



SRGC

Bulb Log Diary

ISSN 2514-6114

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BULB LOG 46.....15th November 2017

Bulb house sand bed special



With the days getting shorter and poor weather not much has been happening outside in the garden this week however I have had a number of enquiries about the bulb house sand beds so I have brought all the information together in this Bulb Log.



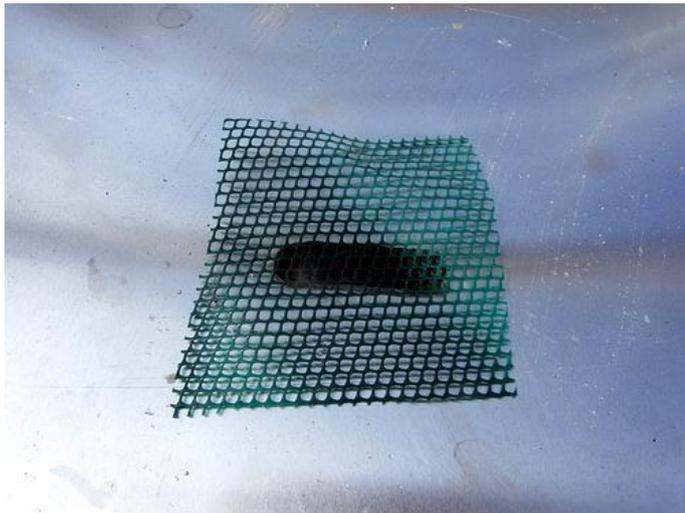
For years the plunges I made from salvaged materials served us well but rust and corrosion was taking its toll - worried they could collapse under the weight I made the decision to replace them all with a modular system that came in sections of 600mm x 600mm by 150mm deep - three of these joined together fit nicely across the width of out small glasshouses.



Two more three-part benches fitted down the long sides provide a good use of the small space.



For drainage I cut a 20mm hole in the centre of each of the base sections, through this I fed a strip of capillary matting then covered the hole with plastic mesh that would prevent the sand from escaping.



I hung plastic guttering underneath to catch the surplus water draining away and collected it in a bucket for recycling.



Plastic gutter drainage system



I have used sand from a quarry where they crushed rock as well as another where they quarried into old river beds for sand and gravel. Previously I could go right into the works to select the exact material that I wanted but nowadays health and safety rules prevent me going anywhere near the work face or the piles of lovely material. I often think rather than moving all the sand and gravel from the quarry to the garden it would be better to move the garden into the quarry! You can also get sand delivered in bulk bags, approx. 1tonne, or small 15-20kg bags can be purchased at most garden centres or builders' merchants – however it is best to test it is suitable before you buy a quantity.



In the UK the sand you need is called 'sharp sand', that is it has a percentage of larger particles. To check it I dry some out then pass it through a kitchen sieve what I am looking for is a roughly 50/50 make up with half passing through the sieve.

'Builders' sand' which is used in making cement mortar does not have the larger particles of grit so is too fine for the plunges.

Over the years I have tried and experimented with many potting mixes and have come to the conclusion that the complicated mixtures I have used in the past serve more to satisfy this gardener's needs than those of the plants. With few exceptions plants are not fussy about what they are growing in provided that it has three key properties, the first is to hold the plant upright, secondly it must be able to retain moisture while at the same time it must also have the third property of holding air around the roots to enable them to take up this moisture. This is why you need the mix of fine and coarse particles: the fine ones help retain the moisture while the gritty ones keep the mixture open retaining air as well as allowing surplus water to drain away.



After laying around 20mm of sand I spread out a soil warming cable this is not to warm the bulbs but to protect against the sand freezing around the roots and base of the bulbs, which for some types is fatal. The cables are controlled by a thermostat and sensor placed just above the cables. This is set to come on when the temperature at that depth falls to 0C and it goes off again when the temperature rises to 2C.



I covered the cables with more sand then started to place the bulbs.



It was easy to plant the bulbs when I first converted the plunge to sand beds because I could see and space them out suitably however once all the sand is in the bed I continue to plant bulbs randomly pushing them into the sand - mostly during the summer when they are dormant. Ideally the deeper the sand plunge the better - ours is 15cms deep which is around the minimum I would want it to be.



I planted out some pots of first year seedling bulbs in groups around the label to remind me what they are. The label is buried in sand but I can poke and find it if necessary. With a few others I slipped the label down the edge of the bed roughly in line with where the bulbs were placed as an aide-memoire.



Another method I have used is to sow seed in clusters directly into the sand after taking a photograph of the seed packets laid in the position where the seeds are to be placed. I can refer back to this image at a future date if I need help in identifying these bulbs.

Note that as these are mostly Crocus and Narcissus seeds so I sowed them 3-5cms deep in the sand.



The feeding regimes I am currently using is as follows:
Prior to the first watering on 1st September I sprinkle a light dressing of N-P-K 7-7-7 Growmore pellet fertiliser evenly across the sand this will dissolve in the watering and supply the roots and early first growth with the essential nutrients for the first six weeks. Once leaf growth starts to appear I add half recommended strength tomato type liquid fertiliser with added trace elements to each watering.

In the early spring I add a dressing of a soluble form of Potassium.



It is essential to take time with the first watering to ensure that the sand is soaked all the way through.



Every watering washes up fine material which pools on the surface and if left this will attract the growth of moss and form an impervious crust so I carefully cultivate the surface of the sand with a fork, small rake back to an open gritty texture.

The next sequence of pictures are not current but were taken during the past year.



The first year after planting I get surprises and many lovely combinations as I get to see where I placed the bulbs.



Crocus longiflorus



Crocus longiflorus

When growing in the sand and because I space the bulbs out I don't get the mass group of flowers like you get from this pot of *Crocus longiflorus* but as we still have one bulbhouse for pots we can enjoy the best of both worlds.



I like the random nature of the planting and the spacing out of similar flowers it seems more natural to me.



Crocus sieberi



This lovely variation was the result of a completely randomly planted group of Narcissus seedlings



**Colchicum
szovitsii**



Eranthis cilicica is not hardy in our garden but it is establishing under the protection of the sand bed.



Fritillaria alburyana



This sand bed was predominately planted with *Fritillaria* but I am adding some autumn and winter flowering *Narcissus* and *Crocus* to extend the flowering season.



Fritillaria



My experiments with sand beds started a long time ago but this is the first established of the sand beds since I installed the new plunge staging in 2013. This picture was taken on 25th January 2017 and you can see how well some of the Narcissus are clumping up.



As the season progressed the growth advanced and different genera and species came into flower.



Tropaeolum azureum with *Tropaeolum tricolor*. I wanted to repeat this spectacle so I sowed all the seeds from this *Tropaeolum azureum* into the latest sand bed conversion and to date over twenty have germinated.



Narcissus obesus



To illustrate how well some of the bulbs are growing in the sand compare these two flowers of *Narcissus obesus* in 2016 with the same group photographed earlier this year below and in the previous picture.





Another of my aims is to have flowering interest for as long a period as possible into the summer months when most of the bulbs are dormant and for that I am exploring some of the smaller Alliums



At this stage I am only watering lightly around the bulbs such as Alliums that are still green and flowering.



Back to the present I photographed the sand bed this week where a number of Narcissus are flowering with plenty more buds coming to give flowers through the winter and into the spring.



The long term care will be an interesting challenge and as I don't want to have large clumps of a single clone I will divide them when required. There will also be slow a build-up of humus from the remains of the old roots and I am curious as to how that will change the physical nature of the sand.....