

International Rock Gardener



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June 2013



As the northern hemisphere gears up for summer (perhaps a vain hope as so much of central Europe has been hit by flooding with sad amounts of attendant damage) let us dwell a little longer on the 2013 Czech International Rock Garden Conference and the garden visits enjoyed by the three coach-loads of visitors.

I think that for many of us our main impression after these Czech events has been a reinforcement of a feeling that it is plants *within a garden setting* that hold the strongest impact, and that no matter how fine the plants or impressive the views, that it is *people* who make these gardens exceptional – the individual gardeners who work to achieve their own special goals, the friends who give us plants, the hunters

who find the seed and, overwhelmingly for most, that in the company of other like-minded souls it is possible to appreciate both the plants and the progression of making a garden in a new light. Most of the Czech gardens we visited are quite small, built on a truly domestic scale and, as such, not ideally suited to group visits. These are decidedly private spaces, designed primarily for the fulfilment of the owners. Nonetheless, even though it was often slightly comical to see long files of visitors snaking round narrow paths, there was a feeling of excitement to see so many people being admitted to these individual garden havens by such generous hosts.

Those who attended the event are invited to post their comments and photographs in the [SRGC Forum](#). The Forum is open to all, not only SRGC Members and registration is free. (We are aware that there are some delegates missing from the [postings of "people photos"](#) and it would be lovely to have a full set of pictures to commemorate the event.)

This month the review of gardens will conclude with those of Vojtěch Holubec and the "Beauty Slope" of Zdeněk Zvolánek. We were pleased also to visit the Botanická zahrada Trója and to see the famed display of the Klub skalnickaru Praha at the Church of St. John on the Rock in Charles Square, Prague. Englishman Tim Ingram kindly shares his thoughts on the Czech Conference and visits with the IRG. Cover photo: On the Beauty Slope, Margaret Young.

----A gardener's reaction----



Left: Marika Divišová sings a farewell in Roztoky photo J.I.Y.

A Czech Odyssey Text and photos by Tim J. Ingram, Kent, UK.

How many alpine conferences would end with a song in Czech about a woman seducing a man with an apple? The applause said it all - the 2nd Czech International Rock Garden Conference was a joy at every level, organised with great care by Jiří Papoušek and fellow members of the Czech Rock Garden Society and attended by gardeners from twenty different countries.

There were talks ranging from the Patagonian Andes (Martin Sheader) to China and Tibet (Vojtěch Holubec), Plant Exploration in Iran (Dieter Zschummel) to daphnes in crevice gardens (Jiří Papoušek) [these plants were a real highlight of the gardens later on] Growing in Sand (Peter Korn) to Rock Garden Construction (an impeccable presentation from Michal Hoppel from Poland), to a talk and workshop on Bulbs (J.Ian Young) and a workshop on Cultivation in Pots (Cyril Lafong); a mix of subjects that both informed and inspired.



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Particularly impressive was the presentation on Kazakhstan by Vladimir Epiktetov, whose knowledge of the plants of this extraordinary country was very strong, and especially interesting to me after learning something about these same plants from local Kent AGS Group members, Gill and Peter Regan.

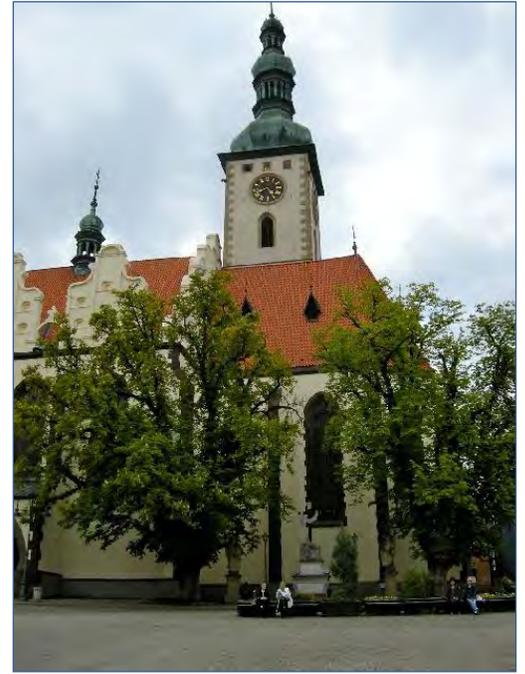
Those of us from English speaking countries were humbled by the ability of speakers to present their talks in English, helped because we all share the common language of Latin binomials for plants!

