



BULB LOG 52..... 26th December 2012



BBC Radio Scotland

Once again and for the tenth time I sit down to write the 52nd Bulb Log of a year – a time to reflect on the past season and look towards the next. On Sunday I did my last live broadcast of the Beechgrove Potting Shed as the programme is being decommissioned – that is BBC terminology for axed.

It is a shame that Radio Scotland will no longer have a gardening programme but I am hopeful that sense will prevail when the powers at be realise the size of the gardening audience out there . There will be gardening features in some other programmess and I am hopeful that I will still have some involvement with them.



One of the best senses a gardener can have is that of observation and above is a small observation test – what can you see? Answer further down the page.....



Every garden should retain some interest in winter – in many ways if you work on having a good winter garden the other seasons will almost look after themselves.

The rock landscaping along with the evergreen cushions in the troughs and raised beds will always repay close inspection even on the shortest day of the year.

Elsewhere the silver leaves of these Cyclamen hederifolium contrast beautifully with the fallen rust coloured leaves.



In some areas the gale force winds have blown the leaves away exposing some interesting plant material. The many rice grains above are being detached from the parent bulbs of *Dicentra cucullaria* which always work their way towards the surface. We should learn from this and never plant them too deep – if you do they will produce many leaves but few flowers until they work back up towards the surface. Once exposed or near the surface, foraging blackbirds scatter the rice which, once separated from the parent bulb, will grow on forming a flowering sized bulb after two or three years. Many rice grain bulbs are adapted to grow near the surface in a woodland type soil to take advantage of the nutrient rich soil replenished annually by the leaf fall. If your powers of observation are working you will also notice a different type of growth, seen most clearly towards the top of the picture. These are the creeping rhizomes of *Dicentra formosa x eximia*. This type of bulbous structure is another adaptation often found in woodland plants such as this group of *Dicentra*, *Paris*, *Sanguinaria*, *Trillium*, etc.



Elsewhere promises of a floriferous spring, like this adventurous hellebore, poke through the leafy blanket.



The terrible wind and rain we have had to endure has flattened much of the remains of the flower stems which were providing structure and interest in some of the beds. Now they are serving no purpose and in the coming weeks, weather permitting, I can get them tidied up replacing them with a mulch of compost from the compost heaps.



Next to the pond is where we keep this group of deep polystyrene boxes carved and painted to resemble stone. The top edges are white due to the erosion of the paint from the many little bird feet perching on the surface! These boxes are ideal for growing *Erythroniums* and *Dactylorhiza* as they provide the depth needed for the long bulbs and roots to explore. Ideally I like to replant them every summer but due to the wet they have not been done for the last two years.



There are plenty of shoots appearing in the bulb houses but due to the weather there is not very much in the way of flowers opening.



I spotted a stray Narcissus bulb lying on the surface of a sand plunge and it shows just how resourceful these structures are – they are true survivors of the plant world. The roots emerge from the section of the basal plate nearest the moist sand as the shoot emerges turning upwards apparently towards the light but I am also convinced they can detect gravity as I have observed that even in total darkness the shoots always grow upwards.



Crocus goulmyi

For most of the last ten years *Crocus goulmyi* flowers would, like most other autumn flowering crocus species, be long past by now - this year they are just lingering on in our poor weather conditions never enjoying the conditions that would encourage their flowers to open. Most years we enjoy some relatively sunny conditions when the autumn crocus flower encouraging them to make their wonderfully colourful displays of open blooms.



My first attempt to take the picture above was a failure, see left, as the auto focus system on the camera was not looking at the same focal point as I was.

One of the many advantages of using digital cameras is that you can review your pictures instantly, enlarging them up allows me to ensure that my intended subject is in sharp focus.

In this first attempt the autofocus preferred to home in on the stronger contrast of the plant labels to sharpen up on. Rotating the camera very slightly improved the situation and I got the picture I wanted with the crocus flowers in focus.



The Narcissus pots offer plenty of promise with masses of flower buds now visible but none are in flower yet – on the left is my most advanced bud. For all the years I have written this log I have always had Narcissus in flower by October if not earlier but not this year. The lack of a distinct change as we moved from summer to autumn meant that there was not a sufficiently distinct temperature gradient to stimulate the growth of the flower stems. The leaves appeared at the regular time encouraged by the cool moist growing conditions but there is a different trigger required to initiate flowering which has not yet been met.

This observation has reinforced my belief that

it is a temperature gradient between night and day temperatures and/or the sudden fall in temperatures as the season changes from summer to autumn that stimulates the flowering of many of the autumn bulbs.

