



BULB LOG 35..... 29<sup>th</sup> August 2012



Do not adjust your screen or suggest that I need to get my eyes tested - I have shared this picture to highlight a common problem we all face with the auto focus systems on our cameras – especially, but not exclusively, compacts. The middle distance is in sharp focus while the main subject, the cyclamen, is out of focus. Auto focus systems look for areas of sharp contrast within the image to focus and then sharpen on them. It is essential that we are aware of this when

taking the pictures as the sharpness of the focus is not always noticeable on the small viewing screen. I nearly always check the sharpness of shots like this by zooming in on the picture once it is taken and that is how I discovered the fuzzy cyclamen.

There are a number of ways to rectify this: I reverted to the manual focus setting on my Canon Power Shot to get this image sharp where I wanted it. Some cameras offer multiple spot selections for the auto focus which could help - alternatively you can point the camera so the subject is directly in the centre and then while holding the button down, to hold the focus , pan to frame the image how you want, then take the shot.



For years we only grew the plain green leaved form of **Cyclamen purpurascens** before a generous reader sent me new stock with a selection of leaf patterned types.



Now we are building up a nice selection with self sown seedlings starting to appear – a few are visible in the top left of the above picture.



### **Eranthis 'Guinea Gold'**

These knobby tubers are those of Eranthis 'Guinea Gold' – each little projection has a growth point and will produce leaves and, in the case of the larger ones, flowers. Eventually these side growths will become independent; separating naturally from the parent and that is how I like to propagate this plant. You can break off the 'nobbles' in an attempt to speed up the rate of increase but I found that there is a relatively high rate of loss with rot entering through the wound using this process. Occasionally bits that are only attached by the smallest link will break when I handle them but because the wound is so small these are not so affected.



I continue the re-potting of the bulbs many of which have not been done for a few years. This Crocus corm is one that has not been checked for three years and as you see it is a sizable corm. However not all is as it seems.

The corm felt extraordinarily light in weight and the label was upside down in the pot, a way I use of reminding myself that no leaf growth had appeared from this pot, and gently rubbing it between the palms of my hands confirmed that this corm was indeed just a ghost – just a shell of old tunics with no life inside (below). This is one of the many casualties of the very cold winter of two years ago when we lost so many bulbs.



### **Crocus abantensis corms**

It is fascinating to see shoots emerging from these *Crocus abantensis* corms, a spring flowering species, even though they are completely dry.



A group of **Ornithogalum** bulbs showing two with the remains of last season's roots still attached and two cleaned up. I am often asked if you should remove them or not and my method is when I re-pot I do clean up the bulbs removing any old roots and loose tunics. My reasoning is that in our cool moist growing conditions they can cause the bulb to become too wet and at risk of wet rot – in their native hot dry environment this is probably beneficial.



Looking closely at the base of the **Ornithogalum** bulbs you see a ring of roots emerging suggesting that they are ready to accept water and start back into growth.

I have always been fascinated about what exactly triggers bulbs back into growth – it is as if they have a built in calendar. However it is seasonal change that they are responding to not the date. Temperature and moisture are the prime motivators – but just what combination of these is critical I have never fully worked out. I suspect that it is temperature swings rather than a specific temperature that they respond to.



Re-potting has progressed well in two of the bulb houses where I have checked through nearly all the hundreds of pots. Now I am getting them ready to receive the first watering at the beginning of September.



Making sure the pots are sitting level on the plunge helps to ensure even moisture throughout the compost. If the pot is sloping slightly the water can just drain down the lower side which can then end up too wet.

Also removing any dried remains of stems or leaves from the surface. These may look harmless just now but when they get wet they will attract moulds which can then transfer to the new emerging leaves.



There is always a positive side to most problems and having lost so many pots of bulbs, two years ago, to the cold winter of which I have only cleared out this year, I find myself with some plunge space. Ally this with my wish to cut back on how many bulbs we grow in pots - I am planting some bulbs directly into the spare plunge. Many stray bulbs appear during the re-potting some get accidentally missed and I find them later, others I find as seedlings in pots that I have not sown. Regular readers will know that to save space I sometimes sow seeds back in with the parent bulbs but I always mark this on the label so when I find unannounced seedling bulbs I remove them from the pot. I am also guilty of not always collecting seeds before they are shed and so they can scatter around falling onto nearby pots so, to help prevent mixing bulbs, I remove stray seedlings.



I am just scattering these bulbs randomly on the sand which I will then top up and hopefully it will become a glorious mixture that apart from occasional watering and the odd feed will look after itself. The strange pink bulb is a seedling of *Fritillaria affinis* which when exposed to light for any length of time will become pink like this.



### ***Fritillaria affinis* bulbs**

Mature *Fritillaria affinis* bulbs are such a fascinating shape - a bit like a cup on a saucer where the saucer is covered in rice grains.

If removed from the parent each of these rice grains will grow into a mature bulb going through a wonderful evolution of form. The progression from left to right in the above picture starting with a rice grain on the top row as the bulb slowly develops eventually forming a twin scale surrounding a shoot seen clearly in the picture on the left.

This bulb will produce a single large leaf next spring as it has one more year of growth to go to become fully mature. You can just see the starts of the base plate expanding to form the 'saucer' at the bottom of this bulb – after one more year it will be a mature shape like the pink one pictured on the previous page.



I am now progressing with re-potting the frits here **Fritillaria alburyana** which produced no seed for me this year but did manage a few offsets.



**Fritillaria crassifolia ssp poluninii** on the other hand flowered during a good spell of weather and did set some seeds. Sown in August 2008 this bulbs has grown, flowered and set seed just four years – I am delighted.



### **Fritillaria house**

There remains a lot of re-potting and clearing up work still to do in the frit house before I can water them but as I now water the frits in October, one month after the other bulbs, I have plenty of time.

I should expand my comment - that these are the watering regimes that work for me in our cool northern garden. When it is best to apply the first watering is dependent on where you are and mostly, your temperature ranges. I am sure that in warmer areas your bulbs may well want to sleep longer and so in the South of UK, or warmer areas, you may find that watering your bulbs in October and the frits in November is more appropriate.

As I have stated above I have never worked out what precisely triggers the bulbs into growth and each year I gather some new evidence. In the wild some say it is the watering applied by the regular autumn rain storms - but the cold rain falling not only drenches the ground it also lowers its temperature and I have seen root growth emerging without any water present. The roots are emerging in anticipation of water ready to enter a phase of rapid root growth when it does arrive.

Another aspect of this growth cycle is when autumn bulbs start flowering. The SRGC forum is a great way to learn when plants start flowering around the world and I often notice that Colchicums for instance often start flowering earlier in warmer gardens than ours - we have not yet seen any colchicum flowers in the open garden this year.

I was delighted to see Janis Ruksans post some beautiful pictures of *Crocus suworowianus* on the forum recently at exactly the same time as our first flower emerged.



This is the very first time that we have ever flowered this beautiful *Crocus suworowianus* which some list as a subspecies of *C. kotschyanus*. Thanks to another friend we now have a pot of seedlings starting to flower.



*Suworowianus* is very similar in looks to another of my favourites – *Crocus vallicola* which has not made an appearance yet. Checking back through previous years we had the first flowers on *C. vallicola* at least a week earlier than this.

I am hoping that it is just late and will have grown well in this cool moist season – it certainly stayed in leaf longer.



A final few pictures of *Codonopsis greywilsonii* the first two to show how the anthers are clasped to the style when the flower first opens (above) then spring back as they mature (below).





Just enjoy this blue beauty as it scrambles through and up anything it can twist its stem around.....