

BULB LOG 05.....2nd February 2011

Quarry

This week I took the opportunity of a loan of a lorry with a self loader to go to the quarry and stock up on sand and gravel. I have noticed many changes over the years in this quarry which was a hill when it was first opened now it is a massive site and there is a huge hole. One of my hobbies as a boy was geology which involved collecting rocks so quarries have always held a fascination for me and I used to be able to wander around them freely with the only restriction that I was to do it during the tea break or lunch time when no machinery was operating.

When I started rock gardening I was allowed to wander around the quarry to choose the stone I wanted or get sand and gravel: this week, due to health and safety regulations, I was not allowed anywhere near the operations. I was

not even allowed to go and inspect the sand that I wanted which can be worrying as for my purposes it needs to be a good gritty sand.

I asked for 1.5 tonnes of concreting sand and 0.75 tonnes of 6mm grit which was duly brought round in the bucket of a massive digger and dumped loose on the lorry platform. On exiting I settled my bill and found that I had been treated generously as I estimate that I had at least 2.2 tonnes of sand and 1.5 tonnes of grit.





Bulb bags

The first job was to shovel all the sand and gravel into 1 tonne bulk bags so that they could be lifted into our drive. Here you can see the four large bags carefully placed on the slabs so that they do not damage the many bulb shoots that are now starting to be visible in the central gravel area.

Now we have to shift all this material round the side of the house – the grit goes to the right of the gateway immediately behind the wooden fence and the sand goes to the far end of the path you can see in the picture.



Shifting sand

If all this sounds very complicated and labour intensive that is because it is – how much easier it would be if we had lorry access right around the side of our house to the compost storing and mixing area. I find the easiest way to move the sand and grit from the bags and the barrow is not with a shovel but with a bucket. Pulling the bucket through the material with the handle acts like a mini version of those giant dredgers that you see in open cast mines.



Moving the sand

Filling the barrow with eight scoops is enough for me to be able to push the short distance when I have to scoop the sand out of the barrow and into another bulk bag for long term storage. It is a lot of work and if you work it out by the time we have finished we will have moved the four tonnes of sand and grit three times by hard labour - equivalent to 12 tonnes – as Maggi says, we are getting too old for this!!



Sieve and sand

It is a good few years since I last got a big load of sand from the quarry and that was not a natural sand but a by-product of the rock crushing and screening process. This time it is natural sand described as ‘concreting sand’ and must have been brought from another of this company’s quarry sites for distribution. Whenever I get a new load of sand I like to assess the mixture of fine to gritty material it contains so I dry a small quantity out and pass it through a domestic sieve.



Mixture

Although I was not allowed to wander across the quarry to see the different piles of sand and select the one I wanted they did agree that I could check it just for suitability in the digger's bucket just before he dumped it on the lorry. A quick squeeze of a handful of the sand and then a shake to see if it stayed in a ball or fell apart again was enough for me to tell if it would be suitable. As it fell apart easily after I had squeezed it into a ball I could tell that it had a fair proportion of grit and was fine for my potting mixes. If it had stayed in a ball with an impression of my fingers it would have been too fine and not suitable for my purpose. The picture above shows the fines that passed through the sieve and the gritty parts that were left are roughly in equal proportions which is a perfect mix for my purposes. As this is a natural sand the majority of the grains are weathered and rounded and not sharp as they were in my last batch of sand that was produced by crushing rock. If I had a choice I would choose the crushed type as sharp edged sand seems to encourage better root systems and especially branched root growth. However not everything is ideal and as the majority of the bulbs that I grow do not have branching roots this will work fine.



6mm Grit

Over the years the 6mm grit I have had has been a pretty standard product made from crushing the quarried rock and grading it through a number of grids to sort it into various sizes of aggregate. A lot of the 6mm grit is used in our area to finish off the outside walls of houses with a harl (render) so it is always readily available and as it has been crushed this adds that sharp edged component to my potting mix. Just to remind you, my mix will be two parts

of the sand, two parts of the grit and one part of leafmould.



Seed frame

It seems inevitable that any big task in the garden seems to upset the equilibrium and cause an avalanche of other tasks. Having got more bulk material than before I needed to find more storage space so I decided it was logical and most practical to give up a bit of the seed frame area right next to the grit pile. The seed frames were in line for a major renewal anyway as the wooden sides were rotten and we threw them into the skip we had a few weeks ago. It was an Erythronium seed frame that needed to be moved and as many of the pots were three or more years old they



were in need of attention which was obvious if you look carefully at the sand plunge above. As they are wont to do, Erythronium seedlings will go deeper each year and if you do not replot them they are likely to find the drainage holes and migrate into the sand.

It was observing how well bulbs that had escaped from their pots grew, as either self sown seed or through the drainage holes, in the sand that first gave me the idea to use sand as a growing medium.



Erythronium bulbs

Now the avalanche of tasks has to carry on as I need to find somewhere to plant all the escaped erythronium bulbs. This is far from the ideal time to be handling erythronium bulbs but I will make sure the roots do not dry out or get damaged and I am sure they will survive fine - this story will continue in future bulb logs.