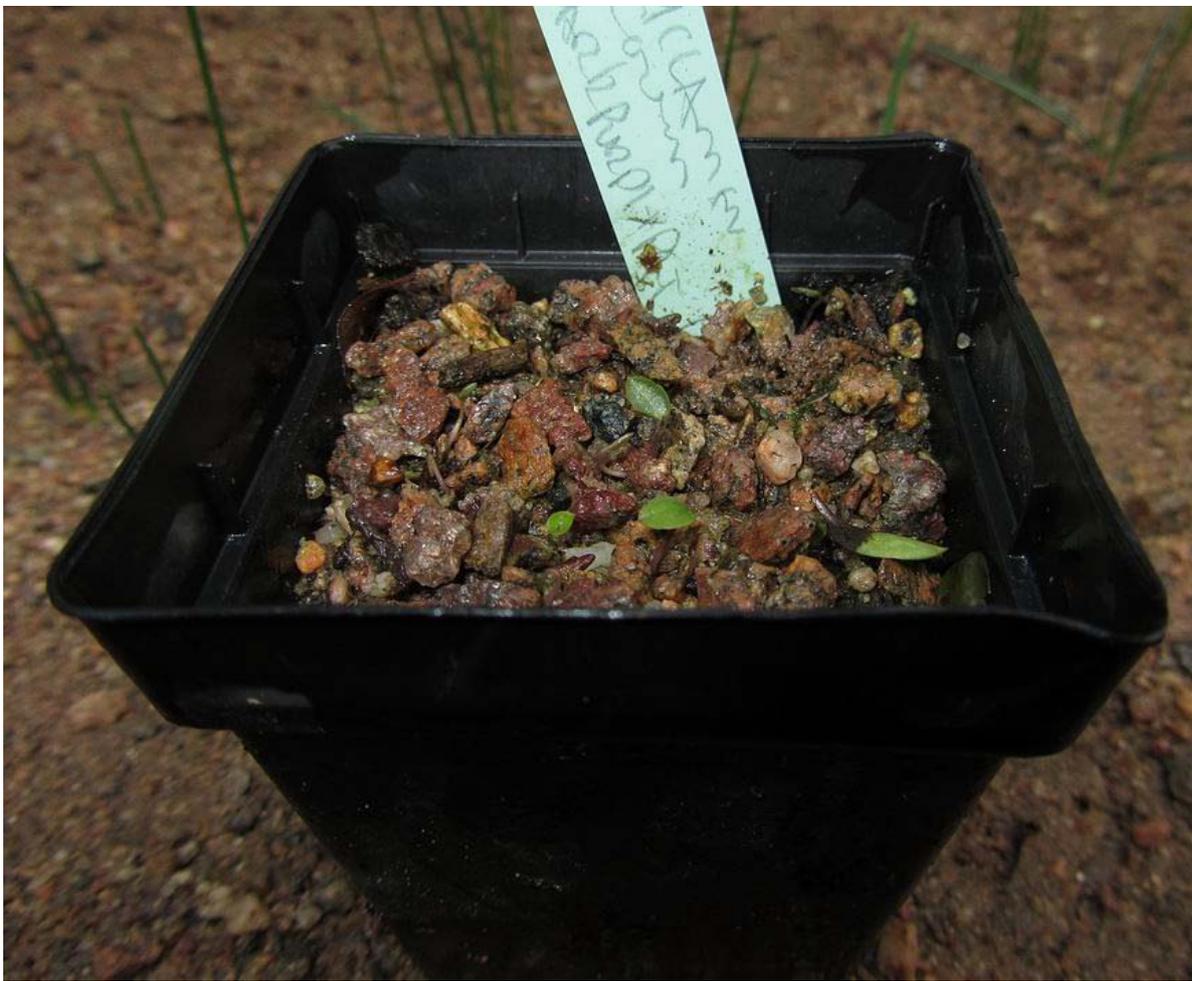


Narcissus 'Cedric Morris'

Usually in flower by now, the buds of Narcissus 'Cedric Morris' are only elongating very slowly.



Because the leaves are well developed it is important to ensure that the bulbs have an adequate supply of water. In our cold and humid air there is little water loss through either transpiration or evaporation just now. I do check daily as this can quickly change if we do get a mild spell or when the sun climbs higher in the sky warming the air as it hits the glass houses.



Cyclamen seedlings

Seed leaves are appearing on a number of pots of Cyclamen that I sowed in August this year.

The seed was sown at a depth of 5cms and the pots left outside in the open to take the weather – now I will move those that are germinating under cover to prevent them freezing too hard and also try and prevent slugs from eating them.



Cyclamen seedling leaves

I have read many reports of the complexities of germinating cyclamen seed and the procedures that you should adopt – I repeat my simple method from a previous log below.



Sowing Cyclamen coum seeds

There has been a lot of research into how to sow cyclamen seeds and how to treat them to optimise germination - I am not a cyclamen specialist but I have my own method. One of the methods written about is the requirement of darkness before germination will occur - I provide this by sowing the seeds half way down a pot. Cyclamen seeds are coated in a sticky substance to encourage ants to distribute them and like other bulbous seed that is ant distributed it has evolved to germinate well if buried under ground - so that is just what I do. Once sown the pot is placed in an open plunge frame and left uncovered until germination occurs.



Observation test

What did you observe in this picture? One thing you should have seen is that it is *Crocus laevigatus* that is flowering but even if you just realised that it was a *Crocus* you should have also observed that the label says *Calochortus uniflorus*. These seeds have self sown into this pot from an adjacent pot of the crocus in a previous year and I have not repotted it since then. Another observation is that the faded flowers lying on the gravel have grey mould growing on them and need removing to prevent this from spreading to the living parts of the plant – a timely reminder of an ongoing and important task.

I will remember this year as the worst year for seed in the bulbous plants that we have ever had – the year when summer forgot to turn up – the year that plants like *Primulas* and *Meconopsis* were superb and trees and shrubs like the many *Rhododendrons* we grow thrived in the cool air with abundant water available. Whatever the weather brings having a well stocked garden with a wide diversity of plants will always ensure interest throughout the year.