

International Rock Gardener

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This month in IRG we have a report from enthusiastic traveller Robert Rolfe on the Northern Macedonian *Viola schariensis* from the Šar Panina and some of the flowers found around it.

We also have a description for a new *Erythronium* cultivar from Canada which commemorates the fine gardener, originally from New Zealand, Alleyne Cook who raised it. John Weagle also wrote about his friend “Cookie” when nominating the latter for the American Rhododendron Society’s highest honour, the Gold Medal. John Weagle says:

“Alleyne started work at a very early age at the nursery of Duncan and Davies in New Zealand; he imported some of the first new rhododendron hybrids from the U.K. From there he set off to work at the famed Sunningdale Nursery in Surrey, England and was soon in charge of moving the many species and hybrids amassed by the Stevensons at Tower Court. At Tower Court he lived, breathed and slogged rhododendrons. He also observed them closely and got to know each species' quirks and history. It was apparent early that this was an experience that few in the rhododendron world would ever have – getting to know and recognize the plants collected by the great hunters firsthand - the Gestalt approach as Messrs. Cox would say. This opportunity fueled his intellectual appetite. His grasp of the species and all of the forms is encyclopedic.

He is also an expert on species *Lilium*, *Hemerocallis*, *Hosta*, *Primula*, hardy palms and indeed most plants that associate well with Genus *Rhododendron* – in this case, *Erythronium*.. He has done as much for magnolias as he has for rhododendrons.

This man lived and breathed plants and their history. He was a first-hand doer and not a watcher. It was Cookie who slogged Greig's massive *R. calophytum* into place at Van Dusen, not a hired gardener. Most important he was never self-satisfied with himself or institutions. He scared those who, after an encounter, were required to think about what they were saying, doing and the direction they were headed. This was an immensely healthy experience.

If Cookie's only lifetime achievement were the development of the Ted and Mary Greig Garden, he still deserves every accolade. Instead, there is much, much more. In music, the great composers and pianists for example always taught. The most brilliant pupils passed on their master's heritage and art to the next generation of performers/composers. Knowledge, history and tradition move on, gaining momentum through these torchbearers. The Japanese call them “Living Treasures”.

Cook is also one for the American Rhododendron Society.” The enthusiasm for Genus *Rhododendron* he ignited in so many, and his nurturing of novice gardeners and plant passions will have a lasting effect and we can now all remember this remarkable man.

Cover image: *Soldanella pindicola* by Robert Rolfe.

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--- In the Mountains ---

Viola schariensis: past and present - text and photos Robert Rolfe.

In North Macedonia, the mountain ski resort Popova Šapka is renowned among plant-hunters for its immediate proximity to large populations of *Crocus scardicus*. Described almost a century ago, this snowmelt species flowers in (April) May and June. Having said this, in 2024 the season was at least a fortnight advanced, and when I was there (May 22nd-25th) it was necessary to climb to around 2,000m before finding it in bloom.



Crocus scardicus



Viola schariensis

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Yet for me, the signature floral flourish in these mountains, the Šar Planina*, is instead *Viola schariensis*, present in its millions and outcompeting all others at the start of summer, even the buttercups and other abundant flowers of the high alpine slopes. You can be driven (or drive there) in under two hours from Skopje airport, westwards via Tetovo, where you should stock up with groceries, for out of season the ski resort doesn't have any shops open to source these.



Popova Sapka, part of the ski centre.



Map of main pistes.

*Not to be confused with the Stara Planina, these mountains marking the boundary between Serbia and Bulgaria, away to the north-east.

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The first person to bring the viola to the attention of gardeners was [Jim Archibald](#). I haven't to hand the earliest catalogues of Sherborne-based nursery The plantsmen (the lower-case noun is as proprietors Jim and Eric Smith styled their business), first issued in 1967. But the 1970-1971 plant list features several raisings from his late July/August 1964 trip to Macedonia, including *Campanula versicolor* JCA 658, though not *Ramonda nathaliae* JCA 686 from the Radika Gorge (arguably the finest exemplar of all in cultivation), nor *Crocus scardicus* JCA 760. Offered in addition, at the princely sum of 30 pence, was *Viola* "albanica" JCA 700: 'A marvellous form... which produces rounded, mauve-blue, yellow-eyed flowers all summer from neat clumps. Sunny scree'. The double quotes are mine, for it is no such thing, as Jim well knew but waited until 1985 to see described as *V. schariensis*, published (in German) by Erben in *Mitt. Bot. Staatssamml. München*. The text is wanting inasmuch as the full flowering period isn't given (but must extend from at least the end of April to July) and the altitude range (2,100-2,400m) needs expanding, for it is also frequent lower down, at just under 1,700m. Plenty of suitable habitat below the village that I didn't have chance to investigate.



