

International Rock Gardener

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---International Rock Gardener---

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We respectfully dedicate this issue of IRG to the memory of a Czech master of rock gardens and growing, Ota Vlasák, who passed away on October 23rd 2015 at the age of 70, after a long illness. Ota will be remembered with fondness and great respect and we in the IRG team pass our condolences to his wife Růžena and their family.

We have memories and comments here about Ota and his remarkable garden and its plants and about his contribution over many years to the regular exhibitions of plants in the magical setting of the churchyard in Charles Square, Prague for the [Klub skalničkářů Praha](#) (KSP) His many friends, gardeners and others, have expressed their distress at his passing and their immense respect for Ota and his selfless dedication to all his passions over the years. His praises have been sung high and with good reason. His passing has seemed a cruel blow to his friends after a summer which proved deadly to a great many rock plants in Czech gardens, where blistering temperatures have even killed rhododendrons and other perennial plantings in the church garden where Ota's superb work for the shows of the KSP were enjoyed by thousands of visitors, many of them from around the world.

Cover picture: *Sternbergia lutea* subsp. *sicula* flowering in the Beauty Slope, garden of ZZ.



Ota Vlasák at home – welcoming visitors from America - with his “pointing stick” in hand, which he always used to indicate plants across the expanse of his rock garden. (Photo Jiří Papoušek)

---International Rock Gardener---

An Outcrop of Sadness text by Zdeněk Zvolánek, Czechia, most photos by Ota Vlasák.

Why do the best rock gardeners pass away so soon, when they are still ripe for passing on all the skill they have obtained? Our small group of Czech builders of natural stone outcrops lost a Master when Ota Vlasák died in October 2015.



At the time of his soul passing above my cool Beauty Slope these delightful flowers of the luminous *Sternbergia lutea* subsp. *sicula* opened and gave me a feeling of never-ending spiritual friendship. I obtained this floriferous dwarf bulb, which is the most suitable for natural rock gardens, as a gift from my “neighbour” Stanislav Čepička. Exchanging plants and smiles is the foundation of permanent happiness in this hard stony Earth!

Ota was a consummate designer of granite rock gardens, but his rock work with limestone slabs and blocks also showed a neat perfection. The international community of rock garden plant lovers will miss this outstanding man and his fine influences.

Ota was young and full of energy to roll rocks into new imaginary Czech lowland

“Rockies” in 1980-1982, when, together with another talented youngster Vojtěch Holubec, he constructed a large granite rock garden at our Prague Club show garden. This rock work is seen even today and no-one has had the strength or skill to rebuild it. Both authors continued in cooperation in their own garden design and they issued a handbook written in Czech about modern Rock Gardening.



Outside the churchyard in Charles Square, venue for the KSP shows.

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The "Czech" outcrop at Erfurt, built by Ota, Vojtech and Josef.

A very important experience came when Ota, Vojtěch and Josef Holzbecher obtained a commission to prepare rock outcrops and over 30 antique stone troughs for the long lasting International Garden Show in Erfurt, East Germany. German professional gardeners prepared troughs of lovely weatherworn limestone and plenty of rock garden plants. Our picture above shows one exhibit of vertically stratified blocks in massive wooden frames just in front of the old castle of town Erfurt. Their carefully arranged troughs travelled on the next year to a large International Garden Show in Stuttgart.

Another great achievement of Holzbecher and Vlasák was a large steep limestone rock garden, (right) built for the late German bulb nurseryman Bernt Wetzel. Some side-walls at the bottom of the slope were up to 3 metres high and the work with light machinery on this sharp slope was often at the edge of disaster. Ota and his half-brother personally selected large slabs in the quarry and after the first lorry-load



all the foreign workers disappeared in horror at the coming strenuous work; so Ota had to roll rocks again and again. He was an athlete; a good boxer and talented football player for the first division club Slavia Praha. He had muscles like the famous Hollywood dog Rintintin or a civilized (reduced) Rambo.

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Early view of Ota's main rock garden - note the size of the conifers in the grass around the rock garden - in later photos you will see how they have grown.

