



Newsletter

North American Rock Garden Society
Berkshire Chapter April-May 2008

Next Meeting

Saturday, June 7, at 10:30 AM

Berkshire Botanical Garden Exhibit Hall.
BBG is located 2 miles west of Stockbridge,
MA at the junction of Routes 102 & 183.

Chapter Business: Show & Tell, Ask the Expert, and any other relevant or irrelevant activities, as long as they are interesting.

AM – Anne Spiegel – Western Rock Garden Plants For Eastern Gardeners

Anne, a founding member of the Berkshire Chapter, has been a major contributor not only to our Chapter over the years, but to NARGS programs of all kinds in all venues, covering a wide variety of topics. Her garden in Wappinger Falls, NY is unique and extraordinary, and she has succeeded in growing plants that are simply not supposed to grow in the northeast. Those of you who have visited her garden certainly understand why she is giving this particular talk.

Anne's program will be followed by:

Lunch — BYO.

We welcome dessert contributions. Lunch will be followed by our first plant sale of the year. Please make every effort to bring a few of last year's now grown up seedlings, or something that you can dig up and that will catch the eye of one of our other members.

Editor's Message – 5/21/08

As many of you know, we lost Geoffrey two weeks ago. I asked Pam Johnson for something about Geoffrey and she submitted this introduction along with his obituary.

Members of BNARGS know only too well what a debt we owe to co-founder Geoffrey Charlesworth, who died peacefully at his home on May 14th after a brief illness. Co-founder of BNARGS with his beloved Norman Singer, he wrote wonderful articles for the newsletter, gave many informative and witty lectures, identified plants for the less knowledgeable, donated hundreds of plants to raise money for the chapter and was a generous friend to us all.

I am heartsick at the loss of my dear friend, but comforted that he was fit enough to deliver that wonderful lecture at the Winter Study Weekend and to receive the spontaneous standing ovation that surprised and delighted him. This was followed by many letters and cards of appreciation, so in his final weeks he was surrounded by messages of love and admiration. He had been at Kimball Farms for 2 1/2 years and in that time had recovered some of his vigor and gotten a renewed interest in joining in, to the extent that he was described as "running the place" since he was on so many committees. He completed many new artworks in the last few months, wrote a lot of poetry (some for publication in their newsletter), and he has three photographs in their current exhibition.

A celebration of his life will be held in the coming months, and I would welcome offers to participate in the planning, as well as any comments about Geoffrey that I could forward to his family. Also, please submit remembrances for the next issue of this newsletter. We just missed the deadline for the NARGS summer quarterly, so the Bulletin will have just a brief factual announcement, while Elisabeth is preparing a full memorial for the fall edition. The following Obituary was submitted to the press.

Geoffrey Charlesworth
September 29th 1920 – May 14th 2008

Raised in a Yorkshire, England mining village, Geoffrey Charlesworth won a scholarship to Cambridge University, where he was recruited by Alan Turing to join the wartime code breakers at Bletchley Park. There he met Norman Singer and formed a partnership that lasted almost sixty years until Norman's death in 2001.

After a short time teaching in Egypt, Geoffrey immigrated to the USA where he made a 30-year career in mathematics teaching (receiving an Excellence in Teaching award in 1960) and administration at Hofstra University. On Long Island, Geoffrey developed an interest in rock gardening that was to become a lifetime love, shared with Norman. After they bought a summer home in Sandisfield, MA in 1968, they joined the Connecticut chapter of the North American Rock Garden Society (NARGS). As Chairman of the chapter, Geoffrey was obliged to write a column for the monthly newsletter. Those columns became the basis for *The Opinionated Gardener*, which won the Garden Writers of America's Quill and Trowel Award in 1987. Eventually, Norman and Geoffrey co-founded the Berkshire chapter, based at the

Berkshire Botanical Garden in Stockbridge, MA. Many people joined just for the articles in the newsletter, among which were Geoffrey's ever informative and often wry musings on plants, the joys and perils of gardening, and life in general. From these came *A Gardener Obsessed* in 1994, including a verse response to "Why did my plant die?", the suggested "first one hundred alpine plants," and much advice given with self-deprecating humor.

