



Newsletter

North American Rock Garden Society
Berkshire Chapter February 2009

Next Meeting

Saturday, March 7 at 10:30 AM

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

Chapter Business: Show & Tell, Chapter
business and general announcements

AM - John Spain

*"Succulent Companions for Hardy
Cacti"*

John, longtime member and resident guru on this
subject of winter hardy cacti, is going to present a
slide presentation covering succulents and some cacti
that do well in a hardy cactus garden. The genera he
will be focusing on include Sedum, Sempervivum,
Jovibarba, Yucca, Agave, Lewisia, Orostachys and
Delosperma.

John Spain has grown winter hardy cacti since 1965
from Grosse Pointe, MI to Wayne, NJ to his current
home in Middlebury, CT. He was a founder and the
first president of the Connecticut Cactus and
Succulent Society, as well as a member of the Cactus
and Succulent Society of America. He was general
chairman of the 7th Eastern Cactus and Succulent
Society Conference held in 1990. In addition, John
has served as the chairman of the Berkshire Chapter
of NARGS. A frequent lecturer and noted teacher, he
writes, draws, and photographs for national
gardening magazines and society publications.

Lunch ---BYO

We welcome dessert contributions. Lunch will be
followed by our plant sale, so please bring something
of interest.

PM – Cliff Desch – *The Garden*

Cliff Desch has been gardening in Conway,
Massachusetts, a small Berkshire hill town just west
of the Connecticut River valley, *(continued on P. 7)*

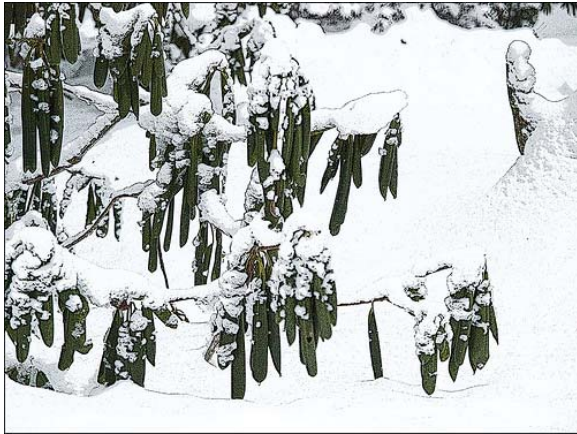


From The Chairman:

Welcome back to the Berkshire Chapter and
to gardening in 2009. Nights are getting 2-3
minutes shorter by the day, seed and plant
catalogs have come, my seed orders are
sown and my plant orders will arrive in
March. I don't know what Phil the
woodchuck saw, but spring is definitely on
the way – as soon as the last 12 inches of
snow melts. Elisabeth Zander, our Program
Chairman, has arranged for a varied
assortment of speakers ranging from local
folk, such as John Spain and I, to the more
exotic including Josef Halda from the Czech
Republic.

Elliott Jessen and I attended the Eastern
Winter Study Weekend hosted by the
Potomac Chapter in Reston, Virginia, 30
Jan. – 1 Feb. Compared to the meeting our
chapter ran last year, this year's study
weekend was poorly attended – only 99
registrants plus a few per diem attendees.
Elliott and I were the only representatives of
the Berkshire Chapter. Although all the
speakers made informative presentations,

the emphasis was on plants for the local (zone 7a) or warmer conditions. Alpines hardy in New England were not discussed. The principle speakers were Tony Avent, of Plant Delights Nursery, on aroids and Koos Roux, of the Compton Herbarium in Cape Town, on South Africa's floral biodiversity. There were also talks on Chilean bulbs, hellebores, primulas, and the flora of Crete. Although the theme of the meeting was the potential effects of global warming ("zone



creep") on rock gardening, most speakers did not dwell on this topic for more than a few, brief moments – more like a preamble to their talk. Because of the low attendance at this meeting in January compared to our event in Farmington in March, the organizers of the 2010 Eastern Winter Study Weekend, the New England Chapter, "saw the light" and scheduled it for 19 – 21 March (last day of winter) in Devens, Massachusetts (former Fort Devens). As we know, this timing allows the vendors to thaw out plant stocks for a grander sale and reduces the time purchasers have to hold plants before planting out.

