



BULB LOG 33.....19th August 2015





For obvious reasons we have named this rock in our pond Frog Island. When we first created the pond I did not want it to be just an area of flat water - the artist within me wanted features to move the eye around. Why I love gardening so much is that it combines two of my interests, art and science – the science is understanding then providing the environmental needs of the plants while the art is how we arrange them. I have always seen our garden as another medium for me to practise my art, no different to paint, printmaking or sculpture. For thousands of years man has felt a desire to shape the land around us from Neolithic stone circles such as the Ring of Brodgar, the Nazca ground drawings, and more recently the monumental ground art works like the Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson, the many

works by Richard Long, the list is extensive. Art in the garden goes beyond just colour into form and we all have the chance to manipulate the land on a smaller scale in our gardens. The big difference in the garden as an art form is that while the artist has the option to make decisions they do not have the final word as time and nature come into play. Back to our island - I selected an interesting rock that was flattish but still had some interesting contours. I placed it on a pillar of bricks so the bottom of the rock just broke the surface of the water. Slowly over the years moss grew and I had the choice to either remove it to keep the rock visible or to let it grow - at first I removed the moss until I decided it would be interesting to see what would happen if I left it.



Now the rock is completely covered in moss with other plants also now seeding into the moss. Earlier this year I placed some dormant buds of *Pinguicula grandiflora* into the moss and they have grown wonderfully well with some setting seed which I will allow to sow itself. One of my decisions is which of the many other plants that have self-seeded I allow to grow on - I will remove the tree seedlings such as *Sorbus* and *Betula*. I am not sure if I will leave the *Sagina* - if I do it will help build up a deeper soil layer which in turn will allow other plants to colonise.



I built another brick pillar at the other end of the pond on which I placed a pot with a *Salix lanata* so the bottom half of the pot is always submerged.



of the pot is always submerged. I knew the *Salix* would grow in these conditions but I have been surprised at the number of other plants that have seeded in. This year we decided to thin out the growth removing various *Vacciniums*, *Betula*, *Rhododendrons*, along with sedges, grasses and reeds. One of the revelations is the number of *Dactylorhiza* that have grown happily in these permanently wet conditions – some orchid seedlings have now appeared in the shallow layer of moss on Frog Island. Our eye can

focus on these two Islands viewing them as individual entities or see them as micro-environments within our wider garden. I now see the growth of moss on the slabs that form the edges of the pond not as something to be removed but as another potential environment in which to grow plants – such as *Pinguicola* - I will scatter some seed.



We can easily see a rock surrounded by water as an island but our garden has many such small isolated environments – the troughs which can be seen as both part of and separate from the garden. It is an interesting range of plants growing in this trough, which can get quite dry in the summer, similar to those on the Willow Island which is permanently wet, illustrating the wide range of conditions that some plants can tolerate – notably *Dactylorhiza*.

Here is another trough with a single lump of (limestone) rock on which moss started to grow like an island except this one is surrounded by the concrete edges of the trough rather than water. Obviously this is a much drier environment than found on Frog Island so it is different species of mosses and plants that can tolerate such conditions - I chose *Erinus*



alpinus to grow here and simply sowed some seeds. The first seedlings to grow established in the ground at the base of the rock but as the moss took hold seedlings started to germinate into it. Growing together the moss and the *Erinus* create a more advantageous micro climate resulting in an accelerated growth rate that will in time completely cover the rock. It is essential to the image I want to create that I keep some of the rock exposed.



The success of the previous trough has encouraged me to experiment - creating a similar one this time replacing the limestone with a lump of broken concrete block. Observing how well moss and other plants can grow on cement walls and slabs illustrates that as long as the environmental needs of the plants are met it does not matter what type of rock it is.



As with the limestone version the first plants establish themselves around the base and now I have to wait until the moss starts to grow on the concrete. I suspect that the moss will start to establish through the autumn and winter but to help speed up the establishment of plants I have drilled a few holes in the concrete -I will fill with these with sand and plant cuttings of *Sempervivum* and small seedlings of *Erinus*. It is