The 5-acre Sandisfield garden, including an arboretum, perennials and most especially many beds of rock garden plants, attracted visitors from all over the world. Sowing more than one thousand seeds a year and studying a succession of species in depth, Geoffrey became an expert plantsman and sought-after speaker and was invited to make presentations across the USA and in Europe. In 1987 received the NARGS *Award of Merit*, and in 1990 the *Carlton Worth Award* for "distinguished writing on rock gardening and rock garden plants." In a section of the special centennial edition of "*Horticulture Magazine*" (April 2004) listing their "top 100 books," #3 reads: Geoffrey Charlesworth, *The Opinionated Gardener* 'Take equal measures of dry, acerbic wit, sharp intelligence, consummate plantsmanship, and philosophical speculation and you get the uniquely satisfying blend contained in "*The Opinionated Gardener*," written by one of America's most respected rock gardeners. Although there's much here about alpine plants, there's also much that is universal: "Being happy is dirt under your fingernails, wearing old clothes, having a good idea get better the longer you work at it, starting a new bed, giving plants away, and listening to rain."

Geoffrey's other interests included composing music, playing the piano, folk dancing, painting and writing poetry, all of which he studied and performed to a high standard. The final chapter of his life was spent in the retirement community of Kimball Farms, where his interest in both music and art was re-invigorated and he made many new friends.

He will be sadly missed by a legion of friends, including those in the international rock gardening community and at Kimball Farms, and by his family. He is survived by his sisters Margaret and Olive, residing in England, and Phyllis in Canada and was pre-deceased by his brothers Norman and Stanley and sister Mabel, all of England. He will also be missed by his nephews and nieces and their children, many of whom visited him in Sandisfield. Funeral arrangements are private. A celebration of his life will be planned within a few months. Donations in Geoffrey's memory may be made to the Berkshire Botanical Garden, PO Box 826, Stockbridge, MA 01262

Funeral home is Roche in Lenox

Obituary prepared by Pamela Johnson, friend and executor.
413-528-4611
140 Main Road, PO Box 203, Monterey, MA 01245
pjjohnson@hughes.net

Addendum:

This issue comes after a long hiatus, primarily the result of the overall Chapter commitment to the success of the 2008 Eastern Winter Study Weekend. It was truly a group project, and the success of the event was due to many contributors, including, but

not limited to, Pam Johnson, Elisabeth Zander, Tom Flanigan, Jacques Mommens and Bill Jordan. There were many others who contributed in important ways, and we all owe a debt of gratitude to all of them, for they gave us not only a successful event, but also an opportunity to see and hear Geoffrey present for the very last time.

Putting together an issue that deals with our usual subjects is something I really have no appetite for, but I do believe that it is in the best interests of our group to continue as before, and devote at least a portion of each issue to what I, at least, perceive to be a year of mourning for all of us. So I join in Pam's request: Please submit your thoughts, your recollections, or just about anything you feel will honor Geoffrey and his memory, and we can fill each month with a reminder or two of what a wonderful, kind, generous and thoughtful man he was, and how much each of us will miss him.

PFG

I've asked a number of people to write a bit about the EWSW, and I'm presenting them in no particular order, Enjoy them all, as I did, and reflect again on how lucky we are to have had the opportunity and to have turned the opportunity into success.

A Few Thoughts

In a dwindling society with an ever-older membership, it is easy enough to forget just who we are and what in the gardening world our array of skills represents. That's the point of the Winter Study weekend: in a bleak time of year to rekindle forgotten values; a coming together of excellent speakers, committed vendors and equally extraordinary participants. Over a beer late at night one New York member confided that, for much of the year, he found himself

eagerly looking forward to these reunions. Yet, after the financial failures of the last two winter weekends, one can understand the leeriness of our chapters to shoulder another fiasco. To me, to, it seemed too much effort for too little results. Without Peter George's last-minute intervention it would not have happened. As Harvey Wrightman wrote, "Peter did a wonderful job – no one else was willing to tackle this one for fear of failing."