I have a thermometer in my greenhouse that records the outside temperature. The sensor is located such that it remains buried in a pile of snow throughout the winter. Although fine for summer temperature readings, it is not very good when covered

with snow. But here is the point: on 16 January the air temperature went down to -9°F while the under-snow reading was +26°F. A few days later it went to -3°F and the snow temperature was +28°F. Yesterday, 8 Feb., the air temperature reached +46°F but the snow temperature was +32°F. So, the deciduous perennials, now dormant under the thick snow cover, don't have it so bad. However, the rhododendrons rising above the snow line are not so fortunate. Previous low temperatures for my garden have been: -10°F on 26 Jan. 2005, +4°F on 26 Feb. 2006, -2°F on 8 Feb. 2007 and -4°F on 3 Jan. 2008.

Cliff Desch

The New

I was recently asked, "How do you make the choices of what seeds to grow for new plants?"

My response: I need something that is easy to grow and attractive in the garden. Further, on a personal level, I want to reach beyond the ordinary and grow those bits of nature that are beautiful, yet not generally found in our gardens. One needs time and experience to make the selections for garden-growing subjects. Criteria for selection may shift over the time, in the past 20 years I have sought plants that are more heat and drought tolerant, not just because of rock garden conditions, but also for the increased interest in trough gardening, that has drawn more people to appreciate the qualities of alpine plants. Gardeners here in North America have finally come to accept the reality of a mostly continental-type climate and to build on its advantages, which are many. It is the gardener who is often ahead of the growers and one must look to fill those gaps in the list of plants available. Much of our early

stock came from England, *Eunomia oppositifolia* being an example. The form from Ingwersen's was OK, if somewhat shy-growing and loose in habit. In the late 1980's the Czechs were offering collections from Turkish mountains and soon we had a better type from Ala Dag, 3600 meters, that grew densely compact with a profusion of those sweetly-scented flowers that are such an early treat for both bees and humans. Most of our non-North American seed comes from Czech collectors.

Logistically speaking, I have settled on ~



Eunomia oppositifolia – Harvey Wrightman

300 pots of new seed each year, from which ~ 240 yield seedlings within 6 weeks. It's a lot to handle and keep track of. The seed selections are heavily dependent on what is offered, and leads to "fads" of sort. One year it was high-level collections of *Cytisus* and *Genista*, which produced hairy and dwarfed selections of *Genista. spp. lydia*, *Genista*

carinalis, and now a hardy form of *Genista delphinensis*.

Although Turkey has been a great source of mid-latitude, hardy plants, China will prove



Genista depressa – Harvey Wrightman

to be the most extensive. In terms of speciation, East Asia has the most as much of its land mass was not glaciated in the last Ice Age. The number of endemics in the mountains is unknown and slow to ascertain due to the difficulties of travel there – but it must be huge. Of course, the Czechs are there and leading the way. Their recent expeditions to Yunnan and Sichuan have brought so many new collections of *Androsace*, *Primula*, *Gentiana* and more. The early impressions are that the collections as a whole are more growable than counterparts from the Himalaya where conditions are wetter and not so harsh. I have observed that the *Androsace spp.* in particular are as trouble-free as the Turkish species; even the ultra-hairy types are remarkably adaptable. So too, the *Gentiana spp.:* *Gentiana farreri*, *Gentiana sino-ornata*, and *Gentiana futtereri* are very much worth trial. They appear to be lime tolerant, which has been a big problem for growers. They may also be more heat-tolerant.

