



BULB LOG 04.....25th January 2012



Eranthis shoots

It is always an exciting time in the garden when I see the first of the early flowering bulbs pushing their shoots upwards and *Eranthis hyemalis* is always one of the first to appear. With the flowers and leaves nearly fully formed as they push through the ground the plant has evolved to bend its stem over to protect them from damage.



Eranthis hyemalis

As soon as they emerge they start to turn over responding to even the slightest amount of sunshine in the cold air.



Allium derderianum

A lovely Allium derderianum raised from Holubec seed looks magnificent as its leaves emerge cradling a fat flower bud. This is a rather choice dwarf onion but alas I have only managed to raise one and despite flowering for the last two years I have not got any seed from it.



Galanthus 'Ramsay'



I showed this neat wee snowdrop a few weeks ago as it was just emerging – since then I have moved it into the bulb house to encourage its flowers to open.



Crocus leaves

Some of the autumn flowering Crocus have well developed leaves that show some weather damage to their tips in the form of die back. In this case the yellowing of the tips is purely cosmetic and nothing to worry about.



Narcissus leaves

Checking in the bulb houses I notice a number of the plants are showing signs that they might need watering. Flopping leaves and flower stems is a typical indication of shortage of water but can also indicate other problems so before I water I check the surface of the compost to see it is quite dry looking.



Sternbergia leaves

It is essential to make sure that the bulbs have sufficient water to both grow and sustain that growth and winter watering is the critical time for these winter growing bulbs. Large broad leaves like this Sternbergia can lose a lot of moisture even though it is still quite cold. They too are bending over more than normal indicating that the cells are losing water that cannot be replaced.



Tulip leaves

The lack of water is even more obvious in these Tulip leaves which have become very soft and floppy. Pots planted with lots of bulbs which are in advanced leaf growth like these will use a lot of water.



Watering

As our outside water is turned off for the winter I have to use a watering can and it is not easy holding a watering can in one hand and a camera in the other. Having confirmed that pots that need water I add gently flood each of them once watching as the water drains away immediately.



Pots with little or no signs of growth may not require watering as they are only losing water through evaporation so I check them carefully. Through the years I have learnt to gauge by the colour of the gravel top dressing if the compost below is dry or not but if I am in any doubt I can scrape back the gravel to see. If the plunge sand below still looks quite moist then there should

be enough moisture for the pots showing no signs of growth. Before I water I always like to know the weather forecast and though we are experiencing cold the frosts are only light and mostly at night so there is no danger of the compost in the bulb house freezing in the next few days, making it safe for me to water.



7cm pots

When you fill a plant pot, as I tend to do, with as many bulbs as you can get in it you have to be aware that when they are growing they will need a lot of watering as they use it up so quickly. If you do not supply them with enough water at this critical period of growth then the bulbs are inclined to break down into many small non-flowering sized bulbs. Even when their growth is fully developed with this many bulbs in a pot they will transpire a lot of moisture which needs to be replaced.