A measure of the success was the number of new faces, many of whom traveled considerable distances: Michigan, Colorado, even southern Oregon – drawn, it would seem, not by the vendors and the chance to view the plants in the catalogues, but by the speakers. This time there were not too many of them, they each had the time



Saxifraga Penelope – Harvey Wrightman

they required, and everyone delivered something to another part of our audience. At most such events there are a number of attendees who do not stay around for the last

lecture. But Geoffrey addressed a hall packed with people who obviously knew what they were about to receive. How do you follow an act like Frank Cabot's – witty, elegant, and so architecturally focused? In a miraculous, free-swinging talk, Geoffrey showed exactly what he was about, earning an ovation the likes of which I've never encountered.

In the whole of the weekend I did not hear a complaint about anything: the food, the hotel service, speakers, vendors. The vibes were pretty special. That's an honor to our two societies and makes something we can build on.

Robin Magowan

EWSW - The Spring Fling

Twenty years ago when we first joined ARGSS we made visits to members of the Eastern Chapters, because that was where the action was. Things have decayed a bit in the past few years; but really, Eastern growers are smarter, if they only knew it. They must be more careful with culture and watering in particular. I always marvel at the various strategies that come of adversity. I think the East can rule again, but some simple changes in group programming are in order. You must think more like Canadians and bring together your strengths, hospitality and enthusiasm not the least. Years ago in the mid-1990's, Josef Halda and I did a joint tour in mid-April to the Connecticut and Adirondack chapters – he with a presentation on plants of Central Asia and selling the resultant seed collections, and I with a selection of plants including some grown from Halda's seed. The meetings were well attended, and in Hartford the attendance was 100 plus. There was an elegant catered lunch and the room was

boiling with happy conversation. Later, I asked some people if perhaps this might be a good idea for some sort of annual event. For us as growers, it was obvious that there were many customers here and that new plant material was scarce. But there was no interest in the idea as Chapter memberships were large and increasing. Now 15 years later, we find ourselves being asked to attend more events than we can accommodate and still do shipping for our mail-order business. The recent EWSW in Farmington was a resounding success in many ways, except one for me as a vendor and member of the Society: People were turned away from the event, and the attendance probably could have exceeded 300, as it did in years past. Setting a limit of 150 attendees only gives a reason to fail. Here are some changes I would like to see:

1) I think the central point is to move the date of the conference to near the end of March, so that you can have good vendor presence. There were two full sales rooms, and from what I saw, they were very busy. By late March one can reliably move plants about (I'm speaking as a grower) and the buyer can very soon plant in the garden, lessening the stress on the plants and the buyer.

2) Hold the event in a good central location – Hartford is not the only place, but it is central and easy to get to. The biggest advantage is that it is within a 4-hour drive for a huge number of people. People who drive to an event are likely to buy more from vendors. To have a healthy vendor presence, you must provide opportunity.

3) What about program? Vitaly important still; but, be aware that technology has gotten so good with the digital presentations that actual content and what a person has to say is even more important. Too, why would

anyone attend a conference to see an old set of slides that are so faded that they should have been left at home, especially as it is so easy to Google a topic and come up with more and better information? I had one attendee comment that she was glad to sit in on my presentation to see something



Centaurea achtaerovia – Harvey Wrightman

practical. This was a repeated request – people want to see new ideas and techniques. One suggestion I have would be to use fewer keynote speakers, but get more presentations from them. It would take careful planning, selection and promotion.

4) Lastly, I am in favor of partial registrations. I am in favor of the broadest participation possible, and for some people that may mean they don't wish to attend the banquets but may be interested in other program and the plant sale. The draw of the plant sale should never be underestimated –

it is integral to attracting new members. I met several local people at our table who were not NARGS members, but belonged to some other hardy plant group. They were very smart and I hope they will join a Chapter. A large, well-organized plant sale brings many new people – I see this every year in Toronto, especially at the May meeting/sale when people spill out the doors of the Floral Hall.

5) Really the whole idea is easy and not daunting. The Berkshire Chapter followed simple, logical principles and held a smash-up event where everyone went home happy, just as it should be.