Better cultural methods have broadened the range of plants we can grow. I would have to say that use of tufa has provided the biggest step forward. Tufa is a better medium for saxatile plants that struggle in ordinary garden soils. There is more time for observation and study of particular needs and the opportunity to increase the number of plants through cuttings- almost always giving a more tractable specimen. It is the success of these efforts that take us back to the seed collectors, who really are the key people in the quest for the new.

Anemone obtusiloba



This plant is a widely distributed species from the Himalaya to West China, growing in wet meadows and open woodland. The trilobed basal leaves are on short stalks radiating horizontally. The petals (sepals in reality) are a bright blue/purple. Flowering in spring can be for well over a month and in fact, can continue right on through the summer if sufficient water is provided. A very undemanding plant, it wants only rich garden soil with plenty of moisture and a bit of shade in the mid-day.

Incarvillea aff. compacta



The genus is centered in West China, but ranges as far as Afghanistan. This Jurasek collection has been put close to *Incarvillea compacta*, but is a dwarf form rivaling *Incarvillea younghusbandii*. The location in Gonghe, Qinghai was at an elevation over 4000 m. on bare, rocky soils. Pinnate leaves hug the ground and rather large trumpets of red/purple erupt from the center. Much easier to grow than *Incarvillea younghusbandii*, the 2 year tubers we have done well. I would expect that it is small enough and tough enough to grow in a trough.

Teucrium polium ssp. capitatum



Pavelka collected this in N.E. Spain at 1400 meters, in very dry, stony terrain - an evergreen shrublet whose stalks of silvery green leaves stand out in brazen fashion, winter or summer. The more severe the weather is, the greater the contrast. White flowers with a touch of pink, provide the frosting for this superb plant. What's the

catch? There is none, just another case of being overlooked.

Seed sources and websites

Websites:

<http://hengduan.huh.harvard.edu/fieldnotes>

www.pavelkaalpines.cz

www.alpine-seeds.com

Sources (they will e-mail you a list):

jurasekalpines@gmail.com

holubec@vurv.cz

Article and photos by Harvey Wrightman

2009 Western Winter Study Weekend

I know it's a bit late, but it's still possible to register and attend the WWSW, *Revitalizing The Rock Garden*, in Portland, OR on March 13-15. The program should be an excellent one, and the meeting incorporates the NARGS Annual Meeting as well, which will be the 75th anniversary of the founding of NARGS.

Their website is:

<http://www.nargs.org/meet/west09home.html>



2009 Programs

March 7

John Spain-"Succulent Companions for Hardy Cacti"

Cliff Desch -"The Garden"

April 4

AM & PM -- Alan Bradshaw-"Western Plants"

May 16

AM & PM - Josef Halda -"Plants of Central Asia" & "Plants of the Balkans"

June 6

Tour of Cliff Desch's Garden, Conway MA

July 18

AM - Joe Strauch - "Gardens Near & Far"

PM - Local Garden Visit - Members Only

August 8

AM & PM - Alan Grainger - "From Seed to Showbench" & "Kentucky Wildflowers"

Sept 5

AM - Judy Sellers - "Primulas"

PM - The BIG Plant Sale

October 10

AM - Lola Lloyd Horwitz - "My Doing and Undoing: A Garden in Change"

