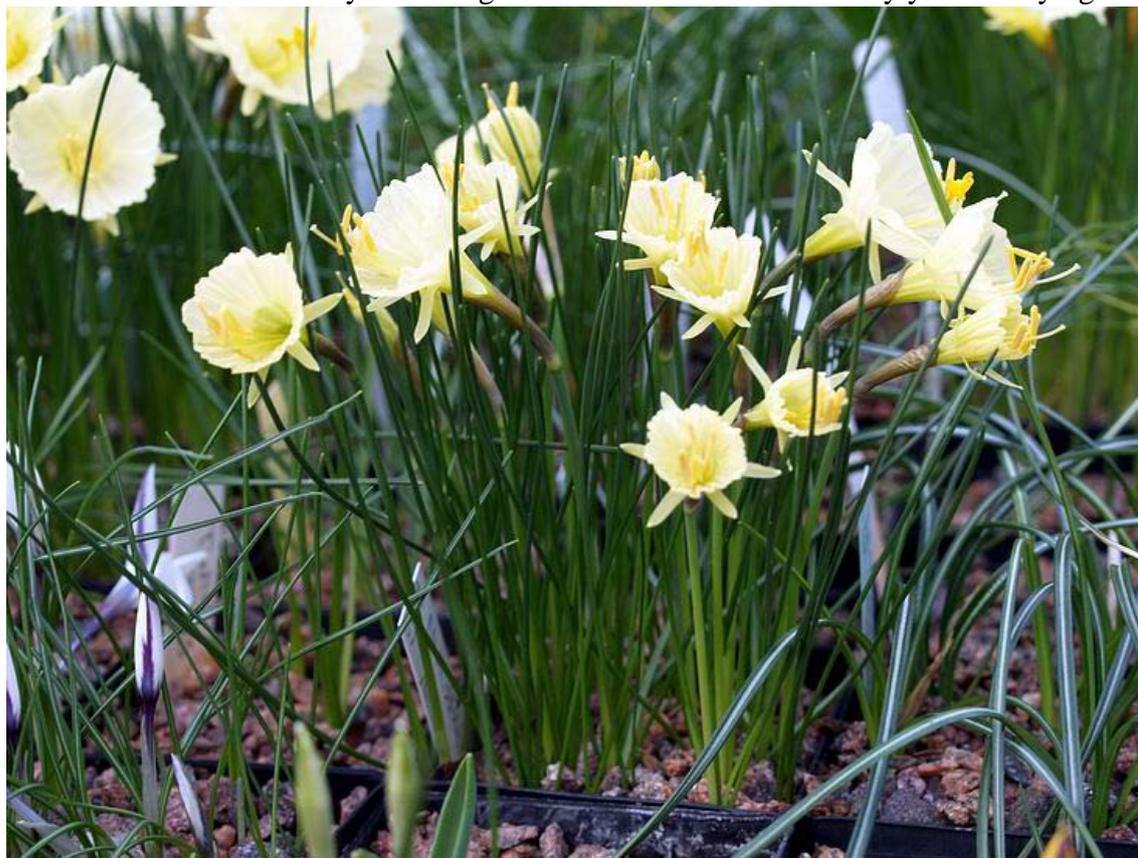
Tipping the pot out reveals that my fears were justified as all the bulbs look distinctly dead and a closer inspection of a few of them shows that there is nothing to save. I will have to wait and watch now to see how many more of these plants on this plunge have been killed.





Mist plunge

That is the bad news out of the way and yes it is deeply disappointing to me - often when I suffer these setbacks my feeling is that I will give up growing bulbs altogether but then I turn around to see this healthy display in the plunge that was my former mist propagation unit and my broken heart is healed. The fact is that the number of bulbs that we grow in pots has increased so much over the years that this glass house, which was our propagation house, has been requisitioned to accommodate more pots of bulbs without adapting the plunges to make them fit for that purpose. The Sternbergia and Narcissus pots that have been damaged by the freezing sit on a shallow layer of sand, only 1-2cms deep, on shallow aluminium trays which would conduct the cold almost like a plate freezer unit and the small amount of sand provides no mass to temper the thermal shock. I do suspect that I will lose some of the Narcissus and the rest of my Sternbergias which will see an end to my years of trying to understand the closely



related species and finding clones that will flower freely for me. Perhaps nature is doing me a favour and making my decisions for me - there are so many bulbs to choose from more suited to our climate.