There may have been many expert alpine growers amongst those attending but the practical demonstrations of planting troughs by Zdeněk Zvolánek and Vojtěch Holubec showed at heart how we all enjoy growing alpiners so much, they engendered great interest, and Vojtěch's crevice trough in particular, built high with rock, was simple but really inspirational.



The Conference Centre was in the Hotel Dvořák in the beautiful old town of Tábor, south of Prague, sitting high above the river; a fascinating place to explore and with a wonderful range of building styles and designs and an impressive

church (above) overlooking the main square. Žižka Square, just a few minute's walk from the hotel, is overlooked by the statue of Jan Žižka, the greatest of Hussite leaders who founded the town in the 1400s. The whole square is surrounded by fine architecture, including the church built in the 1500s.



For many people the second part of the event (based at the Hotel Academic, Roztoky, north of Prague) was even more exciting; a chance to visit many of the Czech rock gardens and to buy more plants. This was a skilled logistical exercise with over 100 people divided into three coaches, visiting four gardens each day. Here the true artistry of the Czech rock gardeners became evident, some gardens having been built over 30 or 40 years, others more modern, with an emphasis on crevice gardening and use of tufa. The success of these methods, a combination of a very naturalistic way of presenting plants and the benefits of the Czech climate, was really eye-opening, with many rare and difficult plants growing happily in the open garden. Rocks and stone are mixed in very different ways in different gardens but in every case you see how well suited they are to growing challenging plants like daphnes and rock ferns. At times this approaches gardening in Japan and is hugely artistic, giving that combination of the practical and aesthetic so satisfying to mind and body.



Callianthemum farreri, photo by Rudi Weiss

Maybe most stimulating of all was the opportunity to purchase plants, and these included many real rarities like *Callianthemum farreri* (in its best forms a good blue) and the extraordinary and varied "Witches' Broom" conifers which are such a strong feature of many gardens. [Daphne](#) and [Saxifraga](#) are real specialities of Czech gardens, and many people ordered fine collections of these to be picked up during the week. The wealth of seed introduced by Czech seed collectors such as [Josef Jurášek](#), [Mojmir Pavelka](#) and [Vojtěch Holubec](#), ensure that there are always new and interesting species becoming available,

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and it is these that make the Czech crevice gardens so intriguing in their detail, in addition to the striking combinations of plants that arise by accident or design. If I learnt anything from the visit it is that most plants are grown in pure 'mineral soils' - i.e. sand and fine gravel overlying the normal garden soil - and that they can be long lived and reliable without winter cover. This is where the crevice garden probably scores best over the [sand garden](#), as well as in its general aesthetic appeal. No doubt in the climate of British gardens the experiences will differ, but the spirit of experiment and co-operation between different gardeners in the Czech Republic has resulted in what must be the finest rock gardens anywhere in the world. In many ways these are the equivalent to exhibition of plants in the UK - in that the culture has developed around the garden rather than the alpine house - and it allows a different way of expressing the beauty and wonder of alpinists, where stone and rock can draw out their true nature. I must speak on behalf of all those from the UK who attended the Conference when I say how grateful we are to the organisers for making us so welcome and showing us so much. I would recommend the next 'happening' (in Jiří's description) to anyone who is even a little tempted to go.