PM - Members Potpourri

November 7

Annual Luncheon

Priscilla Twombly – *Program to Be Announced*

A Program of Interest

The **2009 Conference for the Home Gardener**

At the Lewis B. Rome Commons, Storrs, CT

March 13, 2009

University of Connecticut,

College of Agriculture and Natural Resources

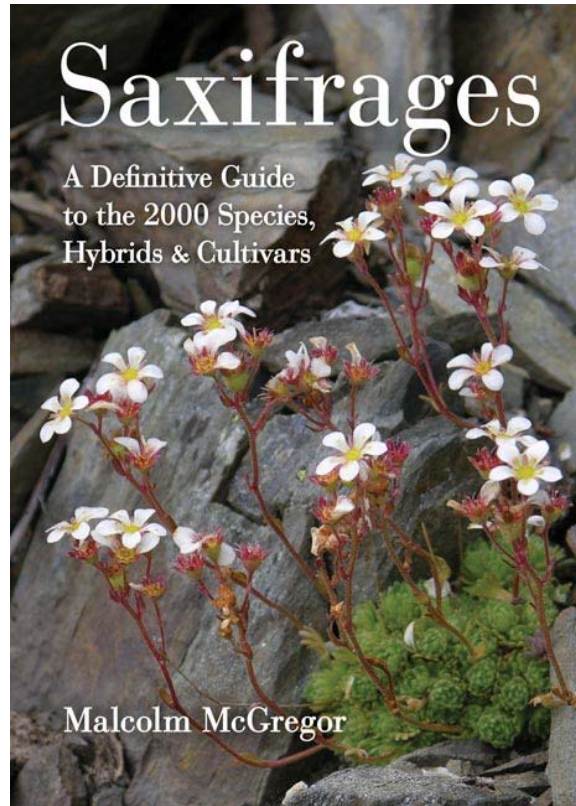
www.hort.uconn.edu/2009garden/

Saxifrages: A Definitive Guide to the 2000 Species, Hybrids & Cultivars By Malcolm McGregor 384 pp., hardcover

Reviewed by Peter George

I haven't written a book review since college, and I am not enthusiastic about starting again in my 7th decade of life, but this book is good enough for me to break with tradition. I received it as a review copy from Timber Press, and was immediately struck by the book's fine appearance and feel. It is solidly bound, printed on matte paper, and filled with photographs of exceptional beauty and clarity, including the terrific cover photo.

I began reading with some trepidation, expecting an impenetrable text loaded with technical plant jargon, but quickly found myself delighted by the accessibility of the language and the logical order of McGregor's presentation. From the discussion of ecology and habitats through the description and taxonomy of the species to the clear explanation of how best to grow them in your garden, I was carried along effortlessly. By the time I was done, I was ready to start again. McGregor has written a book fit for a specialist, yet completely accessible to the novice. His descriptions of the enormous variety of these interesting and beautiful plants will absolutely delight any plant person, and will motivate many



readers to acquire and grow more than just a few of these often challenging plants.

I am always somewhat skeptical about books that describe themselves as "definitive," as the claim is usually far from true. This one IS definitive, and will remain so for quite a while. McGregor takes us to places we've never been, and gives us the opportunity to grow a small piece of these places in our own gardens. If you get the Sax bug, you'll be returning to this book almost daily as you delve into this arcane corner of the rock garden world. And as gardeners in New England, you'll be able to learn which Saxifrages we can grow, and exactly how to grow them

Wrightman Alpines Nursery

Group Orders for NARGS Chapters

For every \$50 worth of plants ordered, BNARGS will receive an additional plant (our choice), which you could use for prizes, raffles or drawings.

You save on shipping and phytosanitary charges.

When small orders are placed as part of the group order, there is no minimum order size (usually \$50), therefore no relatively high minimum shipping fee.

Also, if your group would like additional

plants for a plant sale/raffle/drawing, we can assemble a flat (32 plants), our choice, for \$100 (plus shipping).

All the best in the next gardening year,

Harvey and Irene Wrightman

If you have interest in taking advantage of this offer, please contact The Editor @ petergeorge@verizon.net.

February Nursery: **Cistus Design Nursery**

A Brief Description of Nursery and Gardens

Cistus Design Nursery is a unique micro-nursery founded in 1996 by Parker Sanderson and Sean Hogan, partners with interests in climate-appropriate plants and new textures for gardens. Their exciting collection of treasures, gathered around the globe with brilliant plantspeople, quickly outgrew a 100-year-old greenhouse in North Portland so the nursery opened to the public on Sauvie Island in 1990, expanding in 1993.