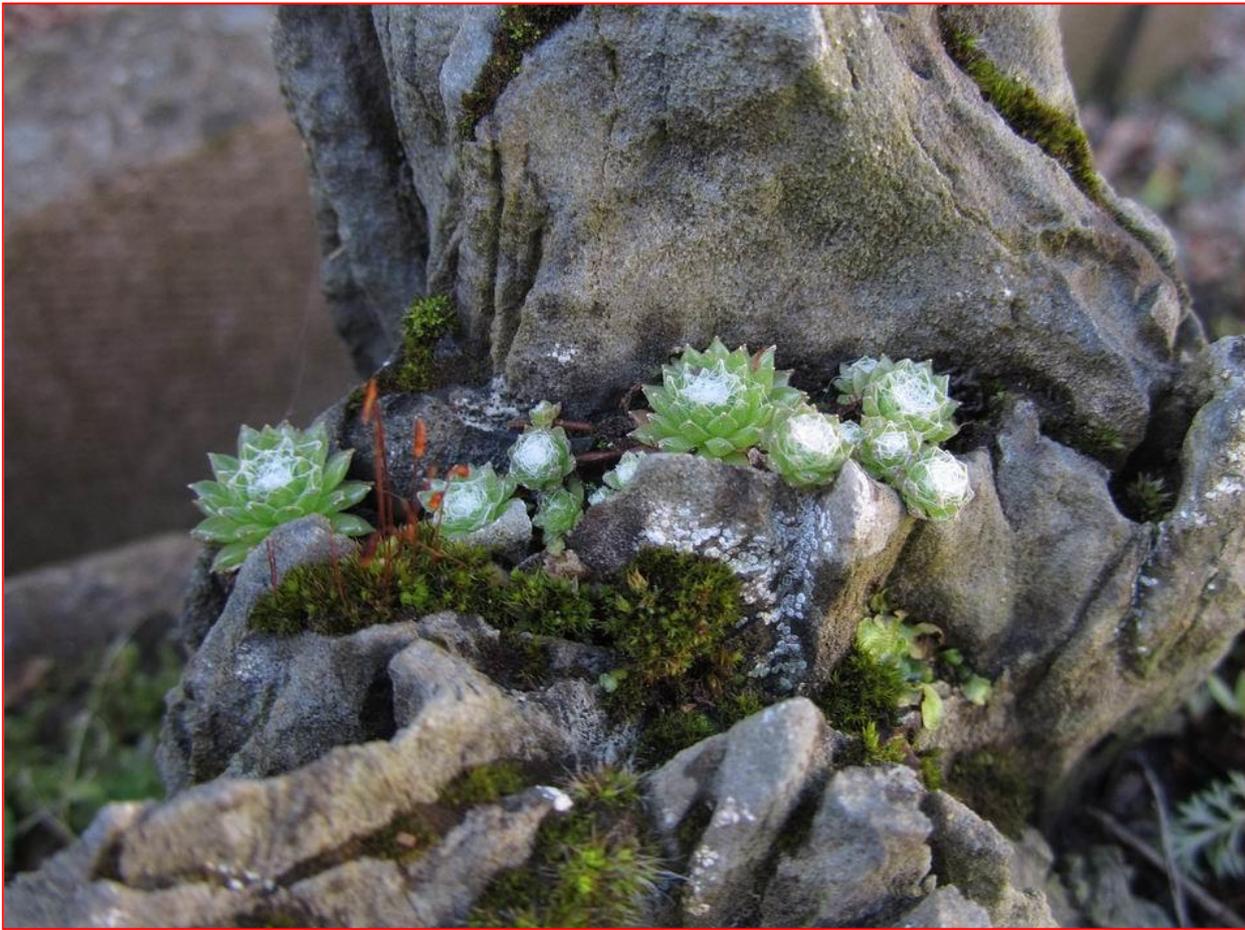
observing the process watching the plants colonising the rock that so fascinates me rather than planting for an instant effect.



Another trough where I used old roofing slates to create a high crevice style landscape is long established with various Androsaces that increase by sending out plantlets on the end of stolons. I do redirect some of the runners that hang over the sides helping the plantlet find a suitable spot in which to root. Other plants continually seed in - I will remove the Digitalis and larger plants but will not remove the fern until I see how large it will grow – if it stays small it might be allowed to stay.



Here I have an experiment where I am replacing the moss with a mossy Saxifrage to see if the Androsace will root into it. Even within a small trough like this we can have an isolated environment – an island – like the vertical rock rising through the green mossy saxifrage.



Real moss started to grow in the crevices on top of this decorative bit of rock into which I placed some tiny plantlets removed from a sempervivum. Many of these plants that increase themselves by runners are like nomads, continually on the move, exploring, hoping that some will land on a suitable growing area.



Sempervivum sending out runners.



Saxifrage brunonis is another plant that sends out masses of runners each with a tiny plantlet on the end. For its size this plant sends out quite long runners making it a very successful nomad able to colonise nearby troughs.