***Tropaeolum tricolorum* and *T. azureum* leaves**

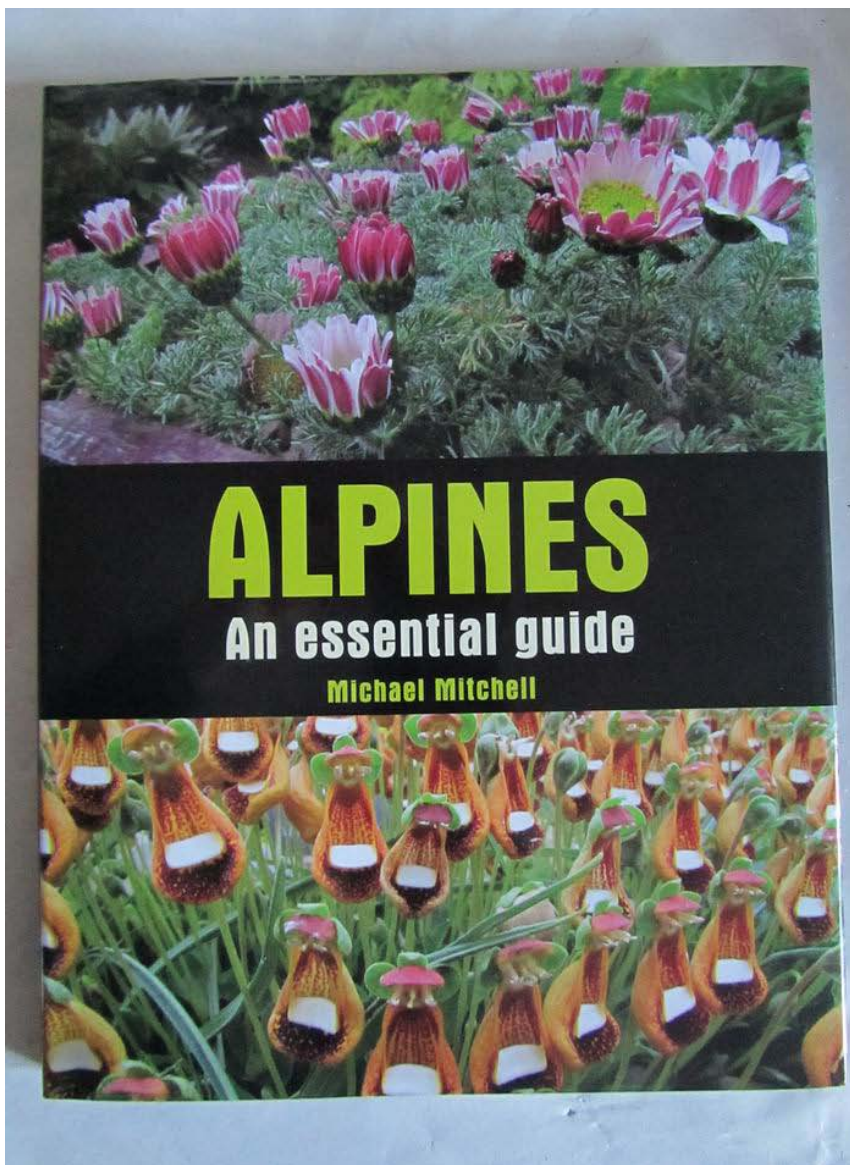
The more rounded leaves to the left are *T. tricolourum* and the elongated ones to the right are of *T. tricolorum*.

Book Review

“Alpines an essential guide” by Michael Mitchell

I have just received a review copy of the above named book - so just how ‘essential’ a book is it?

First impressions are that it is a relatively slim volume and would not put any one off having to read through a weightier tome but can the author capture the essentials in the 144 pages? It has a cover price of £19.95 and publication details can be viewed below.



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Frontispiece: *Lewisia cotyledon* hybrids.

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The contents are split into seven logical sections starting with an explanation of just what the term ‘alpinists’ means and what plant types it refers to. The author does well to get over the main characteristics and adaptations which true alpinists have evolved, while also explaining how the term is used in horticulture to cover a wider range of plants suitable for the smaller gardens of today where space is so often limited. I also like the brief explanation of the binomial naming system and how learning some of the Latin terms can help the grower understand the plants forms, uses, habitat, etc.



2 Traditional settings

The earliest methods of cultivating alpine plants generally involved them being planted in a naturalistic man-made setting in what we think of as a rock garden or perhaps a scree, where many different species could be grown together in a well-drained soil. Simply put, rockwork (sometimes homemade from a sand, gravel and cement mixture) was used to create an outcrop and the alpine planted there. The use of stone sinks or troughs in which to house a collection of alpine has also been widely practised for many years. These traditional locations for cultivation along with raised beds and alpine houses are still very popular and ideally suited to today's gardens.

THE ROCK GARDEN

Probably the most recognized and popular way of growing alpine plants is on what is usually called a rock garden or rocky, generally built on a sloping site and incorporating rockwork of some sort. Carefully constructed, it can provide suitable conditions for a very wide range of alpine plants. A rocky can be of any size and therefore is suitable for both small and large garden

OPPOSITE PAGE: Stone troughs, raised beds and paving all provide planting opportunities for alpine.



Colourful corner of a rock garden.

spaces. Almost any garden can be transformed by the addition of a rocky, lawn have their uses, but a miniature alpine landscape with exciting, beautiful and fascinating plants giving interest all year round, offers far more than a patch of grass.

The base of the rocky is generally where excess rainwater collects and eventually drains from. This area is ideal for the cultivation of plants requiring plenty of water and which can, on occasion tolerate being submerged for short periods. Such plants could include bog graminids, perhaps most spectacularly represented by a group known as 'Harlow Carr'

Hybrids: Above this area, a carefully contrived outcrop of rocks could be softened by mat-forming or trailing alpine. Phlox, Aubretia and Lobelia to name a few from hundreds of possibilities. Higher still, among more rocks and with steeper drainage, conditions would be suitable for plants like the heath-leaved *Leucis concolor* with its gaily flowers in pinks and oranges. If conditions were particularly suitable, then it may self sow and create a wonderful and reborn site. Although a sunny aspect is generally desirable for a rock garden, any shady corners and crevices have plenty of desirable treasures to choose from. *Ranunculus implexus* would be a beautiful option, growing