Narcissus 'Craigton Gem'

As well as the deeper sand plunge the former mist unit also has a soil warming cable in it so that also helps moderate some of the effects of the freezing conditions keeping these pots in good condition.



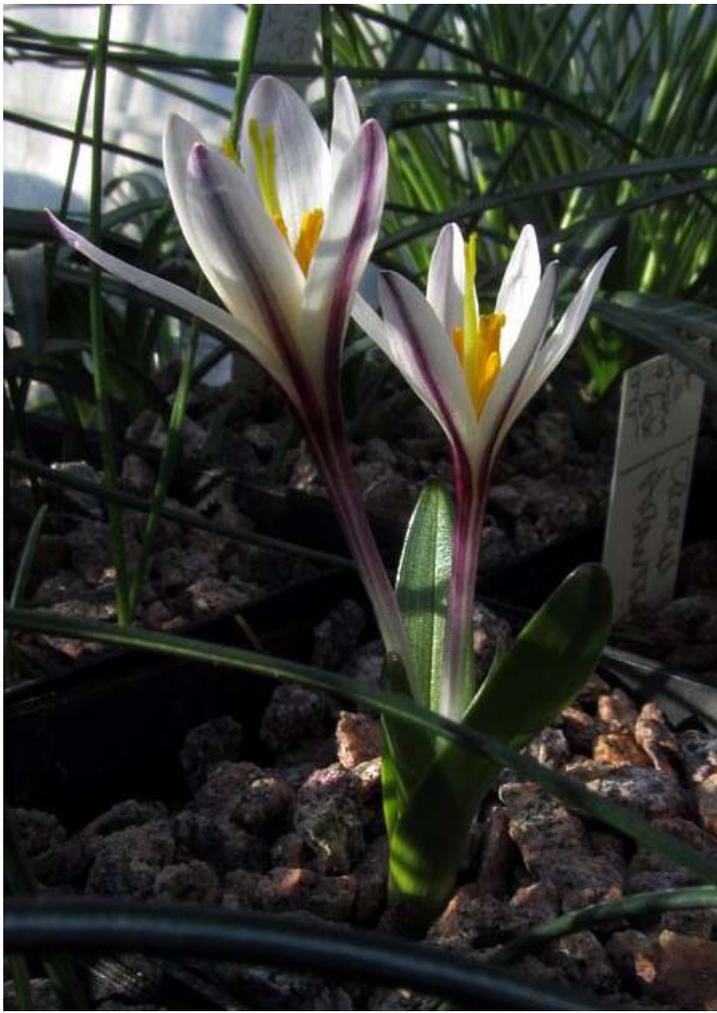
Narcissus romieuxii

Some forms of *Narcissus romieuxii* have flowers that face upwards which is a feature that I find very appealing but it is not always a fixed phenomenon. Sometimes they open in the upright position then turn over as the flowers mature - I suspect that in many cases it depends on physical conditions such as light levels. This picture shows a pot of a single clone and as you can observe some flowers face upwards while others in exactly the same state of maturity face sideways.



Colchicum kesselringii

Here you can see the lovely flowers of *Colchicum kesselringii* (two pots) with the attractive dark maroon stripe along with *Crocus abantensis*.



Colchicum kesselringii

The majority of pots in the mist plunge are 7cm with two rows of 8cm ones and as with all my pots the roots will come out through the drainage holes and penetrate deep into the sand plunge below. Even though it is far from ideal to get the best photographs I always try and picture them in situ without moving the pots as it would not be beneficial to disturb the roots. Very occasionally I may lift a pot out and the roots can be eased out of the sand without too much damage but then it is impossible to replace the pots and get the roots settled back into the sand.



