



BULB LOG 22.....3rd June 2015





Trough gardening is one of my passions, it is so accessible that everyone can do it; even if you have no garden surely there is a door step where you could have a small trough garden to tend and enjoy? I have not done a full count of how many we have but I know it is well over 50 - each having its own character and environment.



I was asked by the Television programme 'The Beechgrove Garden' to go back and work on the polystyrene troughs that I first made for them many years ago as the painted surface has eroded over the years exposing areas of the white polystyrene. This time I showed my more permanent cement-coated fish box troughs that I described in [Bulb log 38 of 2008](#) .

I also used the larger salmon-sized fish box which is approximately 750mm x 400mm



I landscaped the Beechgrove trough using some old broken concrete and cement that I found at the back of their garden which was already covered in moss giving a very established appearance. I always like to have at least one large rock to anchor the landscape and help build up the height well above the rim of the trough.



The trough itself has only been made for a month and was stored undercover so it still looks very new however now it is planted and exposed to the elements it will soon start to weather, taking on a more natural look.



After making the large one for the Beechgrove I decided I needed to make one for myself; in fact I made two. My style of landscaping is creating an environment that will suit alpine type plants - a well-drained rocky one. Many people fill the trough to within a few inches of the rim forming their planting area which stops there; with my style the planting opportunity starts at the rim and goes upwards. High landscaping brings many advantages - firstly it adds around 50 percent more volume to the planting medium which in my case is pure sharp sand. This height also adds aspects so you have North, South, East and West sides. A flat planted trough, like a solar panel, absorbs maximum heat from the sun resulting in maximum evaporation of moisture; with the piled up version the sun cannot hit the entire surface at the same time so the evaporation rate is greatly reduced. Plants that like hot and dry conditions can be planted near the top while those that require cooler moist conditions are placed near the rim on the shady side. I like to take time and rarely plant up a trough immediately I finish the landscaping, preferring to ensure that the rock work looks effective in itself – the plants can then be added to further enhance and complete the picture. Many times I plant up using very small cuttings or even by scattering seed so that I can enjoy the whole process of the plants' growth and establishment.



Like most of my recent rock landscaping, I have landscaped these using old broken concrete.

I hate seeing plant labels spoiling the look of a trough so I avoid this need by taking photographs of the planted trough with the plant labels laid out so they can be read in the full sized image - this then becomes my record.

My interest is in creating environments within the troughs - observing and enjoying the processes of nature, watching how the plants fare, whether they grow or die. I can learn from that experience using it to inform future projects. This small trough has a single lump of limestone marl that almost fills it. I then simply scattered seeds of the lovely *Erinus alpinus* onto the rock imitating how I have often seen this plant



growing, beautifully compact, on walls. It took around three or four years for the seedlings to reach flowering size and then shed their own seeds so it became a self-regenerating habitat that only needed the occasional watering in dry spells. This is the second version the first trough was made about 30 years ago using a hyper-tufa mix which



fell apart after repeated frosts leading me to wonder why on earth would you put peat into a cement mix for making troughs anyway? Since then I only ever use a sand cement mix for making all my troughs and have had no more such losses. The trough above is the second version using the same lump of limestone. Last year I used another old trough that I made 30 years ago, left, to recreate the same effect but this time I am using a lump of concrete block that I have

roughed up sufficiently to disguise its origins as well as creating cracks and crevices for the plants to get a hold. I planted a few seedlings around the base and will assist the distribution of seeds over the 'rock cliff' as they ripen.

Part of the success of the original 'rock cliff' can be attributed to the growth of moss that first colonised areas of the rock, this then provided a suitable habitat for the Erinus to seed into – you can see in this detail the many seedlings growing in the moss. This is precisely the process I will enjoy watching develop in the concrete block version.



It does not take very long before mosses start to colonise the broken concrete blocks as some of the troughs I planted up a few years ago show. In many instances I have the dilemma of deciding how much to let it grow as I do not want the rocks to be hidden completely by either the moss or the plants. The cushion forming moss in the foreground looks particularly attractive as well as providing a wonderful moist seed bed.



