



BULB LOG 27.....2nd July 2014



Mountain landscape

While this is called the Bulb Log, regular readers know my interests extend way beyond bulbs - this week I was examining the progress of some of our many troughs. At one time we grew many alpine plants in the glasshouses then we started to grow bulbs which slowly increased in numbers until they took up all the space under glass. This did not mean we had lost our interest or love of the alpines we just have to find other ways to try and grow them.



Trough zone

Excellent drainage is one of the essentials if we are to grow these plants outside of their high rocky homes and the best way to provide that is to raise them up well above the ground and water table. Raised beds and troughs are an ideal way to approximate the rocky well drained habitat they desire. We have been using troughs for as long as we have been gardening – they hold a particular appeal to me that seems to be widely shared – even non

gardeners are drawn to these landscape vignettes – or miniature gardens.



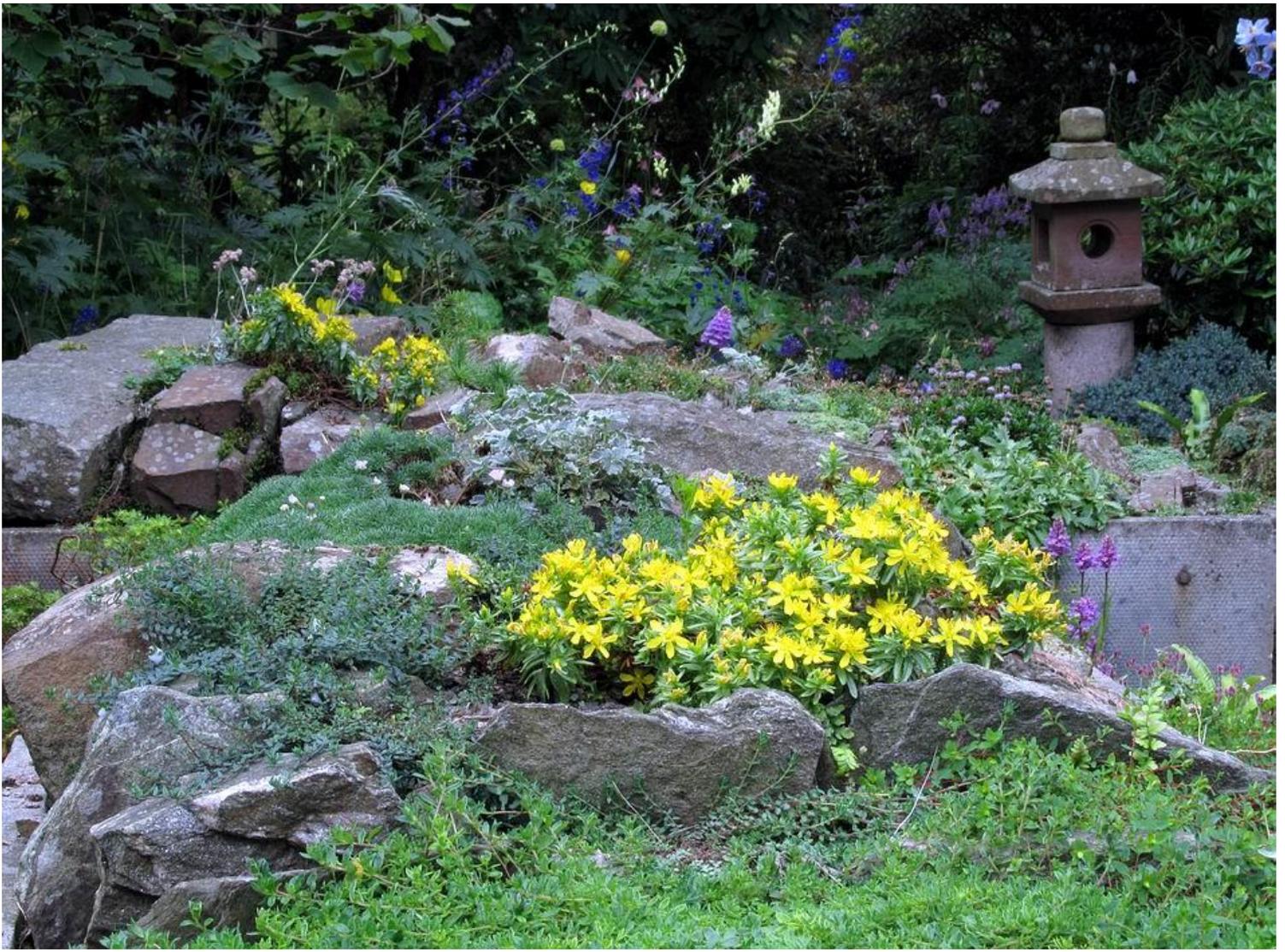
Over 40 years our style has developed as we better understand the needs of the plants and became bolder in our use of rock. It is not only best to raise the plants above the ground level of your garden but also in most cases to raise them so they are planted above the level of the rim of your trough - this both looks better to my eye and seems to work better for the plants.