Fine decoration on a Tábor building

There are some real stars in the alpine gardening world in the Czech Republic, notably of course Zdeněk Zvolánek and Vojtěch Holubec, but also many others and they shared their fascination, knowledge and skill in growing alpinists and travelling to see them in Nature freely and generously and gave us much to think on.

At one point I asked Zdeněk Zvolánek (most of us English speakers stick with ZZ!) whether anyone had considered writing about the Czech gardens, and he replied "Who would consider buying such a book?" For me the gardens hold as much artistic value as music, fine paintings and literature, and deserve to be celebrated in the same way - and most of all shown to gardeners yet to be captivated by the world of rock plants. It was certainly an unforgettable experience to visit them.

Perhaps a big part of the enjoyment of the Conference, from the viewpoint of a British gardener like me, was a refreshing view of alpinists from so many speakers I had never heard before. Because the emphasis in the Czech Republic is so much on gardening with alpinists it was also exciting to see more of this in detail; and for a culture like this to really develop and become so effective in growing and presenting plants, it does need a strong momentum and sharing of experiences.

Zdeněk Zvolánek introduced us, in the first evening, to the 'Charms of Balkans - to remember Czech sources of alpinists within iron curtains in the past'. It is obvious that iron curtains do not subdue, but for anyone with a poetic and free spirit they must take great fortitude to resist. In my notes I have some 70 different plants ranging through Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece and Albania, and it is difficult to pick one more than any other. Many appeal to me as a gardener in the relatively warm and dry south-east of England, and I can see us growing more of them in future years using crevice and sand beds (and the 'rare as hen's teeth' tufa).

Edraianthus are especially good in our garden and the [Czechs grow very many species](#); *E. horvatii* (shown right) from the Galičica Mts.; *E. vesovicii* from Mt. Prokletije in the south of Montenegro; *E. pilosulus*, a tiny and recently named species from the Komovi Mtns.; *E. pulevicii* and *E. sutjeskae* (these last three species are discussed in [Systematic Botany 34\(3\): 602-608. 2009](#)). In the West there may be some dispute about nomenclature (*E. horvatii* and *vesovicii* are both described as synonyms for forms of *E. graminifolius* in the 'Plant List' for example - but the former looks very distinct in our garden- see below). From a



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purely gardening perspective though this variety is greatly appealing, and many of these plants are very local in their distribution. The picture (below left) shows *E. horvatii*, with quite broad greyish leaves unlike the more grassy-leaved *E. graminifolius* that I grow, and the lovely silver-leaved form of *E.*



pumilio. This latter species does vary markedly so it must be difficult to delineate species at times.

Right: [*Aubrieta glabrescens*](#) photographed by Paul Cumbleton in the Wisley Crevice Garden which was created with Z.Z.



Also proving an excellent garden plant is the very local species of *Aubrieta glabrescens*, which is restricted to the smallest smattering of plants on the [summit of Mt. Smolikas](#). Seed of this was introduced by the AGS MESE Expedition (No. 536) which is comprehensively described by John Richards and others in Vol. 68(3) of the AGS Bulletin.



Aubrieta glabrescens

On Mt. Bobotor the rare Balkan endemic *D. malyana* (close to *jasminea* and *oleiodes*) grows along with *Sempervivum kosaninii*, *Edraianthus sutjeskai*, ***Gentiana verna* f. *calycina***, [*Scabiosa silenifolia*](#) and *Potentilla clusiana*.

Gentiana verna f. *calycina* in a form with beautiful soft-blue flowers

ZZ's intro was a 'whistle-stop' tour of so many interesting places and plants,

showing what rich sources of alpinists have been open to Czech growers and travellers, and how well these have been capitalised on. It was a thoroughly enjoyable and stimulating way to open the Conference.