Harvey Wrightman

**NARGS
Eastern Study
Weekend
March 2008**



Campanula oreadum - Harvey Wrightman

I most loved Geoffrey Charlesworth's presentation – Glamorous Gardeners, Glittering Gardens. He articulated, and made tangible for me, the reason why people become so incredibly active in the plant world via organizations like NARGS. He showed that people certainly love their gardens and sharing this love with others, but more importantly he honored historical and current characters by recognizing the contributions they made. Even though I am new to the Berkshire chapter, the 5 or 6 shots including Howard Pfeifer made me feel more a part of this group. I was in the last plant taxonomy class Howard taught at UCONN (1984/85) and he is the reason I left Connecticut for Michigan and became professionally involved with

plants. Regardless of how individuals reacted to Howard's strong feelings about plants, plant names and people, his contribution to multiple plant groups was and still is widely felt. My favorite line, besides the reference to how glamorous gardeners are, was Geoffrey's take on heaven: "God will be there changing the labels to the names by which we first learned them." I firmly believe that will be heaven for me as well.

Alan Bradshaw exemplifies a type of uniqueness, found more frequently among plant academics. He is one of the few plant

purveyors who care enough to keep excellent records on the alpine plants of the plains, and share them in his *Alplains* seed catalog. This information is tremendously valuable to folks interested in cultivating plants common and not so common in cultivation.

His encyclopedic knowledge includes much more than what might be found in any published flora for the regions supporting the plants he grows.

After seeing Elisabeth and Rob Zander's presentation, I thought, "How many single stonemasons do I know?" Although I was mostly interested in the plant information I found the specifics provided (from letting new crevices over-winter prior to planting, to the fines in 3/4" grit containing all the nutrients required) were of great interest. The Zanders mentioned something most presenters shared, which seems one of the key cultural requirements separating rock gardening from other specialties: that is keeping the growing medium lean, as in NO

compost and NO soil. This makes sense to folks directly familiar with natural habitats of rock plants but goes against the grain of most gardeners. Their presentation so well documented rock garden construction it made me think “PBS special!”

Elaine Chittenten

My First EWSW

I was so excited after the wonderful EWSW that I offered to write an article for the BNARGS newsletter. I am offering a beginner’s viewpoint and I hope it is well received.

I started my first rock garden last year. It has evolved from a garden with everyday daylilies and *Centaurea* to what I hope is the beginning of a wonderful obsession. I have watched my father’s rock gardens evolve over the years, new ones added and old ones redone, and thought I could never do anything like that. At some point I mentioned the beauty of my father’s garden to him and he asked if I would like to start one. He invited me to BNARGS meetings and started buying me a few plants. I found that the garden I had started with generic plants was the perfect location for a rock garden, so I dug most of them out. Living in New Hampshire I have plenty of rocks, and with my husband’s help and our tractor I began to form my first rock garden. The BNARGS meetings have allowed me to gain knowledge from some of the best in the rock gardening world. The first speaker I ever saw was John Spain, and the last one was Geoffrey Charlesworth. How lucky is that?

I was thrilled when my father invited me to attend the EWSW this year and couldn’t wait to get there. The list of speakers was amazing, and I looked forward eagerly to listening and learn more. I have to say I

came home with a great deal more knowledge and a wonderful array of plants.

The one thing that worried me the most about attending this event was my lack of prior knowledge, but I have to say I think that was an asset. The people there were warm and inviting, eager to share their knowledge with me. I could not believe the number of people who just stopped to talk to me, to ask me about my garden, to offer advice, and just to welcome me. The President of NARGS said he was happy to



Draba acaulis – Harvey Wrightman

see someone young involved in this hobby. People were impressed that I do this with my father, as sadly most of them do not have family members and children who share in their passion.

There is an area in my yard that I had no idea what to do with, but after the presentation by Zdenek Zvolanek it came to me – a crevice garden. I made a ton of notes

and my booklet is full of pictures I drew out of inspiration. My husband received call after call with questions and ideas for our yard.



Lewisia cotyledon – Rachel Flowers

The vendors were amazing, the plant selection astonishing. The books offered a wide variety of information. I returned home full of excitement – only to see my garden still under a foot of snow! As I write this it is snowing again, to my dismay. This is going to be my second year working on my garden, and waiting to see what lies beneath the snow is like waiting to open a present; the anticipation is overwhelming. I cannot wait to see what survived and then add all the new plants I bought. I am excited about beginning the new crevice garden and implementing the information I learned. The garden photographs from around the world were inspirational and gave me many ideas.