Ota built himself a practical villa in Bořanovice, a small village north of Prague. The clay from digging his large cellar was used to form a terrain wave to shelter the garden from a busy road nearby. We see his old rock garden from the upstairs bedroom of the villa (which was home to him, his wife Růžena and the family of his son).

Irregular layers run from west to east (the north is towards left part of the picture above). There are no paths (planned or existing) to run through his large granite outcrop. Only a few favoured friends were permitted to follow Ota's careful steps on shallow screes into the heart of the rock garden to see details inside. All the stones were collected and transported nearly 200km from northern mountains by Ota and his friends. At present the rock garden is enlarged to a new outcrop and small nursery behind the fence, where Ota built a second villa and garden for his daughter's family.



Ota Vlasák - photo by Mark Smyth

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Side wall planted with *Saxifraga*

When I saw his rock garden's rockwork first time, I had no idea what the rule was for placing his granite stones. Later I discovered that he uses igneous rock and the governing rules for forming sedimentary rock with vertically spaced layers. Well, it is the trick! The parallel layers are only partly visible, often missing under plenty of lovely irregular granite grit.

The whole rock garden is a natural looking complex of small round or triangular units called by the author of similar creations, Josef Halda, "babka" which means stooping old grannies. One unit has a pretty

southern face made from 2 or more larger stones into one layer. The connecting crevice is planted with *Saxifraga longifolia*, *Sempervivum arachnoideum* and other suitable plants.

Behind the first layer tilted towards the north are layers made from small stones forming a cooler microclimate

with a northern aspect. The picture above shows set of layers facing east in a fine short return of layers back to the terrain.

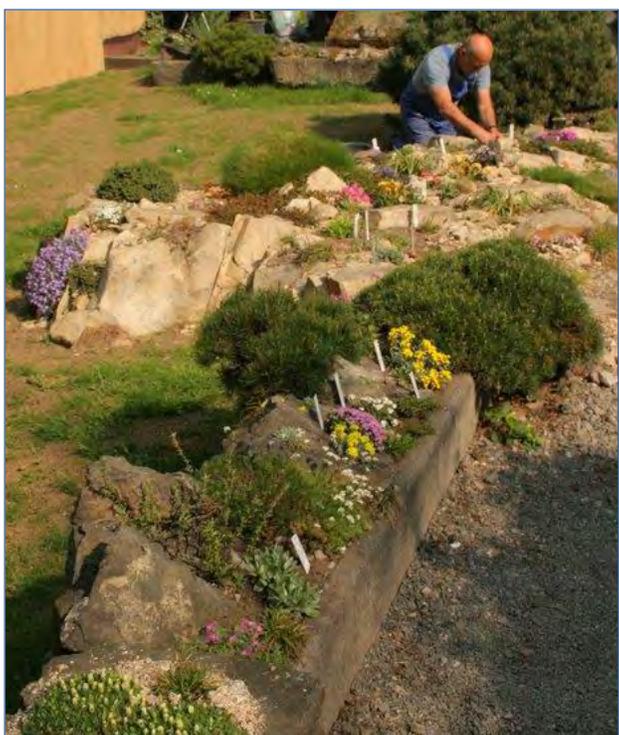


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Flat outcrop built by Ota at a KSP show, planted with bright *Lewisia*.

This is a prime example of Ota's simple design of a flat outcrop made from soft local sedimentary rock for our club's May show. Side-walls of this crevice garden are well pronounced and the faces of layers at the top are loose because of spaces needed to hide plastic pots of richly coloured *Lewisia cotyledon* (a rich selection from Holzbecher's botanic nursery in Lelekovice, Moravia). Ota Vlasák was the dynamo of all the many Prague rock garden shows (each outdoor event lasting two or three weeks). He was the firm Director of Shows (the chairman of the committee with 15 working members) and one of the chief arrangers for 30 long years.



Lád'a Maleček working in the KSP show garden.

Ota Vlasák trained Lád'a Maleček for 6 years or more as his trough making assistant. They were both very meticulous in hiding potted exhibits with grit and changing designs of the top rock work in large granite troughs.

During the last few years Ota provided workshops with arranging large troughs at one Czech Garden Centre and at the [nursery of Josef Holzbecher](#). Regrettably he was not well enough at the time of the 2013 Czech International Conference for his planned workshop there – though he bravely came straight from hospital treatment to welcome visitors to his garden.

