



BULB LOG 28.....15th July 2015





It always fascinates me how changing the format of a picture from portrait to landscape can affect the dynamics giving the viewer a very different feel.

The pictures show the garden in full summer growth greatly fuelled by the abundance of rain we have been having, we had the monthly average rain fall in just forty eight hours, the majority of this falling during a two hour downpour.

While good for of the garden and plants we grow the wet does not help us in getting on with the seasonal tasks that need to be done, like the hedge cutting, which I hope to get started this week. Also the fact that now all the Erythroniums growing in plunge baskets and pots that need repotting will be sitting in wet compost which makes it difficult to work with and I just hope that the cold and wet has not triggered some of the bulbs into early root growth which would mean I cannot repot them this year.

I have taken advantage of the bad weather to write some more of my e-book 'Erythroniums in Cultivation' and this Bulb Log includes the chapter on 'Growing in Containers' but as I was writing I realise that this is a big subject so I have split it into two parts: the first which appears here looks at the containers and the plunges it will be followed in coming weeks by the one on repotting.

I would also like to take the opportunity to appeal to all of you to consider contributing in some way to the interest we all share. I have been writing the Bulb Log since 2003, that is 758 to date, and I had hoped that others would be encouraged by my efforts to share their own garden, plant experiences. You do not need to be experienced: a diary from a newly converted gardener would be of great interest and it does not have to be weekly – it could be a one off article. The [SRGC Forum](#) is an ideal place to start sharing as many already do but the numbers who actually make posts is a small fraction of those who view so please join in where you will be welcomed by this wonderful community.

There are other ways to contribute – [The International Rock Gardener \(IRG\)](#), published monthly on the SRGC site, is open and free for all to read but it requires a regular supply of articles of all kinds contact the [Editor of the IRG](#). The [Editor](#) of the SRGC printed Journal 'Rock Garden' would also be delighted to receive contributions. We all have a story to tell please contribute.....

Chapter 3

GROWING IN CONTAINERS



Depending on your local weather Erythronium can be relatively easy to grow in containers – one thing they do not like is for their bulbs to become too hot when they retreat underground during the summer. I grow them in containers of various types and for a number of reasons - from previous chapters you will see that I sow a lot of our seed into containers where the young plants will stay undisturbed for at least three years or more, mature plants are also grown in containers for my studies and to enable easy division of the bulbs on a regular basis - I like to try to repot these every second year.

The containers I use are square plastic pots, plastic mesh baskets, as used for planting aquatic plants in ponds, and polystyrene fish-boxes. The main criterion to understand when selecting containers in which to grow Erythronium is that they should be as deep as possible. I have never grown Erythroniums in clay pots but see no reason why you could not do so provided they were deeply plunged to keep them moist and cool during the critical growing season.

Plastic pots



Plastic pots are ideal for smaller amounts of bulbs as well as seed sowing - I use 9, 11 and 13 cm square plastic pots that are 10 to 12cm deep. These are not surrounded by sand because when placed close together on

a bed of sand in an open frame they become almost self plunging with the rims touching.



Escaping bulb

Newly repotted pots stacked waiting to be placed into the frame on the right which has been leveled to receive them. I should warn that when you lift pots of Erythronium out of frames always be aware that the bulbs may be escaping through the drainage holes into the sand plunge below - the longer you leave the plants between repotting the more likely this is to happen. I have even experienced a seed pot containing no bulbs five years after germination only to find a bunch of lovely bulbs growing happily in the sand plunge below the pot.

Once all the pots are labelled and placed in the frame I will sometimes mulch over the entire surface with some composted shredded prunings I find this helps control the growth of weeds and liverworts better than the traditionally used gravel. A mulch also reduces the evaporation rate helping conserve the moisture.



The same frame of pots in full flower the following spring.



Two years on this same frame is almost ready for repotting - once I have collected the seeds.

MESH BASKETS



The mesh baskets that I use are intended for planting aquatic plants in ponds and have an all over mesh with holes of around 2mm. I use three sizes that are 30cms, 25cms and 20cms square and 18cms, 15cms and 9 cms deep - the sides and base are formed from a fine mesh of 2mm holes that help contain the bulbs while allowing roots to pass as well as the free exchange of moisture and nutrients with the plunge.

Most bulbs will be contained but there are always a few that will try and escape downwards by pushing through even the smallest of holes (2mm) in the mesh especially if they are not repotted often enough.