Ed.: *R. nathaliae* JCA 686 remains a popular plant, often seen on the Show benches in the UK as in this example where Dr David Millward is shown with his Forrest Medal winning plant at an Aberdeen SRGC Show. Photo: Ian Young.



Viola schariensis

Since Erben's description of *V. schariensis* was published, the distribution has been broadened to include immediately neighbouring Kosovo (it also occurs in adjacent Albania). He gives *V. latisejala* Bornmüller as a synonym, which I take to be a close ally of [V. declinata](#) and [V. elegantula](#). This last, long ago offered by Joe Elliott (Broadwell Alpines), received an RHS Award of Merit when exhibited by Valerie Finnis at the 1980 RHS Chelsea Show, 'pinky-wine below with the upper petals a shade darker' (*Flora Europaea* records it as 'violet or yellow or parti-coloured, rarely white or pink'). More on this analogous count to come.

True *V. albanica* I've seen on the upper screes of Greek Smolikas, its type locality, spread in fragmented, discontinuous populations, principally on account of the typically mobile, scree habitat.

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The subterranean suckering, ramifying habit and dense, felted foliage is typical of *V. cenisia* affiliates. The flowers, often broader than long, with overlapping petals, are described by Strid as 'dark reddish-violet' but often paler in my recollection.



Viola albanica, Smolikas.

I had little idea of how prolific *V. schariensis* might be when I set out on the first morning, establishing my bearings by heading for the centre of the small village, overlooked by the Hotel Scardus (despite the appeal of my spacious chalet, with its panoramic view to the nearby



mountains, this is the best place to stay, not least because it offers a wi-fi connection and a decent menu). Just right of there, a steep track leads steadily upwards, easily identified by a tor-like rock – you might almost be on Dartmoor.

Tor-like rock feature.

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Or you could turn left, after fifteen or so minutes reaching the weather station/churchyard (marked by a large cross), beyond this slogging up the main ski run. Either way, you will reach a welcomingly fairly level track at around 2,000m, which goes on for mile after mile. To gain further altitude, it is necessary to scramble up one of the several corrie faces or else the frequent gullies. Failing these, strike out across the upper slopes; I found no footpaths or other means of climbing higher. Note that the ski lifts stop at 2,000m and are not in operation once the winter season ends.



There it was, within five minutes of searching, *V. schariensis*, abundant in the short turf and spilling down the slopes in a haze. A profusion matched only in my memory by *V. doerfleri* on Kajmakčalan (2,521m), around 230 km south, five hours' drive away. While I'd set out in brilliant sunshine at 08.30, the higher reaches of the mountains with extensive patches of snow clearly visible, as soon as I'd gained a respectable altitude, c. 1,900m, hail was flung from on high with such ferocity that its impact on my hooded head was painful. Just as well that I beat a retreat to my villa, for the violent storm intensified over the next few hours. A short intermission, then a thick blanketing of white cloud and rain drops of astonishing size, until early evening. As well to drive a 4WD (not all vehicles are

allowed up the mountains: check first) both for its ability to negotiate the badly rutted tracks and to afford shelter.



Viola doerfleri on Kajmakčalan.



Viola doerfleri variants.

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Viola schariensis flowers differ markedly in shape: anything from that of a Heartsease to generously rounded and overlapping, or else more open, the dorsal petal squared off at its base and wedge-like. In size anything from 20-35mm long, 15-32mm wide, a yellow palate extending over a third, occasionally half of the lip, with from five to seven narrow, black brushstrokes radiating downwards, the two lateral petals with two or three more, as deftly applied but frequently thicker and sometimes merging. While the corollas are typically concolorous, on occasion the upper two petals are of a darker hue (rather like the biennial *V.* 'Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow') or with deeper flushing towards the eye.

Typically concolorous *V. schariensis* flowers.

The accepted colour range (reddish-violet in the type description but in truth anything from pale pinkish-mauve to almost navy) is in this account, I think for the first time, extended to incorporate three white albinos. The finest, found first, had an apiculate lip: a floriferous clump would be breathtaking.