Strange Bulb

Can you identify this strange looking bulb? If not see below.



Fern

Of course it is not a bulb - it is a resting fern. This year's fronds are all there tightly clasped in a modified form waiting to spring into growth when the weather improves - sound familiar? A bulb is made up of modified leaf bases tightly gathered to help preserve a plant's life through an adverse period of weather, be it summer drought or winter hibernation. I am not suggesting that we should be calling a fern a bulb but it does illustrate that a number of plants have evolved similar strategies to cope with adverse conditions. I love the green colour that is revealed when I cut this 'bulb' in half.



Fritillaria chitralensis

Two fat buds are appearing in a pot of *Fritillaria chitralensis*.



***Fritillaria chitralensis* seeds**

After many years of growing *Fritillaria chitralensis*, collecting the seeds and sowing them I have been very disappointed with the germination rate I have had – some years none have germinated. How delighted I was to find this pot of last year's seed sown in September is germinating very well. I quickly removed it from the open seed frame to the protection of the Frit house where I can keep slugs and snails away and hopefully raise a good quantity of young bulbs. As all my mature bulbs are from a single clone it will be wonderful to have a range of bulbs which should produce more viable seeds. It is this unexplained success after years of failure that makes the challenge of growing bulbs all worthwhile. I hope I am not counting my chickens before they have hatched as there is much that could go wrong before these seedlings reach maturity.



***Galanthus* 'Don Armstrong'**

The price being paid for named snowdrops on Ebay has hit the national news again today as I heard on BBC Radio Scotland that one that apparently looked very like Galanthus 'Don Armstrong' reached £350. I have always said that the ideal vision of a snow drop that people seek is one with equal inners and outers – this is a Canadian version from the Vancouver area. Perhaps the one thing could improve on this beauty is if there were green tips on the inner and outer petals.(!)



Galanthus 'Greenflake'

Just like this: another selected form from the same area. If you cannot wait for these to become available or you cannot afford the high price I suggest you get some Leucojum – they are very similar ☺

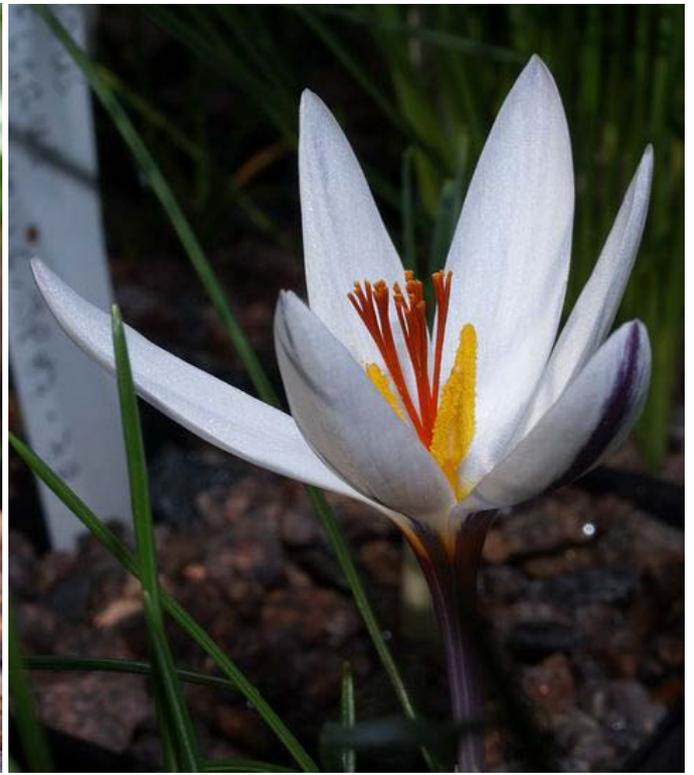


We are extremely fortunate to have these lovely Canadian snowdrops, thanks to generous friends.

Galanthus 'Green Brush'

One that is more readily available and while not cheap is not so expensive, is Galanthus 'Green Brush'.

This flower has the more familiar form of three short and three long petals displaying good green markings.



Colchicum kesselringii and Crocus fleisheri

A quick look around the bulb house as I take a break from shifting sand shows a number of subjects opening in the sunshine. Sharing a similar colour pattern when closed but very different when open are *Colchicum kesselringii* and *Crocus fleisheri*



Crocus biflorus alexandrii

A pot of *Crocus biflorus alexandrii* seedlings grown from our own seed shows great variation. This picture does not fully capture the cream colour of the flower on the left and I have tried again below showing two of these siblings.



Crocus biflorus alexandrii



Narcissus romieuxii

I leave you this week with a picture of *Narcissus romieuxii* which due to the early onset of winter is only now coming into its peak flowering some month or six weeks later than it has over the last several years.

As a post script I want to send greetings and good wishes to David Nicholson and the South Devon AGS Group who meet in Ashburton - David is giving a talk tonight on plants on the web and he hopes to log in live to the SRGC forum. I am sure that many who have never been online will be surprised at how much information, fun and friendship is online. Certainly the most active 'Group' of the SRGC is the Forum whose members meet all day every day and their combined knowledge is awesome. Good luck David.....