T.J.Ingram

Tim Ingram and his wife Gillian are re-opening their nursery at Copton Ash in Kent. Gillian blogs on [their website](#) and Tim is a valued contributor to various alpine plant sites such as SRGC and NARGS. He is perhaps the most diligent member contributing to the AGS discussion area, seeking to encourage participation and to emphasise the importance of the *garden* in such organisations. Tim will continue to add to his reports [on the Conference](#) in the AGS website.

You are invited to [add your comments and photos](#) in the SRGC Forum thread on the events. There are photos of the Beroun Conference and Czech Gardens from 2007 [in the Forum](#) and some articles from [Elisabeth Zander](#) and from [Bobby Ward](#) may also be of interest. (Click on the names highlighted in blue to follow the links.)



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---Mountains in the Gardens---



The main rock area in the garden of Vojtěch and Lenka Holubec

The garden of Vojtěch Holubec in Praha-Suchdol has been the subject of many glowing reports by visitors over the years and after my recent visit I can see why this is the case. Yes, the rock work, using some huge stones, is impressive and without doubt the plants are thriving in its artificial mountains – yet it is the overall ambience of the whole garden that makes the strongest impact on me. It would be easy to be totally beguiled by the main rock garden which is both shapely and full of surprises but what I will remember of this garden is the clever use of different situations and micro-climates to allow many other plants to take best advantage of the site.

Iris reichenbachii forms

Androsace barbulate



Rhododendron canadense



Petrophytum caespitosum



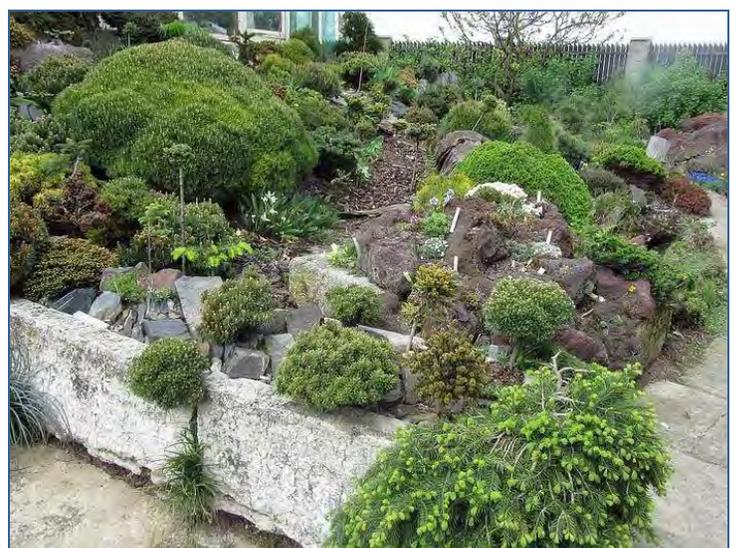
Magnolia liliiflora 'Susan'

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Vojtěch, an agricultural botanist working with the Czech gene bank and [author](#), who is a popular speaker around the world (he has been awarded the [Lyttel Trophy](#) by the AGS) has travelled to many of the most fruitful areas of the world to see alpine plants in their native habitat and this has served him well as he has constructed his charming garden.



Which way to go first from the entrance to the garden? The slope to the garage is bounded by a mini-mountain and a selection of troughs. The conifer bed near the front door is full of witches' brooms.



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The witches' brooms were collected by their son David – I wonder what his folks will say when the day comes he wants to remove them to his own garden?! There are some large troughs, with what I think are volcanic rocks, by the path.

This type of rock continues in the rest of this area – here we see Tim Ingram taking a photo by a little moss surrounded pond



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Continuing round from here is an area that Vojtěch can cover with shading if necessary - this includes a peat bed area and his plant frames. Along the back of the house is a border where fine rhododendrons are clearly very much at home. Around the eaves of the house there are attachments of wire or chains that reach the ground and make clever supports for climbing plants such as *Actinidia*.



Evidence of the owner's identity!



Lenka, Vojtěch's wife, likes bulbs.