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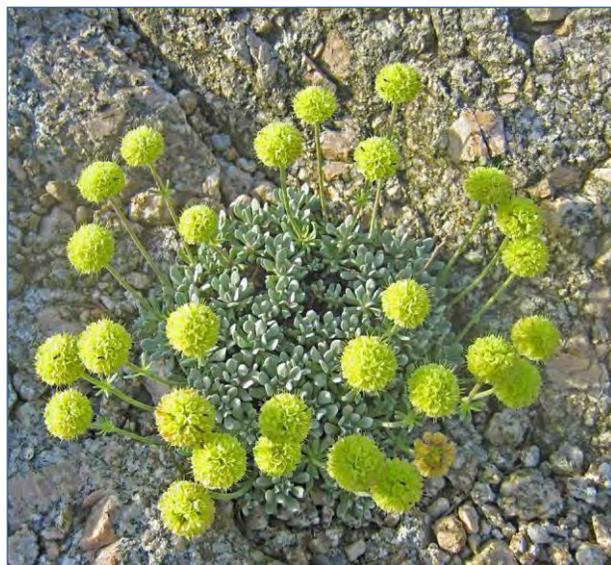


Eriogonum ovalifolium var.
nivale

The rock garden of the Master in Bořanovice has all day sun burning at 200m above sea level. It is artificially watered. Great success was found from plants from the American west, high plain semi shrubs raised from seed from Ron Ratko.

One love was reserved for the smaller shrubby *Eriogonum* (buckwheats) which have long lasting blooming effects with reddening/darkening of their

inflorescences. Some of them can be propagated by dividing older carpets.



Eriogonum douglasii



Eriogonum caespitosum

Ota's second love was for wild microphloxes, which he carefully propagated and with great success. For 30 years Ota propagated hybrids which used to be offered in Jack Drake's Inshriach nursery in Scotland. I gave them to Ota after exchanging them with the Master, Drake. The most popular in Bohemia is the cultivar „Iceberg“ in which there are genes of *Phlox pulvinata*. Some other fine forms such as „Apollo“ and „Concorde“ disappeared; perhaps they moved back to the UK, because they do not like the too hot and dry conditions near Prague.

The pulvinate *Phlox* „Hibberson“ is rare now. The toughest hero for Czech Karst hot gardens is *Phlox kelseyi* from the Idaho-Montana frontier. The true alpine *Phlox caespitosa* subsp. *pulvinata* and *P. caespitosa* subsp. *condensata* need a cooler eastern aspect of the crevice garden.

Luck and blessings fall into the hands of prepared growers. Ota obtained one chance seedling of *Phlox* with an excellent salmon pink sheen and described it as *Phlox* „Bořanovice“.

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Phlox „Iceberg“



Phlox caespitosa subsp. condensata



Phlox pulvinata



Phlox „Hibberson“

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Phlox kelseyi



Phlox and Armeria cushions in flower

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Erigeron chrysopsidis – Ota's chocolate hybrid



Another little bit of luck was an outstanding chocolate variation of classic well tamed yellow coloured *Erigeron chrysopsidis*, which I know from the alpine desert of Mt Matterhorn in the Wallowa Mts. in NE Washington.

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Globularia incanescens

Globularia incanescens from the marble cliffs of the Apuan Alps above Carrara, Italy, grew easily for Ota and he often propagated it.

Convolvulus phrygius

There has always been a good display of Turkish steppe and saxatile plants in Ota's rock garden. I recommend to everybody Czech introduction of *Convolvulus phrygius* from Lake Salda in Western Anatolia.



The oldest plants here of *Convolvulus phrygius* have been cultivated for 15 years. They form silvery flat shrubs up to 40cm in diameter and they are able to produce seed in the garden.

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More care is needed to grow the 125cm tall violet *Asyneuma limonifolium* from the limestone areas of Eastern Anatolia.

Ota's closest friend Josef Holzbecher exported the Czech raised *Pulsatilla*, the hybrid called *Pulsatilla* „Papageno“ (above right) in different colours into many places in Central Europe. Ota liked its fringed (dissected) petals. For a real adventure in good cultivation try the early spring *Pulsatilla vernalis* which hates lime and planting places which are too warm.