Further downslope was a second, weather-beaten but unmistakable, with a large yellow blotch and an absence of markings. The third, by the side of the main ski run, was undersized and otherwise unremarkable. A further surprise was the discovery, on a low bank of short turf at over 2,000m, of a yellow phase, with no others found above, and no other species present. This too is new. Seen after several days' scrutiny of umpteen plants, they must be accounted extremely rare, although there were numerous surrounding mountains, not all accessible, where similar variants might also occur.

Viola schariensis, white form.



Viola schariensis, yellow form.

V. schariensis is relatively short-lived: I've only once seen a 19cm potful on the showbench, somewhat drawn and perhaps involving more than one plant. Individuals typically flower sequentially over several weeks (and can be rejuvenated in cultivation by cutting back). They often grow through a sward of thyme, *Acinos alpinus*, achillea, *Potentilla aurea* and *Helianthemum oelandicum*, the first three giving off a powerful scent that masks the far more subtle fragrance of the viola's flowers. Effective combinations involving similarly coloured *Veronica aphylla* and the vibrant green of a dwarf *Alchemilla* were also welcome team mates. Horses and sheep graze these slopes (I witnessed a huge flock of the latter bleaters rushing by, within a few feet of an extended bank thick with the viola). Lower down I heard cow bells but did not see their wearers, summoning to mind a set of these chimes from Greece, gifted to me by a venturesome aunt. Suspended in the hallway, they were the despair of my family whenever I set them clanging.

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A large herd of sheep, high above Popova Sapka (in the middle background).



Hotel Scardus.

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Around Popova Šapaka, the immediate landscape is dominated by sizeable spreads of dwarf *Juniperus communis* subsp. *saxatilis* (subsp. *alpina* in Strid's *Mountain flora of Greece*, vol. 1, 1986), sprawling and pancake-like in profile and interspersed with short turf where the *viola* also abounds. Much was still to come – I noted the first flowers of vibrant *Geranium cinereum* subsp. *subcaulescens*, *Acinos alpinus*, dwarf clumps of *Myosotis sylvatica* and a dusting of white *Minuartia verna*. Also interwoven were *Dianthus scardicus*, *Polygala major* and campanulas, one possibly *C. orbelica*, illustrated on a couple of posterboards just below the hotel, portraying the flora and fauna associated with specified locations – and the walking distances involved. A couple were approximate (what was given as “*Erica* sp” was more precisely *E. spiculifolia*, once segregated in the monotypic genus *Bruckenthalia*, but even so welcome.) There's also dwarf, bright yellow *Genista depressa*, distributed throughout the Balkans and as far east as Crimea; another cheering presence*.



Myosotis sylvatica

*There's a checklist of the overall flora, *Alpine and subalpine flora of Sharr mountain* (Macedonian part), by Nasuf Abdii and Murat Xhulaj, [International Journal of Advanced Research, September 2016](#).

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Genista depressa

Piste bashing in reverse is required. You must propel yourself upwards by foot power alone.

Expect no zigzagging ascents, the short pulls leavened by more gradual pathways. Further ascent



is mainly via the numerous gulleys, some of them still snow-choked. In a few of these you can expect to chance upon *Primula elatior*, *Soldanella pindicola* (cover image), minuscule *Androsace hedraeantha*, *Crocus jostii* (a *C. veluchensis* affiliate, [described in this online journal two years ago](#)) and, on north to east-facing banks, *C. scardicus*). *Viola schariensis* pops up here as well but is most profuse either side of the relatively few tracks, or in astonishing transverse, otherwise cascading, massed swarms measuring (I checked) twenty or more paces up and down, side to side.

Primula elatior

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Typical populations of *Juniperus communis* subsp. *saxatilis*, with extensive drifts of *Viola schariensis* apparent (arrowed).



Crocus jostii (syn. *V. veluchensis*)

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This profusion of the viola was witnessed repeatedly, making me ponder that no seed collector, however rapacious, could make even the slightest adverse impact. If the massed artillery of snowploughs, wheel loaders and trail groomers cannot extinguish the viola (which on the contrary appeared to relish the brash directly under the pylons and was also present, less exuberantly, on the main runs), no individual or group could cause any damage. One hopes that an authorised body – a botanic garden the most obvious agency – will be able to reintroduce *V. schariensis*, last listed by Jim Archibald (January 2002) with the reassurance: 'Not difficult in a very well-drained site'.