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It was good to see that even the busiest people can have time for a seat in a restful retreat in their garden. Below, clockwise from left: *Rhododendron* 'Graziella', *Daphne collina*, *Iris* sp. from Turkey.



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Two general views of the main Holubec rock garden



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Vojtěch answering the questions of some guests.



Pulsatilla subslavica from Muran, with flower and ripening seed head.

Z.Z. sometimes known as the 'Stonerider' – demonstrates his nickname in the Holubec garden.

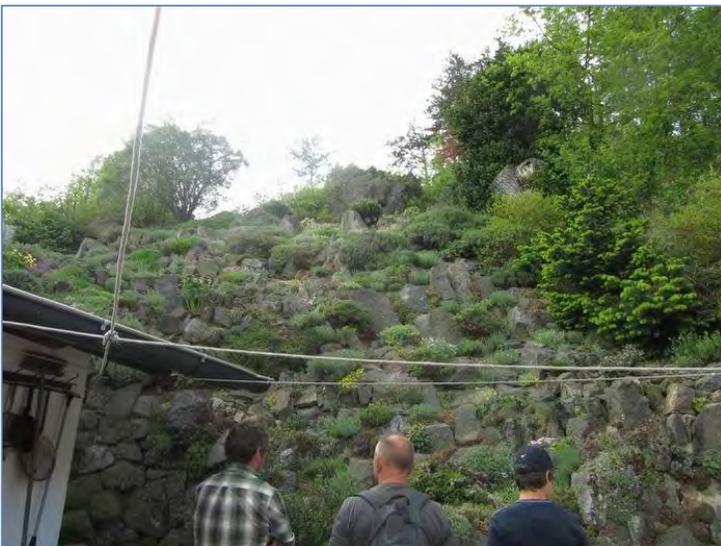


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---Report from the Beauty Slope---

It is usually Z.Z. himself who brings us news of his garden in Karlik but for once the pleasure of this task is given to Margaret Young.

It was a tremendously warm day, even with a few clouds in the sky and with the heat radiating from the rocky hillside that is home to Z.Z.'s garden it was a wonder that the plants were not wilting as fast as some of the visitors! The view across the valley was hazy in the sunshine.



The garden rises up steeply on the rock and this gives a great feeling of a garden **on** a mountain. From below it seems impossible that any access can be gained, other than by a chamois, to cultivate the dark grey rock face.

Are these three friends from Belgium contemplating the climb?

This *Sempervivum arachnoideum* has colonised the roof tiles.



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Luckily, after the initial ascent, there is some flatter area on the slope which allowed us to gather to admire the plants in their very naturalistic setting as well as to take in the views.

At the rear of the garden, the stone walls rise steeply – but even these have their plant inhabitants.

Sempervivum and *Sedum* have claimed any fissures in the rock while larger plants gain a foothold in unlikely places.

Below: the Beauty Slope in sun – empty of visitors but full of life.



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Gentiana, Daphne, Paeonia, Sedum and Sempervivum.