Visitors are invited to wander the all-season, display gardens showcasing West Coast natives and Mediterranean plants, architectural desert plants for the “dry garden,” Asian specimens, shade plants, and a dazzling mixed border of summer showstoppers – gardens that echo the pavilions and courtyards in retail itself. Eucalyptus, olives, evergreen oaks, many delicious items from the southern hemisphere, myriad magnolias and asian delights, tropicals and mature palms, the prickly, prickly plants of the desert – these are only a few of the many enticements for gardeners of all stripes. The nursery staff is

always willing to assist and answer questions. Tours are available upon request.



The Nursery’s growing facilities are on the same property as are our research facilities where we test and evaluate all of our new collections. Cistus propagates thousands of plants, many of which are new to cultivation and can be found in both the retail nursery and an ever-expanding mail order division accessible on the web at www.Cistus.com.

(From Page 1)

PM – Cliff Desch – “My Garden”

since 1977. The garden terrain is folded and faulted Precambrian schist with very good air drainage and acid soil. Other natural features include a stream and rock outcrops and ledges. The natural vegetation is mixed deciduous hardwoods and conifers. The understory includes mountain laurel

thickets, pink lady slippers and carpets of partridgeberry. The garden site experiences zone 6 conditions.

Cliff will show slides of the growth and development of his garden including plants of the past and present. About 4 acres are planted to hybrid and species rhododendrons, magnolias, maples and a wide variety of herbaceous woodlanders. Other garden features and contrivances include a large, now mature rock garden with (not so) dwarf conifers, a sand bed, a moss garden, a bog garden, a small water garden, and planters and containers. A 25 x 12.5 foot cool greenhouse houses a large collection of cacti and succulents, and modest accumulations of *Asarum* species,



Partridgeberry

vireya rhododendrons, orchids, carnivorous

plants, cycads and assorted others. The greenhouse is ringed on the outside with raised alpine beds.

Cliff has been a member of the North American Rock Garden Society since 1974 and is the current chairman of the Berkshire Chapter. He is also a member of the Cactus & Succulent Society of America, the

Succulent Society of South Africa, the Magnolia Society International, the Rhododendron Species Foundation and a life member of the American Rhododendron Society. Cliff is a professor in the Department of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology of the University of Connecticut (Hartford campus) and does his research on morphology and taxonomy of parasitic hair follicle mites of mammals in the Department of Plant, Soil and Insect Sciences of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

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~ MEANDERING THOUGHTS ~

The Berkshire Chapter's Eastern Winter Study Weekend, 2008

~ Written & Illustrated by Abbie Zabar ~

I take a ferry to Hoboken or the subway to Brooklyn for garden inspiration. This minimalist prefers a life without accumulating air miles.

Then again, was traveling ever part of my comfort zone? I remember sleeping beneath life-saving equipment on decks of Greek tourist boats when I was in my teens, or seeing too many Renaissance churches. Or after I got married we'd fly our noisy twin-engine plane; or maybe the Concorde because it was faster than the speed of sound, but what I really wanted was the silent slow motion of a garden back home. I know what he meant when William Faulkner, 20th century Nobel Prize-winning author, said "*I discovered that my own little postage stamp of soil was worth writing about, and I would never live long enough to exhaust it.*"

Yet I reread the program for the 2008 NARGS Eastern Winter Study Weekend

over and over. The schedule of speakers was tempting as early spring outside my kitchen window, where buds on a holy trinity of Washington Hawthorns, *Crataegus phaenopyrum*, are beginning to swell and in the distance skeletal trees of Central Park are putting on weight. I tell myself Farmington's not that far away. Besides, I would be with other members in the tribe who, even before finding their room locations, let alone unpacking their gear – will hit the plant sale tables as if this were Las Vegas and everything's coming up double sixes.