Pulsatilla „Papageno“

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A similar challenge for lowland gardens is the endemic alpine of the Italian Monte Baldo - *Callianthemum kernerianum*.



It is not easy nowadays to obtain the old hybrid between *Armeria maritima* and *A. caespitosa* called *Armeria x suendermannii* „Rosea“. It needs to be watered in dry periods and to have a substrate with an acid-neutral reaction.

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Every Czech rock gardener has the Slovak shrub *Daphne arbuscula*, which loves dolomitic limestone crevices and warm sunny place in mineral alkaline soil. Ota had always old, compact specimens.



This photograph by Josef Holzbecher shows one of the many of Ota's pilgrimages, adorations and suitable prostration of oneself (in the way of an eastern religion) at the bounty of these holy mountains. Our hero went every year to collect experiences, usually to the European Alps.

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Granite Alps near Mont Cenis

A classic Ota expedition would be in his Ford van with 5 enthusiasts like Josef Jurášek, Vladimír Staněk, Milan Halada and Lád'a Maleček. In his articles he called them "my boys". They made their carefully selected camps, always with available beers. One trip was to the granite Alps near Mt. Cenis, where all cool moisture loving alpines such as violet *Primula latifolia* and *Ranunculus alpestris* are to be found, blooming happily.



Primula latifolia



Ranunculus alpestris

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Above: *Primula hirsuta*, new subspecies, Grigna.



Left: *Primula grignensis*

More practical trips were made to those Italian areas with dolomitic limestones where the alpines are more adaptable to our lowland garden conditions. An exploration of unknown Grigna Mts in northern Italy was fruitful. Ota found there the newly described neat *Primula grignensis* and some dolomitic lime-tolerating subspecies of *Primula hirsuta*.

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Acantholimon saxifragiforme

Ota explored Turkish Anatolia and brought many plants new to cultivation. He had the biggest cushion of the new Eastern Anatolian *Acantholimon saxifragiforme*, the beautiful princess from the Castle of Harput near Elaziğ.



Delosperma – Jewel of the Desert Garnet – a plant bred from African species which thrived in Ota's garden. [This cultivar was raised by the Japanese-born grower Koichiro Nishikawa.]

The deep friendship with educated garden expert Josef Holzbecher led Ota Vlasák to an exotic mountain expedition to Basutoland in Southern Africa and to Patagonia. Ota was a good grower with all sensitive green fingers but to cultivate the Argentinean *Ranunculus semiverticillatus* was an impossible task even for our well-seasoned Czech Master.