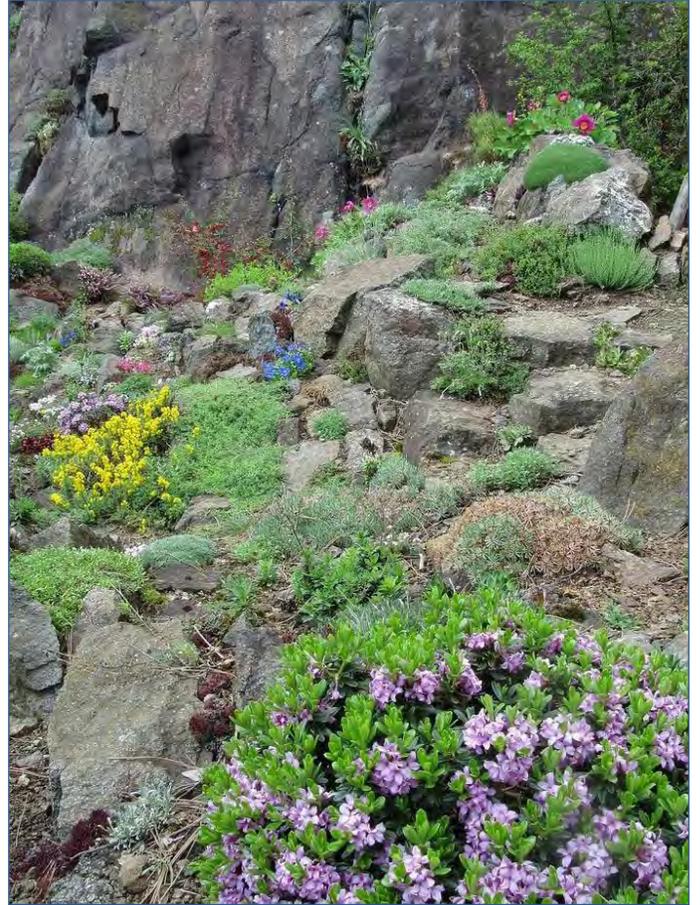
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Flowers on the Beauty Slope

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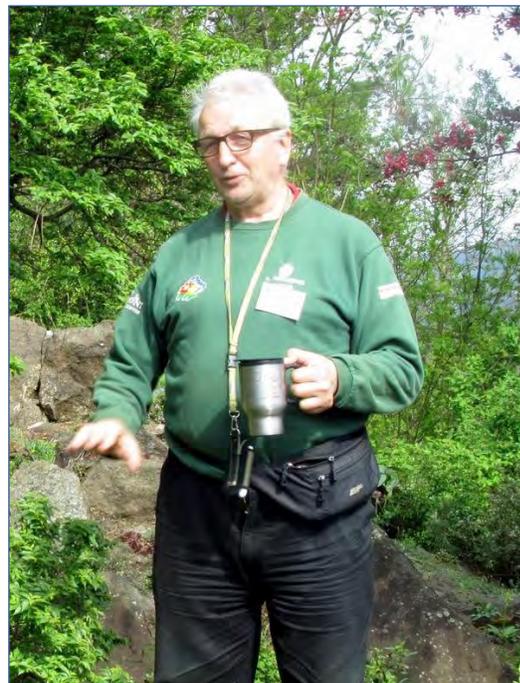
.....exploring the Beauty Slope.....



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Some subtle planting on the slope



The man on his mountain



Looking up the slope – where is the pathway?

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Photos from the Beauty Slope by Margaret and J. Ian Young.

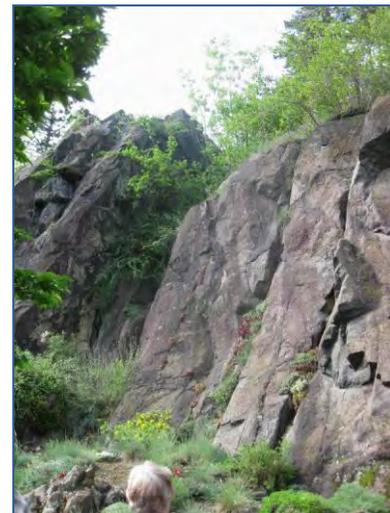


Peeking through the rocks



Surprisingly, there is even space on the slope for larger patches of paeony.

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To the summit of the slope.

There is colour and interest everywhere.



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It was a real pleasure to see for ourselves the wonders of the Beauty Slope. Now I understand why Joyce and Zdeněk were so in love with this garden. Joyce's soul seems to sing there in the still air. Z.Z. bemoans the fact that there are weeds and that he neglects it too much but it remains a place of charm and excitement – it is truly the 'Beauty Slope'. M.Y.



