



BULB LOG 27..... 4th July 2012



Lilium pyrenaicum

A deep depression covers the country! No surprise when we have just recorded the wettest June on record with less than 75% of the average sunshine and up to 175% more rain.

It is always interesting to see how plants react to the variable weather we get and looking on the positive side no matter what the weather some things do well while others suffer. Around this time a few years ago we had a drought (by Scottish standards) and the trees and shrubs suffered as there was barely enough moisture to support their leaves never mind fuel any new growth however the flowers had a wonderful season in the warm sunny days. This year it is the total opposite the green growth is lush and abundant while many of the flowers are simply rotting before they can open as you can see in these Turks's Cap lilies.

Other lilies such as *Lilium mackliniae* and *Nomocharis*, as you can see in the pictures below, have evolved in regions with regular rain during their flowering periods and have adopted umbrella shaped flowers to shed the water and protect the pollen and stigma.



Lilium mackliniae with lush *Rhododendron* growth in the back ground and a darker flowered form below.





Nomocharis



Slime moulds

Another symptom of the continually wet weather is the occurrence of slime moulds. These are primitive, fungus-like organisms that are classified as myxomycetes in the Kingdom Protocista. They are often seen on lawns and here you see it on a Thymus climbing over the edge of a trough. The slime is the digestive state of the organism and feeds on rotting vegetable matter - although unpleasant to many it should not

do any lasting harm. I find it fascinating as I do all plants and it is nearly always present but only becomes noticeable in wet conditions bring on the jelly like state. Scraping it off will allow light and air to reach the leaves of the plant and the slime will quickly vanish if it ever dries out.

This picture looks back to last autumn and shows healthy growth on *Androsace villosa*, (top) *A. sempervivoides* (left and a hybrid between the two on the right). The picture below shows the current state of the plants after spending the winter without any cover. Unsurprisingly it is the hairy leaved *A. villosa* that has suffered and has obviously passed that susceptibility on to the hybrid.



Androsaces



In an attempt to encourage the individual rosettes to root, especially the two that suffered great loss, I covered them over with some sharp sand earlier in the season.



While *Androsace sempervivoides* has survived reasonably well the other two have both suffered and practically died out in the centres of the plants with only a few areas of healthy growth around the perimeter towards the edge of the runners. This started me thinking that the runners may not be only a method of colonising new territory but also of survival. We expect plants to more or less stay where we plant them but what we see here is an example of a nomadic plant that wants to be continually on the move and, when you think about it, there are a lot of them around.



Hopefully each rosette will root and form the basis of a new plant but I must be prepared to expect this plant to seek new territory on a regular basis. Looking back, it was only when I grew these plants in pots which were regularly repotted and I managed the runners by removing them or fixing them in place that I have kept a good looking compact plant for any length of time that would be acceptable on the show benches.



I created and planted this trough with *Androsace* runners two years ago.



It now looks well colonised as the runners have each found spots to root into, sometimes with a little guidance from me. This continual search for a new spot to grow in, away from the parent rosette, is what this plant wants to do.



Saxifraga brunonis

Many other plants have evolved similar strategies as you can see in this trough where it is the lovely *Saxifraga brunonis* that is rampaging around, over and into the other 'cushion' *Saxifragas* and escaping over the edges.



Saxifraga brunonis

I love the contrast the red runners make with the fresh green rosettes – like they have been capped with a spun sugar confectionery – and if that was not enough we can look forward to the mass of yellow flowers that dance on stems above the mass of rosettes late in the summer.



Saxifraga pubescens ‘Snowcap’

This is how *Saxifraga pubescens* ‘Snowcap’ looked a few months ago as we emerged from winter – not very attractive. However for a number of years I have been trying shake off the ‘show’ mentality where I expected each plant to be perfect and instead adopt a more natural approach that reflects how most of the plants in the wild would look. Notice also the typical winter state of *Saxifraga oppositifolia* to the left and compare below after the spring growth.