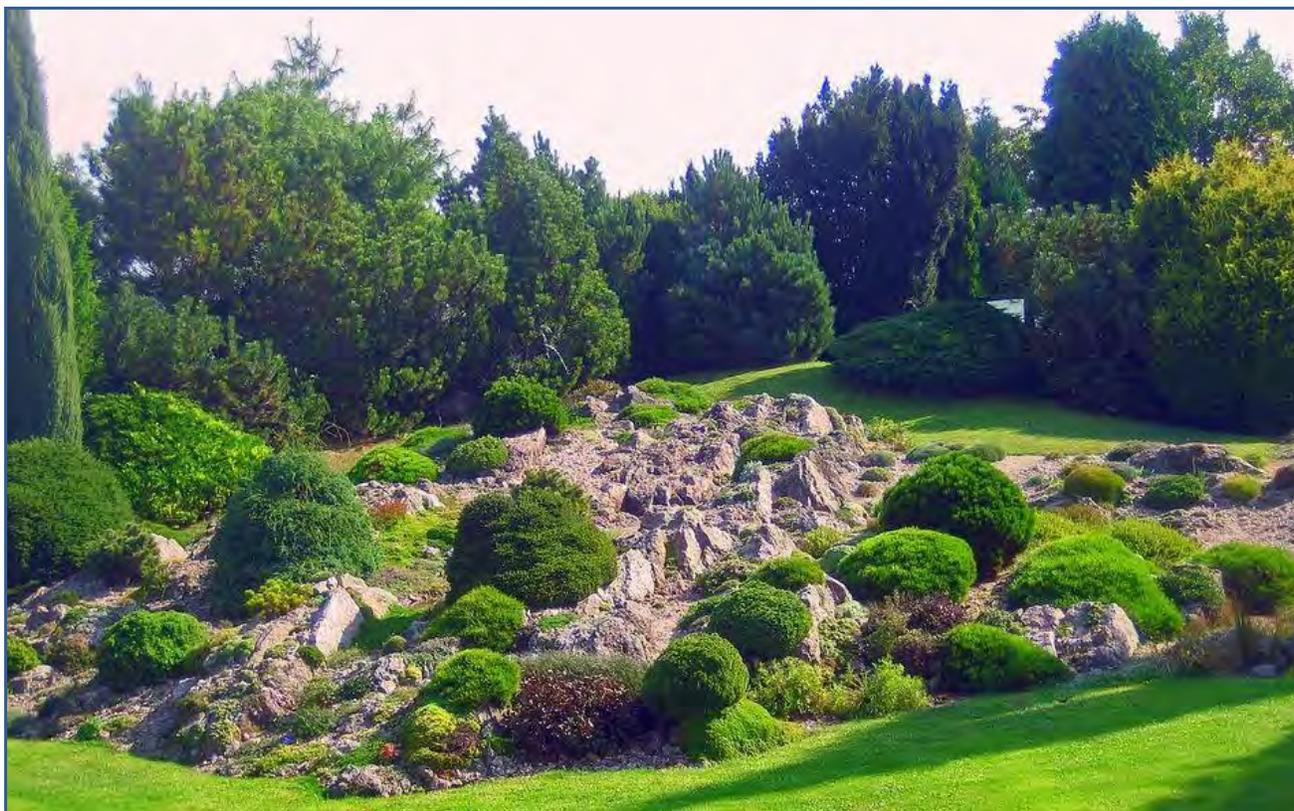


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Ian Young is sure to be disappointed to see few bulbs in this article. I think that Ota was not big fan of any alpines which would take valuable parts of his scree and then might leave an empty space for long time period! He had prepared new lecture for Czech clubs together with Stanislav Čepička, the lover of bulbs, but our Master's quiet quick departure destroyed that plan. I show one nice bulbous alpine plant from that unfinished talk: it is *Iris (Juno) rosenbachiana* f. *nicolai* 'Cormozak' growing in a steep shallow limy shale scree with all day vivid sunshine.



The last picture of my funeral/memorial gallery of Ota Vlasák's photographs shows his mature rock garden, where conifers show their strong influence. Even regularly pinched *Pinus mugo* are too big for this outcrop, where they confiscate lot of soil moisture during our tropical days in summer time.



One extra productive life is spent, well fulfilled, and I see a new great gardener's soul marching on to the highest boulder fields of Heaven. Glory, glory Hallelujah our dear friend!
Z.Z.

---International Rock Gardener---

Musings on the garden of Ota Vlasák by Tim Ingram, Kent, U.K.



Arabis androsacea

Having always regarded arabis as rather more utilitarian alpiners for the wider garden this species, *Arabis androsacea*, was a surprise when I first saw a mature plant in the garden of Ota Vlasák in the Czech Republic in May 2013 and was also an indication of how the world of alpiners is so very much wider and more fascinating than even those who have grown these plants for many years might appreciate.

This is an opportunity to write of one of the finest rock gardens that I have had the privilege to visit, and

for me proof that this form of gardening is the equal of any other, even if much less encountered and even less described in the horticultural media. It is often said that alpine plants are ideal for small gardens and this garden (though perhaps a little more extensive than many alpine gardeners might envisage) illustrates this well.



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The use of authentic dwarf conifers, some probably 30 or 40 years old, integrates the rock work into the wider garden very successfully, and the result is in every way the equivalent of gardening on a larger scale with perennials and trees and shrubs, and in my eyes a true work of art.

A garden like this is the consequence of place and long tradition and it is interesting to refer back to an article written by the Czech gardener Olga Duchacova, „A Letter from Czechoslovakia“ (AGS Bulletin Vol. 34, p. 236, 1966) in which she describes something of the history of rock gardening there and some significant figures, such as Karel Capek and J. Nauman-Horny, the „Czech Reginald Farrer“.