Perhaps because we have so many, a new trough may sit for a year before it gets planted – I have placed a few bits of rock on this one but have not decided if the landscaping is finished yet never mind what I may plant in it.



Here another new trough landscaped with two types of concrete block and planted up earlier this year as a demonstration with a mixture of Saxifrages and Sempervivum which, unusually for me, I bought from a nursery.

It is much more likely that I will plant up a trough with tiny cuttings as this one was a few years ago.



I find that now, mid to late August, is the ideal time to take cuttings from some of our existing saxifrages planting them directly into sharp sand that I use in many of our troughs.

I like the way the tiny cuttings form into the shape of the rockwork as they slowly grow.

Here is the progress of trough planted with cuttings and established long enough for the mosses to start to grow. There are at least two distinct types of moss seen here - a running form that can be seen growing on the sides and the mound forming ones mostly growing on the broken concrete. As I have found out the moss growth can be advantageous to some plants by providing a moist area to root into.



Not all the plants will take to the environment you place them in – this trough of Saxifrages has been planted up for a few years now - at first all the plants seemed to do well but recently two have suffered some degree of die back. The pale green patches on some of the mats suggest that they may be short of nitrogen. It could be that the exceptionally wet summer we are having is washing all the nutrients out so I have scattered a balanced NPK 7-7-7 pellet fertiliser at a low rate around the plants. Most years I would do some watering of these troughs and when I do I use half strength liquid tomato type feed – due to the rain I have not had to do that this year.



This trough is well established now with some of the concrete block completely covered in moss looking as good as any cushion plant - the Androsace in the foreground is self-seeding around, including into the moss.



Each of the troughs can like the islands be viewed as individual components or step back and they become a part of the wider picture.



Some plants choose the strangest places to grow – often it is some place where you would never have considered planting them.

This poor conifer has been growing in this trough for at least thirty years – that it has survived is a testament to its adaptability to withstand dryness at its roots and very little in the way of added nutrients.

I do not know how the *Campanula sartori*, growing at its base, found its way in there – we used to grow it not at very successfully in a pot then one year after flowering we lost it. Somehow some of the seed found its way into the trough with the tree and it has grown, flowered and self-seeded there ever since.



We can learn many lessons by simply observing where plants choose to grow.



Asphodelus acaulis

I have been comparing the 'Islands' in our pond with the troughs as each can be viewed as a separate entity and each can also have its own environment, in fact there can be a number of micro-environments even within a small trough, pots also fall into this category.

As time permits I am working my way through the repotting of the bulbs and I am cheered or disappointed as the contents of each pot is revealed.

Unlike the troughs when we grow plants in pots under glass we become the prime factor of when and how often they are watered and as I mentioned in last week's Bub Log I failed in providing sufficient water in the early part of the growing season and as a result many bubs have not grown as well as I would have liked however I am finding out the bulbs that might enjoy the slightly drier conditions, such as *Asphodelus acaulis*, have done well.



Tropaeolum tricolorum

Tropaeolum tricolorum has also done exceptionally well with all these tubers coming out of this one 13cm pot.



When I put them back in they almost fill the pot leaving little room for any compost so I split them into two 13cm pots and I still had a large number left over as you can see on the left.

The Crocus corm, shown below, exhibits typical signs of lacking moisture at the critical growing periods.

A substantial amount of the old corm still remains – under normal growth this should have shrivelled away passing all its reserves on to a new corm- however in this case, due to poor growing conditions, a number of small corms have formed still attached to the remains of the now dead corm.

The message is I have to do better.





Fritillaria camschatensis bulbs

Outside in the plunge baskets a group of *Fritillaria camschatensis* bulbs also exhibit an environmental effect this time it is down to exposure to light. We are used to seeing the white bulbs of the *Fritillaria* but many, such as the bulb on the left, when exposed to light will take on quite strong colours.



I have learned from observation that *Fritillaria camschatensis* flowers best when the bulbs are close to the surface so that is how I plant them. Through erosion parts of this bulb have become exposed to light causing the modified leaves that form the scales to develop pigmentation, the more exposure to light the darker the colour becomes.



Although we can never control nature we can use shape and form in our gardens to adjust and create many different environments. Building rock gardens or mounds can not only look good from an artistic perspective but it immediately changes the drainage with drier areas towards the top, the mound will also have north, south, east and west faces creating shade as the sun passes over and this same principal is so in the smallest of containers. We do not grow plants – plants grow themselves – all we need to do is provide an environment they can tolerate. Taken in isolation you could think that the picture above was taken in a natural setting but pan out and you would see it becomes a small but important part of our garden. I leave you with the frogs on their island.....