Cerastium alpinum var. *lanatum*

The geology is complex, with granite, metamorphic rocks (shale and schists) predominant but also limited expanses of marble, where a different flora takes hold, *Dryas octopetala* and *Cerastium alpinum* var. *lanatum* its most obvious markers, along with a tiny *Muscari*. *Viola schariensis* was here too, in limited numbers, having followed the main ski run in the rubble and either side, then the right-hand turn. Better yet was come, for at over 2,000m it was present in astonishing

---International Rock Gardener---

numbers: I imagine that the absence of grazing on these dizzyingly steep slopes is a telling factor. I was told that Czech and Polish hikers would be visiting in July but when I was there it was blissfully tourist-free, away from the village. My only company was provided by a trio of chamois, a golden eagle (said to be rare thereabouts) and a couple of hawks.



Gentiana verna subsp. *balcanica*



Dactylorhiza sambucina

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Some flowers you might know well from the European Alps – *Ajuga pyramidalis*, *Vaccinium myrtillus*, *Anemone nemorosa* (but at over 2,000m, in heathland), *A. narcissiflora* only 10cm tall, *Silene acaulis*, *Linaria alpina*, spring gentians (*Gentiana verna* subsp. *balcanica*), *Dactylorhiza sambucina* and cowslips – though here in the large-flowered, mealy-leaved version *Primula veris* subsp. *columnae*, mixed in woodland margins with oxlips. But throw in verbascums (probably not including the fairly recently described *V. scardicola*), *Potentilla montenegrina* and *Lilium albanicum*: everything alters. These are substantial mountains, only occasionally jagged but soaring up to 2,747m (Titov Vrv), with 41 peaks attaining more than 2,500m over a distance of around 70 miles, Kosovo only a mile or two further west, Albania not far away to the south.



Primula veris subsp. *columnae*

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Profusion and variation of *Viola schariensis*:



Colour variants



Colour variations can be minimal but obvious.

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Fairly uniform population

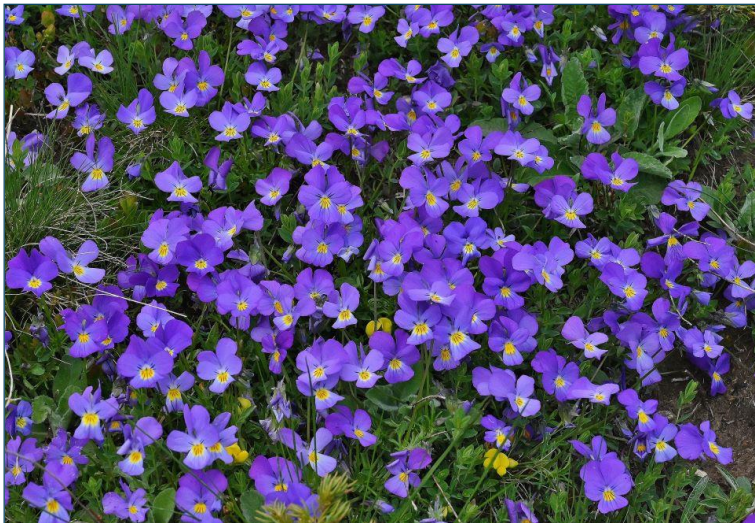


Viola schariensis

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Viola schariensis, navy morph



Close grouping of *V. schariensis*.

Large population of *Viola schariensis* at c. 1,700m, in the foreground, (arrowed) amid *Juniperus communis* subsp. *saxatilis* and *Erica* (syn. *Bruckenthalia*) *spiculifolia*.) I should also mention that *Viola grisebachiana* is recorded from the Šar Planina, at 2,500m and occurs in a vast, intermittent arc



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from Bosnia-Hercegovina down to Albania, across to Bulgaria, and in Serbia is known from much lower down, starting at 1,000m. Descriptions are hard to come by, the one in *Flora Europaea* (Volume 2, page 277) not especially helpful, but crucially giving the spur as obtuse and 3-4mm long, viz. much shorter than glabrous *V. schariensis*, 6.8-9.5mm according to Erben's measurements.



Šar Planina – view south-west to Albania.

Herbarium material confirms *V. grisebachiana* as a 'wanderer', emitting shoots from a subterranean base and popping up intermittently from this fount, unlike shallower-rooting, clump-forming *V. schariensis*, which is also typically more vibrant, photographic evidence of an unusually albino *V. grisebachiana* (the Bulgarian flora online) aside.



Ed.: The Polish grower Michal Hoppel found a fine form of *Viola grisebachiana* in the Pirin Mountains near Vichren, Bulgaria at 2,900m which he photographed and shared with [NARGS](#).