Gardening in the British Isles is often set into an historical context but rock gardening is so specialised and distinct that it tends to stand apart from this mainstream. The gardens in the Czech Republic that were opened so generously to delegates of the 2nd Czech International Rock Garden Conference show that while rock gardens now may be very different to others that are regularly described in magazines such as „Gardens Illustrated“ and „The English Garden“, they lack none of the underlying artistic and cultural strengths.



Ota Vlasák's garden illustrates two aspects of rock gardening especially well; firstly the fine and careful placement of rock in naturalistic ways, and secondly, relatively sparse planting so that rock is truly a significant feature of the garden. Although less easy in regions where rock is not so readily available, this essential style of gardening can be mimicked even on the small scale of a trough or raised bed and shows choice alpines off to perfection. A balance between stone and plant, very reminiscent of Japanese and Eastern gardens, is a strong feature of Czech rock gardens, and an additional reason why this form of gardening can be particularly artistic and even poetic. Neither of these aspects need compromise the detail and variety of plants themselves, and the range of alpines grown in Czech gardens, and traditions of collecting seed in the wild, have resulted in a wonderful diversity.

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Some of these pictures from my visit show some of the rock work in more detail, and I think few gardeners in the UK would give stone such prominence. Yet it brings out the discrete nature of the plants in a way which you could say is not dissimilar to the prevailing exhibition of plants in the British Isles. Association with stone undoubtedly introduces another dimension to the plants, and if I was starting a garden again this is a way of growing I would be very happy to emulate.



---International Rock Gardener---

My memories of Ota by Robert Rolfe, Nottingham, U.K.

It was in November 1985 that my first letter from Ota arrived (in it he wrote: „I own a family house with a garden (1,900m²) with a big alpine rock area and greenhouse. My English is not much better than your Czech – my favourite phrases are „How do you do?“ and „English is easy“), and we kept up a correspondence for 30 years, to my great benefit and pleasure. For quite a while his daughter or son loyally translated my intermittent, typically lengthy letters, and in longhand converted from Czech his replies, until he went to night school classes, subsequently writing in better English than he ever accepted – numerous sendings ended with an apology for any mistakes, of which there were none of any account whatsoever.

From the start he offered to send me seed that he or his pace-setting friends had gathered throughout Europe and Turkey – the 1985 list included offerings from the Pirin and Bucegi Mts such as *Daphne velenovskyi*, *Viola grisebachiana*, *Dianthus glacialis* subsp. *gelidus* and *Eritrichium nanum* subsp. *jankae* that you would struggle to obtain nowadays. Letters would arrive with neatly-arranged row after row of small but generously filled packets, sellotaped into position, in such quantities that much was passed on to friends and nurserymen.



Eritrichium nanum subsp. *jankae*

[ZZ writes: *Eritrichium nanum* is usually impossible to tame, but is possible to grow its sister from the Transylvanian Alps in Romania - *Eritrichium nanum* subsp. *jankae* - in tufa walls near Prague.]

---International Rock Gardener---

Ota had known Romania and Bulgaria since his youth, returning fairly frequently, but sometimes including stops there within a much more ambitious itinerary. These were usually camping trips, not without their hazards, as when his tent was ransacked by a bear while he was high up on Piatra Craiului in search of *Dianthus callizonus*, or when his red rucksack enraged an itinerant bull (though he was more alarmed by the animal's owner, who brandished a shotgun).



On one occasion he was able to access the higher reaches of a Turkish mountain when an obliging farmer gave him a lift on his tractor. He might be away from home for up to a month: one August he and several friends set off on a 15,000 kilometre odyssey taking in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. Highlights included the scaling of Mt Olympus (where he was delighted to see in the wild *Jancaea heldreichii*, *Viola delphinantha* and others he had grow in his renowned rock garden on the outskirts of Prague, and equally pleased to time his descent in order to reach a taverna near the coast by late evening, watching on television the Czech national football team trounce their Greek opponents) and the reconnoitre of several Turkish mountains hitherto unexplored by Czech plant-hunters. Latterly he travelled much further afield, first to the Drakensberg, then to southern Argentina (though he wasn't fond of lengthy transatlantic flights, declining a subsequent opportunity to visit Chile on this account).