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---Sunshine and Rain in Prague---



We cannot leave this report of the Czech events with a quick mention of our visit to the Botanical Garden Trója ([Botanická zahrada Trója](#)) - in baking sunshine - and to the spectacular display of the [Prague Rock Garden Club](#) – in the pouring rain (which seems to have been the norm there since) – in the grounds of the Church of St. John on the Rock in Charles Square, Prague.

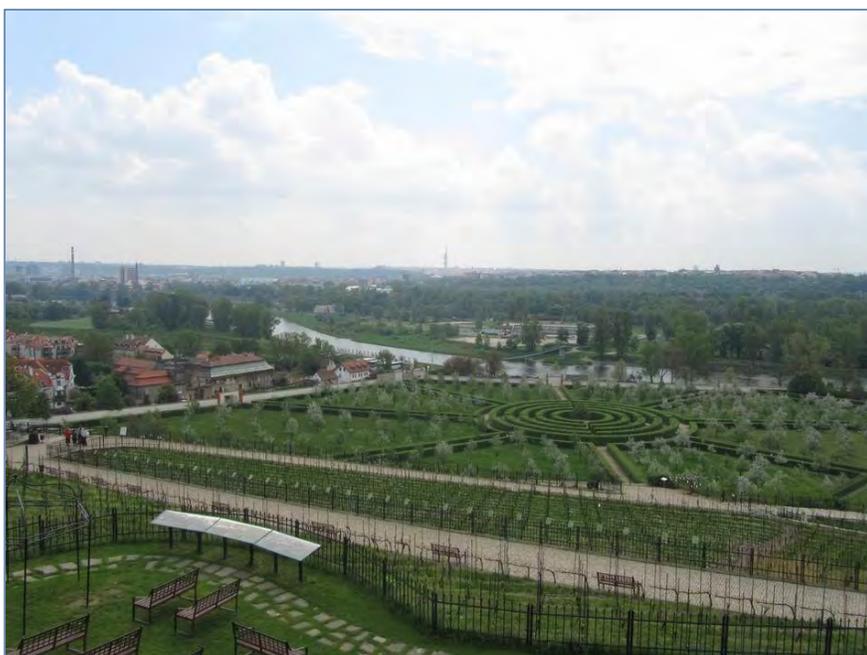
We were given a warm welcome at the Prague Botanická zahrada Trója by Petr Hanzelka. The gardens cover a large area and have sections covering many plant habitats as well as glasshouses and even a vineyard. The gardens appear to be very well loved and used by local people of all ages – it was delightful to see small school children fascinated by the tadpoles in a pond! The Garden was founded in 1969 but the vineyard may date from the 13th Century and the Chapel and Castle from around 1680. We were just a week or so too early to see the Iris and *Paeonias* in full bloom. For a Scot it was strange that it could be so hot when there were still clouds in the sky.



Petr Hanzelka who gave us such a warm welcome.



Lewisias in the xeric garden



View in the botanic garden over St. Claire's vineyard



Part of the Japanese garden

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In sharp contrast to our warm sunny time at the botanical garden, our visit to the show and sale of the Prague R.G.C. could not have been wetter.

Spirits were high in spite of this and there was no shortage of sales being made at the packed sales tables. Without doubt, the comprehensive efforts made by our organisers to allow proper preparation and certification of plant purchases and even to facilitate onward transportation of the many plants bought, was instrumental in the happy bustle of “retail therapy” that was seen throughout the event.



Wet, wetter, wettest! There is even rain on the camera lens. The KSP Club maintains the permanent planting of the garden throughout the year and then, for the special shows, exhibitors bring in plants to form the show display. These also look uncannily as though they have been grown in situ. While we walked round the show or sheltered as best we could, we were treated to the strains of organ music coming from the church: a charming addition to the atmosphere in the quiet surroundings, so near to the busy Charles Square.

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Kind and sincere thanks to all those who made the Conference and garden visits such an exciting and successful gathering of so many international rock gardeners. Here's to the next time!

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