I can't wait to communicate again with the many people I met, I can't wait to start showing off my garden, I can't wait for more meetings – but most of all, I can't wait for the snowmelt. I guess since there is not much to do with the garden outside I will begin the process of germination, having bought my first packet of seeds from Alan Bradshaw.

Here's to an eventual spring, and a fond thanks to all those I met and talked with.

Rachel Flowers

Late May Musings

It's been almost 2 months since the EWSW, and it seems like a lifetime. During these 2 months we've had a major plant sale at Stonecrop, a Primula Society Event at Tower Hill in Boylston, MA, and the annual Epimedium orgy at the Probst garden in Hubbardston, MA. I've planted out all the dozens of purchases I made at the Weekend, and some are flowering, one is dead, but an



Penstemon debilis - Alan Bradshaw

amazing number are flourishing and making even my wife a fan of rock garden plants. She has no idea how much money I spent in Farmington, but it appears that it was well spent, if her daily examinations of the gardens are any indication.

When Robin called me to tell me that Geoffrey was gone, it seemed impossible. His presentation was so perfect, so well delivered and he seemed so full of life that it just didn't make sense. Perhaps it never will, but over time we'll discover how much a part of our gardening lives he was.

Someone asked me last week if I would ever get involved with another NARGS event again, and I actually had to consider the answer carefully before I blurted out the “no, never” that would have been my answer 5 weeks ago. The angst, the frustrations, the unpleasant friction that comes with these events wore me out, as it did all of the participants. Volunteers for these kinds of jobs are usually people who are accustomed to leading, and six leaders can and will have disputes amongst themselves. That part was the “no” – but the event was so well executed, so filled with positives, that to me it was truly a worthwhile endeavor, and one I will never regret.

As I mentioned earlier, the majority of the work was done by a small group of our members. They deserve recognition, for it was through their efforts that the event actually came off, and came off so well. Pam was the Treasurer, a title that in no way even begins to describe the jobs she took on and performed with extraordinary skill. If it needed to get done, Pam did it if no one else would or could. Elisabeth created the images, the enrollment package, handled the publicity and made sure that everything worked and worked well at the event presentations. Tom worked closely with Pam and was primarily responsible for the venue, the event planning and the almost flawless execution of the overall weekend schedule. Bill Jordan recruited the vendors and managed what some would have seen as an impossible job of organizing their locations, their sale times and their complex personalities, making sure that no vendor was left unattended. And Jacques did what only Jacques can do, which is to handle the registration process with deceptive ease and perfect accuracy. The volunteer assistants made all of us confident that everything was being done to guarantee that the complex and challenging registration process was

handled so seamlessly that no one actually noticed.

I could write an essay about each program, but I have to restrain my enthusiasm and say just a few words about the people Robin and I (and others) recruited for the event. Alan Bradshaw was a mystery to most of us, having never given a presentation to any NARGS group before this weekend. To say that any of us were somewhat nervous about his presentation is an understatement, and the fact that he had transportation issues and lost baggage made the concern even more visceral. Fortunately for us, his plane arrived, albeit late, his baggage arrived, albeit even later, and he gave a wonderful presentation which was so interesting that for once, the length became an issue NOT because we were getting tired of seeing his slides, but because we had a schedule to keep. In short, he was a revelation.



Mertensia alpina – Alan Bradshaw

Tom Flanagan suggested Frank Cabot to me early on, and with Robin’s help, Frank agreed to come and speak. It was truly a wonderful talk, one to which I connected on a very emotional level.

Tom also arranged for Priscilla Twombly, and her talk, aimed at the less experienced gardeners in our audience, was a wonderful counterpoint to Frank’s, which preceded hers. She was in an unenviable position, but

the contrast between the talks was perfect, and the balance they created made it a perfect afternoon for those in the audience.

Robin originally suggested Zdenek, and he was certainly a perfect start to our weekend. Anyone who had wondered about crevice gardens before his talk understood the why and the how when he was done, and he truly established a high standard, met again and again by each subsequent speaker.