Viola delphinantha

[ZZ writes:
Everybody would love to grow, successfully, three European woody Violas. Ota showed how well the Bulgarian/Greek saxatile *Viola delphinantha* grew in his granite crevice. They produce viable seeds in the open garden; the only problem is to catch them before the explosive ejaculation of their seed pods.]



---International Rock Gardener---

Ota's main work involved the building of rock gardens large and small throughout Europe, from features on large housing estates to „expositions“ (his preferred term) in locations such as the grounds of a chateau on the Bodensee island of Mainau, just west of Konstanz, and elsewhere in Germany, in Stuttgart and at the [egapark in Erfurt](#), where annual horticultural exhibitions had been held since 1950. Friends such as Vojtěch Holubec and Josef Holzbecher would assist in planting up numerous troughs and constructing rock gardens filled with plants they had brought from the Czech Republic. These were sizeable undertakings that often required the manoeuvring into position of rocks weighing upwards of two tons.

His singular talents in this field made him an obvious choice to orchestrate the annual May shows held in Prague's Charles Square over several weeks in May, even if the time required to mount such displays stretched him to the limit, while the problem of theft made him contemplate hiring security staff and guard dogs, and reluctant to risk certain rarities: „For this reason the best rock plants are only in private gardens“, he once wrote. That said, one year he constructed a six metre square bed, the plants added as the construction of the walls and main part proceeded, with „a very beautiful form of *Primula minima* with many flowers, *Daphne arbuscula* 40cm in diameter, nicely compact and richly blooming *Kalmiopsis leachiana*, specimens of *Androsace barbulata* 30cm in diameter, *Armeria juniperifolia* 35cm across with 400 flower stems and a big and flowery tuft of *Alyssum cuneifolium*“. Another such technical feat was labelled „Ota's sarcophagus“ by his impressed assistants.

His skills I witnessed first-hand on the occasion of the first Czech International Rock Garden Conference in May 2007. Ota chaired the show committee and built several displays, including a conventional crevice garden full of beautifully grown North American plants, and an offbeat outcrop made using local chert and planted up with hardy cacti and delospermas. The sizeable woodland rock garden was an exercise in subtlety and skilled planting, with a water feature that looked entirely natural, but was the result of Ota's engineering skills.

On the second morning he drove me, Harry Jans, Michael Kammerlander and John Mitchell some 10 miles to his home. It was a hugely enjoyable, rushed visit of just two hours – we needed to get back to central Prague and load up the plants bought by delegates, then ferry them to the Beroun conference venue. His driving, honed by numerous lengthy trans-European trips, was unconventional and he made up time at every opportunity. Once, delayed by a queue of cars, he rapidly reversed back along the one-way road, determinedly revved the engine, and drove straight across the sizeable traffic island!

The previous summer had been exceptionally hot and dry: even some of the *Acantholimon* collection (Ota had the best collection of these in his country, all raised from seed) had succumbed. But he had reared plentiful, beautifully grown and neatly ordered replacements in frames (net-shaded at head height) adjacent to the rock garden. Large numbers had been planted out earlier in the spring, in groups of five and seven, to rejuvenate affected areas.

Right: Part of Ota's nursery area - photo by Tim Ingram in 2013.



---International Rock Gardener---



Phlox „Bořanovice“

Ota had a long-standing interest in Primulaceae and in dwarf *Phlox* species (he did not hold garden hybrids in the same high esteem, although the first-rate *P. „Bořanovice“* is of his raising). *Edraianthus* I had thought a recent enthusiasm, triggered by friends' introductions from the Balkans, until I re-read a letter from 1987, in which he wrote of a family holiday in Yugoslavia, finding *E. dalmaticus* growing in startling juxtaposition with *Genista sylvestris* on the highest parts of the Pelješac peninsula. On the way back, he stopped off for a few days in the Julian Alps, climbing to the summit of Triglav with his son and rounding off with a diversion to the Kamnik Alps. *Gentiana froelichii*, *G. terglouensis*, *Primula wulfeniana* and *Eritrichium nanum* were found and their growing conditions precisely noted: it was due to such acute observation that he deployed plants so very effectively in his own rock garden.

