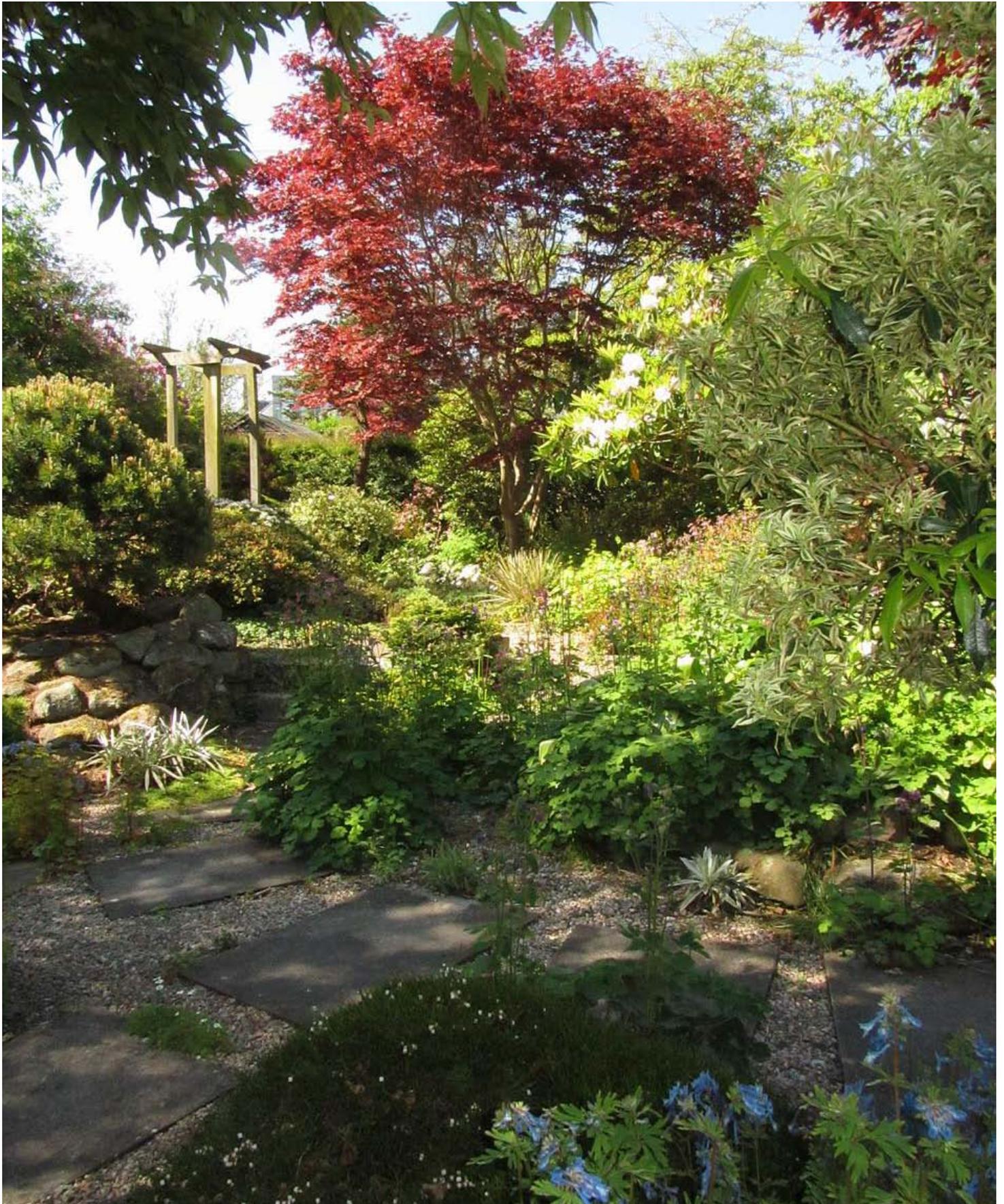




BULB LOG 23..... 6th June 2012



It is important to always keep an open mind especially in your garden where you will find that you can learn much from your plants. The garden we have created is one with many environments with the trees and shrubs providing light and shade as well as shelter from winds and within that framework are a host of various micro-environments.



Bulb house

Artificial environments include the bulb houses where we control the precipitation and to a degree the temperature (pun intended). The recent warm week has seen most bulbs retreat underground leaving just a few late bloomers and some still green stems bearing ripening seed.



Over the years I have learned to accept nature in the garden and not try and tidy things up too much. I am happy to leave this dead patch in the middle of a cushion of *Armeria maritima* – it is after all exactly what you see in the wild.



Armeria maritima and Androsace sarmentosa

As time goes by the dead foliage will crumble and form a humus base for other plants to grow or new growth from the plant itself will grow to eventually fill the space. Even before that can happen the exploring runners of Androsace sarmentosa (studiosorum) have placed a rosette there which hopefully will root down through the dead foliage of the Armeria.