For the car ride I've packed peanut butter sandwiches on challah rolls, topped with fresh strawberries. In a few weeks it would be aromatic fraises des bois, *Fragaria vesca*, an ornamental groundcover seeding under the hawthorns. I'm riding with Steve Whitesell (a walking botanical resource who identifies the charms on my bracelet as *Campanula rotundifolia*, not 'bluebells' as the heathens would say), Baldassare Mineo, former owner of Siskiyou Nursery, and when his catalogue arrived the gardener and I considered it hot bedtime reading), and Gelene Scarborough (Curator of the Alpine House, Wild Garden, and Shade Border at Wave Hill). The car speak will be better than warm-up acts at a Madonna concert. But first we're making a Wave Hill detour, where glass frames on the Alpine House are now wide open during the days and every plant is angling for its beauty shot. The staging is so exquisite I'd be happy to quit while I'm ahead. Yet I'm distracted, as well as intrigued, by thorny rose canes laid down on the upper terraces to protect choice plants from four-legged intruders. How clever, I think; just as later that weekend when Harvey Wrightman advises, *stick in a very young plant; minor roots find their own way.* Or when Rod Zander casually mentions, *"It's important to set aside*

correct stones for capping off a wall, soon as you begin." For someone who envisioned a weekend only about plant sales and presenters, 'Aha' moments added up as gifts-with-purchase.

And speaking of speakers, how I wanted to hear Geoffrey Charlesworth, elder statesman of NARGS, co-founder of the Berkshire Chapter, and a close-to-my-heart raconteur. Ever since he put it to Norman, *"I don't want to see any more slides of yaks and out-of-focus conifers,"* I suspected there's a talk that won't be a yawn. Geoffrey Charlesworth was the final speaker after Sunday breakfast in our large and generic Hartford Marriott meeting room, but cozy as a Swiss inglenook soon as he started recounting the early days of NARGS. In pictures and in words, his was a bittersweet reminiscence of garden personalities, filled with Geoffrey's edgy humor and alpine dirt.

A few weeks later I wrote him a thank you. Geoffrey responded right away on the reverse side of a color copy image of his garden; he couldn't believe I enjoyed his talk so much without knowing the cast of characters. He also added, *"Behind this wall of rhododendrons is a cairn marking Hatsie's (dog) grave with Norman's ashes scattered over it."* I quickly sent off a one-liner, something about wishing his presentation had been twice as long. I never heard back. On May 14th Larry Thomas called to say Geoffrey Charlesworth had died.

I went searching for the copy of Geoffrey's essay 'Some Regrets on Reaching Eighty.' My mind was wrapped around another little trip I took with Larry when we caught a Metro North train at 125th Street; and Jacques Mommens was riding up from Westchester with Midge Riggs in her husband's Jaguar. It was September 14,

2000 and the first time I ever visited the legendary garden of Geoffrey Charlesworth and Norman Singer. We were celebrating Geoffrey's 80th birthday lunch at their kitchen table in Massachusetts. There was smoked fish, bagels, and beer. The Formica counters - resplendent with more gooey-iced cakes than the local Sandisfield bakery - could have been a Thiebaud painting. While we were downing desserts Norman asked Birthday Boy to read something he composed for the occasion. I can still see Geoffrey, head bent down, shyly whispering words to himself. Before we left the two of them, famous for their endless generosity with the thousands and thousands of plants



they propagated (as long as you didn't jump the starting whistle at their Labor Day Weekend Plant Sale, according to Larry)

handed us shoeboxes packed with itsy-bitsy alpines, all potted up and perfectly labeled. Party favors don't get better than that for rock gardeners. I thought if I grew those babies right they, too, might be something in eighty years. At the last minute I pulled out Geoffrey's book and, in spite of embarrassing underlinings and marginalia, I wanted him to inscribe it. I also asked for a copy of the essay he just read, filing it between the pages of "A Gardener Obsessed." Geoffrey was, indeed, an opinionated gardener and one of his best read-out-loud quotes goes *"It is only when you start to garden - probably after fifty - that you realize something important happens everyday."*