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www.bgflora.net

White-flowered morph of *Viola grisebachiana*. Picture taken on 9 July 2011 at Vichren Peak, Pirin Mountains, South Bulgaria by Kiril Metodiev, courtesy, www.bgflora.net.

---International Rock Gardener---

--- New Cultivar ---

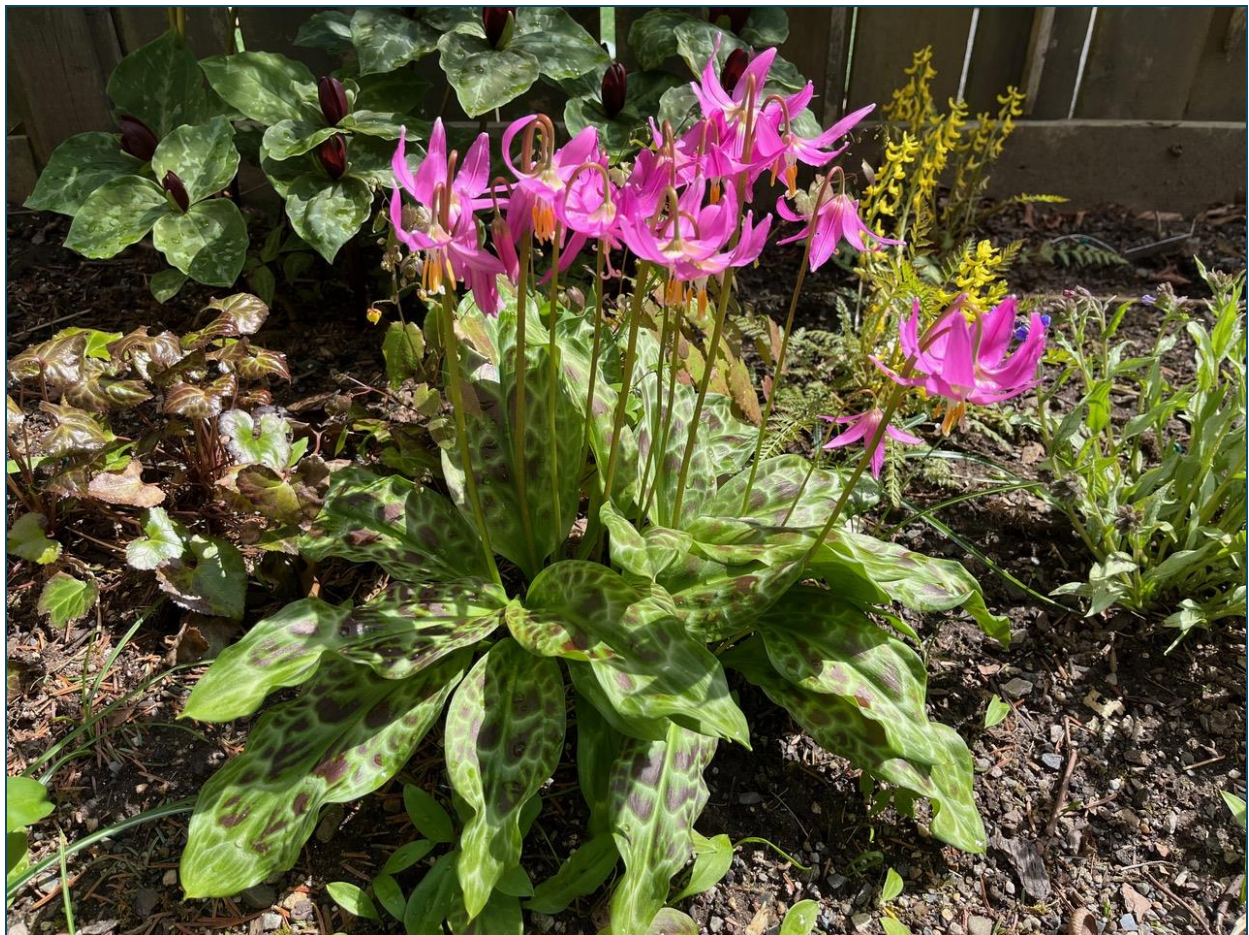
***Erythronium revolutum* 'Alleyne Cook'**

This selection arose in a bed of collected wild *E. revolutum* and self-sown seedlings in the garden of the late Alleyne Cook of Larson Road, North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada and was selected by Alleyne. He shared it with John Weagle and Ken Shannik of Insigne Gardens, Edward Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3H 3H5, they in turn are naming it for him.