He was unfailingly kind and very generous with his time – too generous perhaps, for he often regretted that he could not devote more to his family, or to tending his inspired garden, among the best of its naturalistic kind. Latterly, however, he would spend a few summer weeks on the Croatian coast – he was a keen swimmer – or at the 190 year-old family cottage in southern Bohemia that he had converted from a farmhouse (earlier in life, as we have heard, he had built two other houses). Here he relaxed by cycling, walking and picking mushrooms in the surrounding countryside, in between playing football and tennis even in his late sixties. Having made a conscious decision after the onset of his illness to work at a less frantic pace, he looked forward to putting aside some of his long-term organisational responsibilities – but this was not to be, nor were his plans to visit Britain to come to fruition. But one can look back over a lifetime of achievement, during which he was held in the highest regard by all the many visitors to his garden, by his friends and travelling companions, most obviously by his family, but also by those of us who were privileged to receive his painstakingly drafted, diverting and uplifting letters over many, many years.

R.R.



Ota really loved primroses and here we present his fine portrait shot of *Primula auricula* at the Passo del Maniva in Brescia.

---International Rock Gardener---



Ota's garden in 2013: the conifers of the shelter belt have grown high - photos by Ian Young.



---International Rock Gardener---

The following photos of Ota's garden were taken in mid-November by Zdena Kosourová.



Acantholimon in the central scree



Daphne x susannae „Cheriton“



Armeria juniperifolia in a west-facing crevice

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In the foreground: bare stems of *Salix lanata*



Ota's son and son in law

---International Rock Gardener---



The old conifers in the rock garden are getting large.





Ramonda myconii under a northern cliff

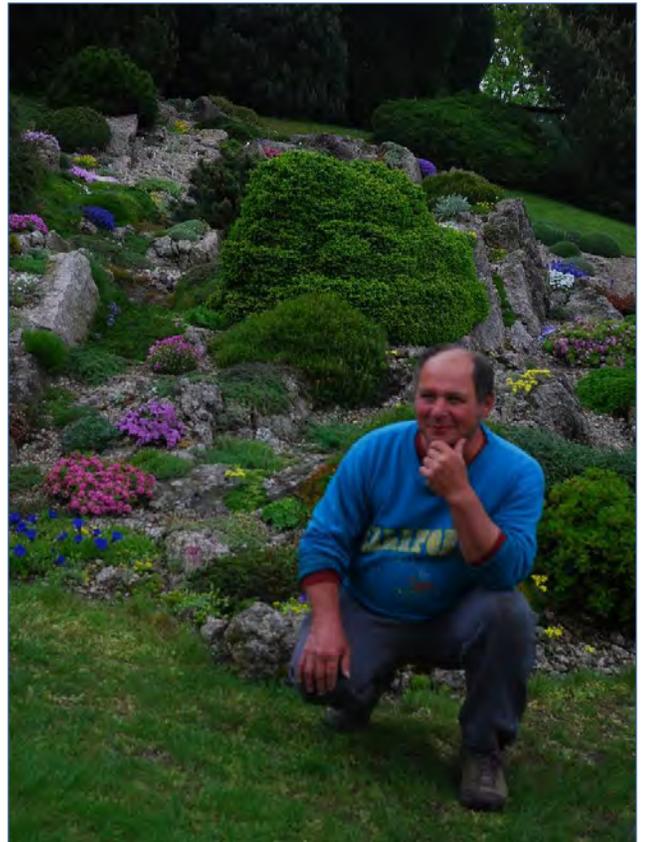


A young *Erinacea pungens* „Ahambra“: thanks to Zdena Kosourová for these photos.

---International Rock Gardener---



With visitors in his garden 2013: selfless as ever, Ota had come straight from hospital to welcome guests on a tour for the 2nd Czech International Rock Garden Conference – photo Ian Young.



Ota Vlasák – a man who will be remembered fondly and with great respect, by all who knew him or grew plants from his seed collections.

(photos by Ian Christie)