I was back in my garden, home from the 2008 Berkshire Chapter's Winter Study Weekend, inspired, but perfectly happy to never leave again. The energy in swelling buds was contagious and my Washington Hawthorns needed meticulous de-thorning before they leafed out, a demanding pursuit but a harbinger of spring that's become *the* ritual I love doing. Yet nothing felt more compelling than pruning out crossover limbs clogging up the center of a young olive tree. After all, as an old Italian gardener told me, *"Prune it so that one day a bird will fly through, wings never touching the branches."* Hey Geoffrey, even if it's only a starling wouldn't that be 'something important?' Or maybe a miracle, when you're gardening above sidewalks of cement.

(Abbie Zabar, a member of the Manhattan Chapter of NARGS since 1997, lives and gardens in NYC. Her drawings are in the permanent collection of the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation in Pittsburgh, one of the foremost resources of botanical art in the world. She is an artist, writer and designer; but when all else fails she gardens.) Abbie has generously allowed us to reprint this article, which appeared in the newsletter of the Manhattan Chapter of NARGS).

Easy Does It: *Iberis taurica* *An Easy Plant for the Rock Garden Beginner*

Rachel Flowers

When I started building my first rock garden a few years ago, I visited my Dad's gardens every week or so just to see what the plants looked like when they were blooming. One day in mid-May I spotted the most beautiful plant I'd seen yet and decided right then and there I wanted it. My Dad said that the gorgeous lavender 'flowers' were, in fact, the unopened buds, and if I thought it was gorgeous now, wait a few days and then I'd see something REALLY special. I waited, and in 6 days I returned. I was not disappointed. The lavender buds opened to flowers that look exactly like the nonpareil candies you can buy at the movies. They were lilac and white, with a touch of yellow at the center, and they were, and are, simply stunning. The buds open sequentially until, after about a week, the plant is covered completely with these beautiful flowers. You simply can't see any green at all. The show lasts about 10 days, and then slowly the flowers dry up and fall off, leaving a sense of real disappointment given the intensity of the 'show' the plants have put on.

Each year I've grown them from seed, and two years ago they bloomed the first year, and then promptly died. The second year I planted the seed I collected, and I got good germination in about 4 weeks. They self-seeded two summers ago, and last year I had 6 or 7 that showed up in odd places, and I'm hoping to get a real show this year.

I have looked up the plant on the internet, and it's generally viewed as a monocarp. Some call it a short-lived perennial, but in

my garden, and my Dad's, it seems to bloom itself to death.

Seed seems to be generally available, but if you grow it, make sure you collect some of the seed yourself, and let it self sow as well, guaranteeing a real show the next summer.



I took this picture above in my Dad's garden and shows exactly what the plant looks like when it is in bloom. The plant in bud and in flower is pictured below. Bob Skowron of Rocky Mountain Rare Plants, a good source of the seed, took this shot.



<http://www.rmrp.com>

Brief Note:

The Chapter has 15 copies of the Saxifrage book, and will be available at the next meeting for \$25.

And PLEASE Remember to Pay Your Chapter Dues!!!

Positions of Responsibility

Chairperson – Cliff Desch
Vice-Chairperson – Robin Magowan
Secretary – Carol Hanby
Treasurer – Pamela Johnson
Archivist – James Fichter
Audio Visual Chairperson - Joe Berman
Greeter – **Still Open**
Independent Director – Peter F. George
Newsletter Editor – Peter F. George
Meeting Recorder – Joyce Hemingson
Plant Sale Chairperson – Bob Siegel
Program Chairperson – Elisabeth Zander
Proofreader – Cliff Desch
Refreshments Chairperson – Joyce Hemingson
Speaker Housing – Anne Spiegel

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Monterey, MA 01245

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Please contact editor before reprinting
articles

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