The next chapter is called 'Contemporary Settings' and shows some new ways to display alpine plants. Some of the contemporary containers and decorative planting may not be to everyone's taste but I am pleased to see the author include them here as those are just the sort of ways that can first introduce some people to the fascinating world of alpinism. Interestingly a couple of the pictures show beds divided up geometrically forming a number of rectangular equal sized planting pockets. I seem to remember reading that this was one of the very first methods of growing alpinism way back in the 19th century – nothing is new. The currently fashionable crevice style of rock garden is also mentioned here along with green roofs planted with alpinism and alpine lawns. Reading this chapter may make you realise that you have space you never thought to utilise for another alpine bed!



Chapter two covers the different ways that we have grown alpinism from the earliest rock gardens through troughs, alpine houses, frames and many others. There are explanations that cover the sharp drainage required by so many of these plants and how to adjust your soil/compost to suit. Practical hints and tips are given to cover everything from the types of rock including approximate quantities you might need to the difference between using clay or plastic pots. In a sense this chapter in itself covers most of the advice a beginner would need to successfully make, plant and maintain a rock garden or start a collection in an alpine house.

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Chapter four covers planting and maintenance – in some cases reiterating some important information from previous chapters – not a bad thing. Planning, preparing the ground and labelling are all included along with the best times of the year for successfully establishing the plants. General information on subsequent watering, feeding and cutting back are common questions asked by beginners and some more experienced gardeners and they are all covered here. This chapter finishes off with the twelve months of the year and the jobs that you are most likely to have to tackle. I am delighted to see this as so often people do not realise that there are tasks and interest in the garden all year round and not just in spring and summer.

Chapter five is a really useful guide to propagating and gives sound practical advice on all the methods that you can use to increase your stock of plants. As the author runs a nursery, Slack Top Alpinism, these pages are full of good advice from his years of practical experience and covers everything from seed sowing, simple division to mist propagation. Next a chapter helps identify some of the main pests and diseases that you will encounter with sensible ways to deal with them. I am pleased to read that he employs a similar approach as I do, that is to use chemicals extremely sparingly and only as a last resort.



An A to Z guide to alpiners gives good coverage of plants that are mostly easy to obtain and suitable to grow in a wide range of conditions. Their suitability to sun and shade are indicated as well as noting those that have the RHS Award of Garden Merit. The descriptions include the ultimate size of the plants and often details of where they

come from in the wild along with the garden conditions that will best suit them.

TABLE 5. OF ALPINE PLANTS

| PLANT NAME | SPRING | SUMMER | AUTUMN | WINTER | YEAR ROUND |
|----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------------|
| <i>Androsace</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> AGM | ✓ | | | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> | | ✓ | | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> | | | ✓ | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> AGM | | | | ✓ | |
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| <i>Androsace</i> AGM | | | | | ✓ |

TABLE 6. OF ALPINE PLANTS

| PLANT NAME | SPRING | SUMMER | AUTUMN | WINTER | YEAR ROUND |
|----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------------|
| <i>Androsace</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> AGM | ✓ | | | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> | | ✓ | | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> AGM | | | ✓ | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> AGM | | ✓ | | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> | | | ✓ | | |
| <i>Androsace</i> AGM | | | | ✓ | |
| <i>Androsace</i> | ✓ | | | | |
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| <i>Androsace</i> AGM | | | | | ✓ |

To further help the novice a chart noting the season of interest offered by all the plants listed will ensure, with careful selection, the gardener can get twelve months of interest from their rock garden.

I am pleased to see a glossary which is always handy to help the beginner understand some

of the botanical and horticultural words that may be new to them. Suggested gardens to visit, list of suppliers and specialist societies are all useful additions and cover Europe and the USA as well as the UK. Given time these references will become out of date but are always an interesting historical record of nurseries active at this time.

For a long time I have struggled to find a single book to recommend to beginners taking up alpiners and rock gardening other than the Collins Guide to Alpines and Rock Garden Plants by Anna Griffith (first published in 1964) but now here is a new book that I am confident will guide both beginner and novice in all aspects of growing alpiners. While we could all suggest additions to the alphabetical listing of plants the author has given a good variety of plants that are available and that he has personal experience of growing - frankly an extensive list of plants can be found in many a book or nursery catalogue and is less important to me than all the practical advice that is so generously given.

This is obviously a book that is written from years of practical experience and does, I would say, live up to its title and cover all the essential information you will need when growing alpiners.



The last two pictures this week show views that I intend to return to on a regular basis to show how these areas change through the season and illustrate the ‘high rise and timeshare’ system of planting that I have been developing for years.