***Saxifraga pubescens* 'Snowcap'**

Patience has paid off as after a few months, without any intervention the exact same cushion has repaired itself and looks nice and green again. The remains of the few flower stems you can see show that this plant was far removed from the flower covered domes of white that we see regularly from this plant on the show benches but I am happy to have it as it is growing unprotected in a raised bed looking more like the plants do in the wild.



Here again patience and tolerance of dead patches have paid off. This *Saxifraga* cushion had all but died out, not this time as a result of the winter or the wet spring/summer but from sunburn - scorched in the exceptional heat wave we had in April 2011. I resisted the temptation to remove this dead looking mass in a prominent place in this trough and how glad I am that I did - as it too is making a welcome recovery. I normally move these wee troughs around so that the early flowering *Saxifragas* can enjoy the low sunshine then move them after flowering into a shady spot to prevent cushion scorch but I was caught out last year by being away at the International Conference when we had an unexpected heat wave. Sunshine and heat - oh what a distant memory!



Saxifraga trough

Saxifraga cochlearis minor

There are two valuable lessons to be learned from this trough – both are obvious but often overlooked in our enthusiasm to plant a trough or bed. Lesson one is to only place plants that enjoy similar growing conditions in the same trough. There are two groups of Saxifragas here one the early spring flowering types many of which have Himalayan species in their parentage that will, like shown above, scorch in strong sunshine and then there are the silver encrusted ones, flowering

now, that like the sunshine. It is almost impossible to please both types in such a small space so my intention is to leave the sun worshipers and move the others to another trough later in the year.



Lesson two is to only grow plants with a similar growth rate together so none should dominate and bully the others out of their growing space. I should have realised that *Saxifraga cochlearis minor* on the left is much more vigorous and if left to its own devices will eventually take over the entire trough – I have had this happen before. In my defence I planted this trough up as a demonstration during a workshop to explain to people that you should stage the rocks so that the trough look interesting before you add any plants. In this demonstration I used just a few torn off un-rooted bits of the Saxifragas to show how plants will further enhance the rock work and they all rooted and grew on.



Continuing my survey of some of the troughs this is one of those that I landscaped with broken concrete building blocks and now you can hardly tell the difference between this recycled artificial material and those that are landscaped in a similar way but with a natural limestone marl; see the *Saxifraga brunonis* trough earlier in this log.



Concrete block

Any worries of the plants not liking the cement can be dispelled as you can see mosses and plants seeding directly into the open porous structure of the broken blocks. I would encourage everyone to find creative ways to use more recycled materials like the cement blocks and slates in our gardens and not rely on natural limestone, etc the sourcing of which can destroy natural habitats. To add to the few original plants in this trough I have scattered a seed of *Androsaces* and a few other plants which are now growing. I look forward to enjoying the slow maturing of these troughs over a number of years rather than the instant planting effect I could have achieved using larger plants

Re-cycled slate trough

Re-cycled slate forms the outcrop and adds valuable planting depth to this shallow trough.

Planted up with mostly quite common and easy alpines that are happy to grow with and through each other - the issue here is not to let the plants totally cover all the slate. A great mound of plants could look quite nice but I like to see at least some of the slate structure.



Maybe time and growth will come to dominate it and it will become a mound of foliage but for now I maintain a clear area showing the slate crevices.



These next two troughs were landscaped a very long time ago and I basically just planted a rooted cutting of a dwarf conifer in each. All the rest of the plants have arrived by seed with the addition of the odd sempervivum or sedum rosette I find on the path, plucked off from another trough by a bird.





Here a scruffy looking trough (that has been in line for a makeover for a number of years) looks quite acceptable with the flowers on the Antennaria colour co-ordinating with the self sown orchids, the fern also put itself there. A combination of too many other tasks to do, plain laziness and the fact that it looks OK just now has delayed the redevelopment of this trough but I am determined to get it done this year.

I will leave you this week with a picture, below, looking from the trough area towards the lush leafy growth of the larger part of the garden that is enjoying this cool wet weather.