These baskets make it very easy to lift and repot the bulbs, preferably every two years but sometimes it may be three or four years between replanting. The baskets are plunged into sharp sand - the deeper ones to the rim while the smallest shallow ones I will cover so there is approximately 3 to 5 cms of sand over the top of the rim.



You will be surprised how many bulbs you can grow in these baskets - all these bulbs came out of this 30cm basket after three years of growth.

Mesh Basket Plunges



Plunge in full flower.



The sand plunge for the baskets has around 15 to 20 cms of sharp sand laid on our free draining ground. The sand is levelled then the planted baskets are laid out before being covered in approximately 3cms more sand, taking the time to work the sand down between the baskets leaving no air gaps, allowing a full exchange of moisture as well as allowing the roots to grow out freely.



Temporary cover during flowering period.



The plunges are open all year round but because our weather, can often be cold and wet when the Erythronium are in flower, I will sometimes put up a temporary cover over them during this period - I find this improves the seed set we get. Most of the watering is done by the rain but due to the density of the plants and the proximity of trees and shrubs I do provide additional watering during the peak growing period as they come into flower. When I do water it is always with a dilute tomato-type liquid fertiliser which provides extra potassium an essential nutrient when the bulbs and buds, that will provide next year's growth and flowers, are forming.



In an ideal world all my plunge frames would be well away from any trees and shrubs but this is not practical in a small garden and we have trees growing adjacent to the frames with a hedge running down the side.

It is not because of the shade they might cast but their roots that run through the sand, particularly attracted towards the leaf mould that I add to my mix, robbing both the nutrients and moisture intended for the bulbs.

If creating a new

plunge bed you could lay a permeable landscape fabric between the ground and the sand as a preventative barrier to minimise the penetration of tree roots.



Repotting every two years means the roots are not a big problem but after four years the roots penetrating this basket are becoming larger and I think you can see that I would not want to be leaving them for any longer or the roots would get too large to extract without damaging the baskets.



I want the frames to blend in with the garden and not stand out like a nursery production area so they are often sited adjacent to beds. Here the back of this plunge has been raised up to form a rock garden bed integrating the plunge into the wider garden. I also recently reworked the side in the foreground by the path creating a small rock bed that is planted up with *Corydalis* and *Hepatica* which bring flowering interest before the *Erythronium* appear.



A few weeks later the *Erythronium* leaves are growing fast.



Plunge bed in full flower.



I am always looking for places to tuck in another plunge frame for mesh baskets. There are many ways to construct a frame - some of ours are simply constructed from cement castings, used as paving edges, these are 90cm long, 17 cm high and 5cm thick. These are drilled so they can be wired or bolted in place to form the sides - a simple one like this can hold sixteen of the smaller sized mesh baskets plunged into sand.



The baskets are all plunged to the rim, covered with a further layer of sand then with composted shreadings.

This method is very adaptable as you can see I wrapped this frame around the corner of the shed to provide space for several more baskets. As this is a relatively shallow plunge I use only the smallest of the three sizes of mesh baskets which are an ideal size for *Erythronium sibiricum* and similar bulbs that are less inclined to require being planted at depth.



***Erythronium sibiricum* growing in mesh baskets.**

Polystyrene Boxes



I have a number of polystyrene boxes, carved and painted to imitate stone, which are very good for growing larger numbers of mature bulbs like this large one filled with *Erythronium japonicum*.



My favoured size of box for the *Erythronium* is 39cm x 30cm and is 29cm deep although I have used various others that are not so deep which may be easier to acquire. These boxes stand on a free-drained gravel covered part of the garden and can be easily moved around.

Feeding

There is no doubt that you will get a better rate of increase from those bulbs that form offsets by repotting them every year into a fresh potting mix, however in reality, and with the number of bulbs we grow in containers, that is not possible. Ideally I aim to repot mature bulbs every two or three years, after three years you will start to notice a decline in the vigour of the plants. I repot during July and August

when the bulbs are dormant but I can be hampered in wet seasons when the compost is simply too wet to handle and in such cool wet conditions some of the species can send out new roots as early as July so are best not disturbed. In the years when they are not repotted I will scatter some bone meal over them in the autumn then sulphate of potash, (Potassium) during the flowering period. The *Erythronium*s growing in plastic pots have a much smaller volume of compost so require more regular watering during the period of maximum growth in the spring – then I will water them with a tomato-type liquid fertiliser diluted to about half the recommended strength.

If you cannot get hold of bone meal or the potassium supplement then scattering a balanced NPK general fertiliser as the first signs of growth appears will also work.