Another detail from a trough shows how beneficial the moss growth is to other plants and not just seeds. The **Androsace delavayi** is growing best and choosing to migrate from the crevice where I planted it onto the moss covering the concrete. Young plants of **Saxifraga brunonis**, placed by the runners, thrive best when they land on the moss.



Just like with any garden a trough planting that will grow unaided into perpetuity is a rare thing - most will deteriorate or require intervention in time.

This one dates to about 2008 when I landscaped it using red sandstone, planting it up with saxifrages. I have done nothing except the occasional watering with dilute liquid feeds. I was fascinated watching the liverworts invade through the winter months then in the spring when the saxifrages were growing strongly they

reclaimed the territory they had lost and so this cycle repeated itself every year.

Now I have decided it is time for me to rework this trough. It is fascinating to see how the liverworts actually help break down the sandstone rocks causing them to crumble. I have placed all the saxifrages into a sand bed and will give them liquid feeds to help them grow well before I reuse them in another trough or raised bed. If they do grow well I will take cuttings in August to root over the winter.



One trough that requires little attention except to prevent the sedum taking over completely is this one I carved out of an old granite paving slab, landscaped to create plenty of height surmounted by a feature rock then planted it with a Sempervivum and a Sedum, the Campanula seeded itself.



Sempervivums are wonderful in troughs and are as easy as the name *Sempervivum* = ever living, suggests.



I bought these recently at a local supermarket chain as a special offer of six and planted some into this small free-formed trough landscaped with broken concrete. I pulled some rosettes off from around the edge of the plants, most with a bit of root, but these plants are so easy that all rosettes will soon grow new roots. When I got the plants they were quite plump and well-nourished but now they are growing in this

more Spartan environment they will become smaller, forming tighter groupings.



Another experiment I made using recycled materials was this trough where I used broken concrete paving slabs to make an extreme crevice environment in which to grow Ramondas. It is not one of the most attractive troughs from the landscaping point of view but the plants love it and have grown extremely well diverting the eye away from the still bare slabs. Unlike the broken concrete blocks I use these slabs are made from a very dense form of concrete that prevents moisture penetrating so mosses do not grow on these so well.

Back to some of the smaller cement-covered fish box troughs landscaped with broken concrete that are now in year three or four since planting.

As well as the mosses and plants covering the landscaped concrete you can also see a healthy growth of lichens and mosses on the sides of the troughs making them look just like real stone.





I just love seeing these miniature landscaped environments which when isolated in a photograph look just like pictures I have taken in the wild, excepting the plants I use do not always grow together in the wild.



The troughs also have different aspects; here is the west side of same trough that was in the previous picture.



The east side and below is the view looking down on the trough in situ. The beauty of these smaller troughs which are around 400mm x 300mm, weighing in at 20-30kgs fully planted, is that I can move them around.





Here two sides of another trough of the same size and age with **Potentilla pulvinaris** in flower.





Another selected landscape from a trough landscaped using limestone marl over twenty years ago.



One of the longest plantings in a trough is this one completely filled with **Saxifraga cochlearis minor**. You may wonder what the white balls covering the foliage are – well it is the result of one of the hail storms we have been having this week, so heavy they caused lightening. Originally I planted a number of saxifrages in this trough but over

the years but one has dominated and now covers the 700mm x 300mm planting area.



This is among the first troughs that I landscaped with broken concrete or cement - I created a crevice landscape using broken cement salvaged when the neighbours had the builders in. I planted it with an encrusted saxifrage that would not object to any lime that may leech out but nature soon showed that the plants do not care and will grow happily in cement based rocks when the *Dactylorhiza purpurella* self-seeded in among the silver rosettes.



Dactylorhiza purpurella growing happily through a silver saxifrage in a cement landscaped environment. The Beechgrove Garden TV programme showing the making, landscaping and planting of the trough will be aired first on BBC 2 Scotland on Thursday 11th June and is repeated across the BBC 2 network on Sunday 14th.....