Among our oldest planted troughs are these two that I carved out from old Aberdeen granite paving slabs. They are not primarily about the plants but about a ‘landscape’ that in the one above features volcanic rocks – the plants are not special or even particularly interesting but they create in my mind some of the scenes I have seen in our mountains.



This one is landscaped with limestone and as you can probably tell plants have to be tough to survive here. It gets little attention – very occasional watering – and many of the plants, such as the *Erinus alpinus*, have self-seeded.



Up on the slab beds, which are like large troughs made from bolting cement paving slabs together, the plants tend to be more interesting and get a bit more care and attention - you can see they contain a lot of rock and are built up well above the top rim of the slabs. I love the idea that they can be walked around and viewed individually while from some angles they can merge into a continuous rocky landscape.

We never use labels in the troughs as I find them a complete distraction so sometimes we do forget the name of a plant – like this *Hypericum*. We then have the task of trying to identify it - Maggi has been doing some research but we have not made a positive identification yet – we will be grateful for any thoughts or suggestions.



I am no longer interested in creating an instant effect – my pleasure and interest is the process of establishing plants in these environments so I will not be removing the moss growing in the cracks of the rock. Some mosses specialise in growing in these cracks and their growth slowly pushes the crack open. Over time the detritus from the moss along with windblown debris builds up in the crack forming a ‘soil’ which will allow other plants to seed and grow in these cracks.



Here granite and broken concrete combine to make a habitat that most of the plants we are trying thrive in. I re-landscaped this section a few years ago adding the concrete block to create more height so we have the combination of some long established plants along with some newer additions.



Sometimes I landscape a trough but do not add plants - perhaps I will scatter some seeds and wait. Superficially this trough looks good until you get close and realise that much of the greenery is liverwort and a weedy Oxalis – should I be worried? I see this as an experiment with the pioneering plants, mosses, liverworts and ferns establishing first then ‘weedy’ subjects taking a hold but can I then get other plants to grow with this competition? Look carefully and you will see that there are a few that have survived and grown from the initial scattering of seeds. So my interest in this trough is about the journey through time watching things develop not about the destination of a beautiful trough full of flowering plants.



Every winter for the last several years I look at this trough and think - later in the year I will replant it. In the winter it looks really scruffy and unattractive but then when the spring comes around and the plants come into flower it looks relatively pleasing and so I have not been inclined to do anything to it - yet. It looks very like so many areas I have admired while walking the mountains – a naturalistic planting with all its imperfections, not an over-tweaked cultivated version.



This is a fun trough – we bought the container 30 odd years ago in a closing down sale at a very low price and have tended to grow odd bulbs or seasonal plants in it. A few years ago a friend gave us some divisions from his dwarf Hostas and so we planted them here – they look very happy and attractive as long as we can keep the slugs and snails off them. Now they have grown we will divide and spread them out better later this year.



On the left is a slate landscaped trough with well established planting of Androsace and on the right the concrete landscaped one with Saxifage cuttings which were just put in last autumn.



This was also planted last autumn but we used small well rooted plants – the one above was planted using rosettes pulled from these plants at planting time.



I have used only broken concrete in all the next troughs I am showing and the plants just love it – so do I it has become my rock of choice.



Another lesson I have learned from observing plants in their natural habitat is that they tend to grow in communities not as isolated specimens so I am happy to allow these Saxifraga, Androsace and Potentilla to do just that.



Another issue that I have to consider is what do I do with the moss that is growing on the broken concrete. Should I try and eradicate it or will I just leave it in the hope that some of the other plants will root or seed into it in a naturalistic way. That is indeed my intention - I may have to do some selective control of the moss as I want to be able to see some of the rock exposed.



Mountain scene?



No – a homemade cement trough landscaped with broken concrete block and some very happy plants. In previous years we would grow such Himalayan Androsace in pots in the glasshouses trying to create the perfect cushion but now I want to find a way to grow them outside. I do not care if they are not ‘perfect’ if I want to see that perfection I can visit our shows where the perfect cushions are testament to the skills of their growers.

I have written a step by step article on how I make and plant these troughs which will appear in the next edition of The Rock Garden, the SRGC Journal, which will be out in around a months’ time.



Androsace laevigata

Many vignettes can be found even in such a small trough as these two pictures both illustrate.



Androsace delavayi

Intervention is sometimes necessary – this trough has been planted since around 2008/09 and I have had to trim the cushions most years to prevent them hiding the rocks completely – the trimmings provided cutting material so were not wasted. I will also cut the flower heads off the pink *Erinus* to control the seeding.



Look carefully and you will see the seed heads and leaves of *Androsace* growing through the *Erinus*. You may be excused for thinking that the *Erinus* has seeded in, bullying the *Androsace* but it is the reverse that is the case. The *Erinus* was there first and the *Androsace carnea* seeded from another area of the trough - now I will distribute this seed around some more troughs.



Troughs form an important part of our garden – they look good grouped together and you can home in viewing one at a time or you can look in detail at each individual plant.



No matter how small the space available you can always have a trough or two as these tiny demonstration troughs show. The two at the back were planted in 2008 the other three just made and planted last autumn – now I am off to gather the strawberries.....