Crocus abantensis and Crocus chrysanthus var fuscotinctus

Two more nice Crocus subjects from this plunge before I move on to the bulb house.



Bulb house plunge

All the plunges in the Bulb house and the Fritillaria house also have soil warming cables installed and thankfully there is no evidence of frost damage here. The cables come on at zero degrees C to moderate the effect of freezing on the plunge.



Narcissus in Bulb house

One of the joys of growing the winter flowering Narcissus in our northerly garden is that their flowers are not dependant on warmth or sunlight. Once they have formed they remain open in all conditions unlike Crocus for example whose flowers stay firmly closed until the conditions warm up.



Narcissus bulbocodium, Morocco

I am totally at a loss to make any sense of the hoop petticoat Narcissus – where one species starts and another stops does not matter to the plants as I have found out in the many seedlings grown from our own seed , they are keen to share their genes with any compatible neighbour. The experts rely heavily on geographical locations for their catagorisation and without those details they would find it difficult if not impossible to sort them out never mind the cultivated forms. The pictures above and below show two forms of Narcissus bulbocodium that I grow from wild origin in Morocco.



Narcissus bulbocodium, Morocco



Narcissus bulbocodium x Narcissus romieuxii

A hybrid of my own making, this has increased well over the last few years and I am rather fond of it. This is the first flower to open this year and you can see from the picture below that I now have a reasonable potful and a lot more buds to open. I have not named it but will follow my normal procedure and give it a name if and when I start



to distribute it. I know some people do not agree with naming too many plants and I certainly agree that you can end up with too many names – sometimes more names than forms but if you do not identify a plant, especially a hybrid, when you start to spread it around then you can end up with the situation where the same plant gets given different names by people further down the line. I could number the seedlings when I distribute them but what is the difference between giving a plant a

cultivar name and a number except growers are more likely to use and remember a name than a number.



Galanthus 'Don Armstrong'

Talking of naming bulbs I do think that these next two Galanthus are well deserving of their names. I first showed them a few weeks ago but a brief hour of sunshine raised the temperature in the bulb house enough for them to fully open their flowers showing their full beauty.





Galanthus 'Green Flake'

Needless to say I have been carefully cross fertilizing these two in the hope of getting some more interesting poculiform seedlings in due course.

While I amuse myself at the huge number of cultivar names that are being applied to snowdrops I have no long term problem with this fashion. As I discuss above names keep certain plants separate and traceable to a degree. The true fact is that time will sort them out and when they fall out of fashion, which they will, only the very best will survive and continue to attract growers and many of the names will only survive as a historical record in the books until their time comes around again and they come back into fashion sometime in the future and then the whole thing will kick off again. I do not apply this only to Galanthus – all plants go through periods when they are immensely popular and collected fanatically then they fall into decline and survive in the hands of the true specialists who keep them going until their rising – look at Saxifragas.





Crocus michelsonii

Also enjoying that brief afternoon of sunshine were some Crocus such as the very beautiful and dramatically coloured Crocus michelsonii which were in full display to attract pollinators. The only busy pollinator around was me with my paint brush.



Crocus michelsonii - another view from the side.



Crocus biflorus issauricus

Always a favourite and very easy to please is *Crocus biflorus issauricus*.



Crocus imperati suaveolens



Crocus civijicii

Crocus civijicii is a superb rich egg yolk yellow the exact hue of which is difficult to capture photographically. At least I remember when egg yolks used to be that colour before mass production turned them all a pale and insipid yellow. Luckily we do have a few generous friends around that keep chickens and give us some eggs from time to time and they do match perfectly the colour of this Crocus species!



Crocus fleischeri

As if I need to promote the variety and beauty that you can find in the form and colour combinations within the genus Crocus just feast your eyes on these two pictures of Crocus fleischeri – no colour enhancement has been applied – just an adjustment of the exposure value when taking the picture.

With these last pictures any depression and disappointment I was suffering from because of the loss of my Sternbergia and Narcissus on the aluminum plate plunge, as I will now call it, has been fully healed.