Helichrysum sessiloides – Harvey Wrightman

As members of the Berkshire Chapter, we are very familiar with the special talents of the Zanders, and their yin and yang were on full display Saturday morning. With their contrasting styles and perspectives, together they create much more than the sum of their parts.

John Good, our Saturday evening speaker, has gotten short shrift from the other contributors, but I think it's because everyone knew they were going to get a great program, and they did. John is personable, spontaneous, funny, and brilliant, and his program reflected the best of his work, demonstrating to all attendees that there is a lot of science involved in growing alpine plants in lowland gardens.

Finally, a word about Geoffrey's program. For me, getting him to agree to give a presentation was the singular challenge I

faced, and Pam Johnson took on the responsibility of persuading Geoffrey to give us this wonderful hour and 10 minutes of beauty and poetry and humor. When his talk was over, so was the 2008 Eastern Winter Study Weekend. Nobody could have closed it better, or in a more satisfying way. When his last slide went dark, for all of us, the weekend was over, and we knew why we had come.

Our next meeting is on the 7th of June, and Anne Spiegel will share with us her special insights about growing those Westerners that we lust after, but often have no success in keeping for more than a summer. I am hoping that we have a new Chairperson soon, and that we have a successful summer of programs and plant sales, and that the next issue will have too many contributions. I won't be at the June meeting, because I will be in Virginia attending my older son's graduation from college, but I look forward to seeing many of you at the July meeting.

Stay well, and stay in the garden.

PFG



Saxifraga bohunka – Harvey Wrightman

Iris Rosenbachiana

After the conference I was surprised to see hardy rock gardeners arrive that raw Monday for an after conference garden visit. Of course there was not much happening in the garden. But they did get to see the beginnings of a garden construction project.

Two days later, though, *Iris rosenbachiana* emerged with triumphant. This is a very early Juno - Harangon Strain. It blooms between the crocus/galanthus cycle, but before the pushkinia and kabschias. Planted in the sand bed, it has a chance, as it prefers very little moisture either in summer of



winter. It requires great drainage. Not quite as fussy about the water as *Lewisia rediviva*, the bloom lasts much longer - two weeks. Of course this will depend on the weather.

(My pic, my Iris)

Elisabeth Zander

Carol's Collectibles

Another year...This one will be very different for me. In April I turned 65 and, after 10 years left my job at Prides Corner Farms. I went to work as Liner Supervisor a year after I put up my greenhouse here. I think I got the job because I was peddling a tray of Daphne cuttings, a bit of a rarity in those days. Prides has grown to be one of the largest wholesale nurseries on the East Coast. When I went to work there in 1997 if you lined the Hoop Houses up end to end, they would stretch for 33 miles. Today that

figure is 64 miles! I have learned so much at the Farm, not only about the plant world, but also about the many diverse cultures that make it successful. Being a part of that wonderful family has become a real joy and filled a large hole in my previous self-employed life. I will miss everyone.

So, as I come home to devote myself full time to my nursery, my head is spinning with the "to do" list that has been accumulating for years. It will be great to be able to do things in a timely manner. Though I always felt that I was holding on by my fingernails most of the time, the nursery has grown, as has the number of folks who have found me despite the difficulties.

I'm looking forward to it and seem to find the twinge of Dread is missing. As a general rule, I plan to be open Thursday through Sunday starting in mid-April or by appointment on other days. We are located in the northeast corner of Connecticut and there are a number of other interesting nurseries around, as well as good places to eat. UCONN is just up the road and rural countryside still exists and is still worth an afternoon's drive.

I am at the Ashford Farmers' Market Sundays (10AM to 1PM) July through September, and will sometimes be away at different sales during the month of May (please see Events page). Because of these absences, and other unpredictables, ***please give me a call before you make the trip.*** As I say, there are many things to enjoy in the area, but I would hate to miss you!

P.S. – Please note that as of this time I don't ship, so you must come by!

<http://www.carolscollectibles.com>

Carol

Positions of Responsibility

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Vice-Chairperson – Robin Magowan
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Archivist – James Fichter
Audio Visual Chairperson - Joe Berman
Greeter – Open
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Meeting Recorder – **Open**
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Speaker Housing – Anne Spiegel

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Please contact editor before reprinting
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