When I landscape a trough I do not always have the plants ready to go in it so I am happy to leave it or perhaps stick a few cuttings of Saxifraga or Sempervivum in for immediate short term interest. This trough is a good example of one I did some years ago and I became fascinated by the pioneering plants that started to colonise the planting spaces. Some might call them weeds and in some situations they are but you would be surprised at the number of visitors who see a trough full of greenery and say that

looks nice until I say take a closer look at what is growing there.



There are a few cuttings that have rooted but all the rest of the plant life is from the lower level of plants. Mosses and liverworts are the first to appear along with lichens on the rocks. They are attracted to the moisture and like to grow in association with rock and sand. Despite what the so-called experts say about liverwort growing only in very wet conditions and if

you improve the drainage it will disappear - this fascinating plant likes well drained areas like gravel, sand and rock surfaces to grow on. As long as there is constant moisture liverwort will thrive - the surface tension of water holds a thin film to the rock surface whether it is a slab of rock, a bit of gravel or a tiny grain of sand.



Liverwort spores produced from the shaggy umbrella like fruiting bodies drift in the wind colonising whenever they fall onto suitably moist conditions then once plants establish they also produce splash pots full of tiny plantlets.



Liverwort splash pots *Lunularia cruciata*

These 'ready to go' tiny plantlets scatter as rain drops splash into the pots and so make this one of the most pioneering of plants and one of the first to colonise new ground. It also thrives on compacted soil surfaces.



Once the liverwort is established it starts gathering humus from its own dead parts or blown in and trapped under the ground hugging carpet that it forms– this then allows mosses and eventually other 'weeds' to get a hold. Once these higher order plants get established their growth will crowd out the liverwort excluding light which along with moisture is the other essential of life for this plant. The best way to kill liverwort on a flat surface like a garden bed is to cover it in a mulch that will exclude the light – this is why I mulch many of our sand plunges with shredded prunings.



Old trough

This shallow trough was completely covered with lumps of limestone marl many years ago with just a few plants, one a dwarf conifer that I hoped would survive the tough conditions.



Over the years liverwort grew on the rock surface until it dries out in the summer and drying out is the other thing that reliably kills liverwort. You can see the dried remains of the liverwort in the centre of this picture and this forms the basis of humus on the rock surface which as it gets wet again will become a seed bed for other plants. This is exactly the way plant life colonises new dynamic landscapes of breaking rock or even forming volcanic islands and I can observe a similar process in a garden trough. Of course as the moisture wets the surface the liverwort will also return but now there is competition from the higher order plants which will hold their own territory. This progression fascinates me and I am happy to allow some of our troughs to evolve in this very natural way.



Slate landscape

Using slate to landscape a trough gives much added depth to an otherwise shallow planting area and the plants love rooting down the many narrow crevices. Many of these are easy and common plants which we should never ignore in our quest to grow the rare and difficult. The one below is even smaller and shallower but still many plants stuck in as unrooted cuttings four years ago still thrive without the need of much artificial watering.





Troughs are great for creating specialised environments for individual or groups of plants that enjoy similar conditions like this *Lewisia* trough given added interest with some *Sempervivums*.



A shaded trough at the foot of our north facing front wall is ideal for some of the New Zealand alpines of which I am so fond. This is one of the very first troughs I made about 30 years ago using a wooden mould and cement. It is not at all natural ,just looking like a cement box but it does work for the plants and has stood the test of time.



**Celmisia
incana**

**Myosotis
lyalli**

**Celmisia
sessilifolia**



Our slab beds made from paving slabs are just like large troughs and offer us yet more opportunity to create special environments.



Edrianthus serpyllifolius and Antennaria dioica aprica



Saxifraga with Edrianthus seedlings

By allowing the plants to self seed I can observe another very natural process of colonisation where one plant seeds into another. I am always fascinated to see how plants in the wild grow and one of the first things you learn is that they do not often grow neatly spaced out with each one surrounded by their own border of bare ground. They huddle into mixed plant communities often growing one on the other as seen here.



Rock weathering

Another natural occurrence is rock weathering – splitting and cracking as it is broken down by the effects of wind, rain and frost. I was delighted that the rock I have used in the slab bed is of a type to split naturally in this way.



I have also now started to encourage, with hammer and chisel, more of the blocks to split.

Filling the cracks with sand will hopefully allow plants to seed in.



Getting plants to grow in a more natural way is one of my aims and seeing the *Erigeron* running down the rocks and cascading over the slab edges is a great joy.



Potentilla nitida

This *Potentilla nitida* was part of a previous planting and when I re-landscaped this bed with added rock I tried to lift it along with the other plants so as I could reposition them. I followed the single tap root all the way down, 60cms, to where the slab sits on the ground and still did not find the root end so it had to stay in this corner.



Another long time resident of these beds is **Oxalis 'Ione Hecker.'**



No garden should be without a trough or two and if you only have a small garden you will find you can get hours of fun and interest from a few troughs.