Flower width 8.9cm (3.5") wide, general overall colour is closest to RHS Colour Chart 1986 – Red-Purple Group somewhere between 73A and 72D, inner centre white 19mm (.75"), suffused with yellow at the base of the tepals. Flowers reflex in sun.

6 tepals of equal length – each 4.5mm (1.7") long and .635cm (.25") wide at its widest point, with small white tips,

3 inner tepals with a basal prominent white mark; sometimes with a flush of green and sometimes a slight flush of brown closest to basal end; two narrow dark pink lines running from the central base and ending at the start of the white tip.



Erythronium revolutum 'Alleyne Cook'

---International Rock Gardener---

3 outer tepals, sometimes with a basal prominent white mark with or without a flush of green and sometimes with or without a slight flush of brown closest to basal end; two narrow paler pink lines running from the central base and ending at the start of the white tip

Crozier-shaped flowering stem a dark purplish brown, 13-17cm (5.12"-6.7") high holding the flower face 12-16cm (4.72-6.3") off the ground; measurements are entirely dependent o light conditions.



Erythronium revolutum 'Alleyne Cook'

Flower parts – 6 anthers orangey yellow, white spearhead-shaped stigma, ovary .5mm (.2") high, style 1.5cm (.59") long.

Foliage – nicely mottled, more prominent in full sun, less so in full shade.

Plant – Sets seeds abundantly. Spreading well by bulb multiplication as well as self-sown seed.

It is a delight in Ken's garden here in Halifax and certainly a standout in the *Erythronium* collection.

John Weagle & Ken Shannik.

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Erythronium revolutum 'Alleyn Cook' – photos by John Weagle in Ken Shannik's garden.



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Alleyne Cook, born New Zealand 1924, died in Canada in 2019, shortly before his ninety-fifth birthday. He began working life at a New Zealand nursery but felt that he needed to travel to broaden all his horizons. He met the love of his life, Barbara, on board the ship Rangitata to England in 1950 and later married her when she visited Canada in 1961. He had worked at Sunningdales in England and had worked on various prestigious projects around England (e.g. at Castle Howard and Windsor Great Park) and Scotland (e.g. at Gigha) with such folk as Jim Russell and Constance Spry.

Alleyne, having moved to Vancouver, Canada in 1954, installed gardens for a contractor before becoming a gardener at the school board. Cook was credited with being the main designer and planter of the acclaimed [Ted and Mary Greig Rhododendron Garden in Stanley Park](#). He was a gardener for many years at the (Vancouver) park board, but he became a rhododendron expert, given the top award for the American Rhododendron Society, and honoured as a world expert. John Weagle, who has himself won an American Rhododendron

Society premier award, was pleased to recommend Alleyne Cook for the ARS Gold Medal.

A.C. With his ARS Gold Medal.



Right, above: John Weagle with Ken Shannik and John's ARS Gold Medal and certificate.

John Weagle wrote that Alleyne's grasp of rhododendron species and all of the forms is encyclopedic. "Cookie" as John knew him, was also very knowledgeable about many other woody plants, as well as alpines, erythroniums etc.

The Cooks, who had two children, daughter Briar and son Nigel and Alleyne's love of plants combined with his love of family — he identified and registered a variety of *Magnolia*

---International Rock Gardener---

dawsoniana 'Barbara Cook' named after his wife. It's in Stanley Park, Vancouver, as is another magnolia called 'Briar Cook', after his daughter, and a rhododendron called 'Sir Nigel' after his son.



Magnolia dawsoniana 'Barbara Cook'

It took Alleyne some time to finally choose a plant to name after his beloved wife - he wanted something perfect - a special cultivar that Alleyne picked up in 1969 and nurtured and watched over and eventually, in 1993, decided was beautiful enough to be named after Barbara.

---International Rock Gardener---

Alleyne became a legend in gardening circles and he and Barbara were welcomed as much for their charm as for their knowledge wherever they went.

Though Alleyne died in 2019, Barbara, who recently turned ninety-eight years of age, can still entrance with her memories of their life together, their world travels after Alleyne's retirement and their enduring love for nature and each other. Surely, the remembrances of this remarkable man will endure for many years in the memories of plant lovers worldwide.



Cook's Azalea Walk at Pinegrove Park, Liverpool, Nova Scotia. He donated the plants as layers from Ted and Mary Greig Garden.



Alleyne Cook with wife Barbara in their N. Vancouver garden in 1997.



Alleynes and Barbara at Windsor Great Park.

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Alleyne Cook with wife Barbara in their N. Vancouver garden in 2013.