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September 2009

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September 19 program: What's wrong with my plants?

Join us Saturday, September 19, 1:00 p.m. at Billie Jean Isbell's with special guest Michael Loos, former horticulture educator with Ohio State University Cooperative Extension, Cuyahoga County and active NARGS member. Michael will lead a diagnostic walk-through of Billie Jean's garden pointing out insect and disease problems – problems we're all likely to have in our own gardens – and recommend "best practices" for dealing with them.

Michael's encyclopedic horticultural knowledge from more than 40 years as an educator, landscape and garden designer, and garden curator means he is well-prepared to answer our questions about garden plants under siege. Bring samples for diagnosis **in a sealed plastic bag**.

Come at noon and bring a brown bag lunch if you'd like to visit with Michael and your fellow chapter members before the program starts at 1 p.m. That evening **David Mitchell will host supper at his house** at 402 Esty Street, Ithaca, starting at 7 p.m. Please RSVP to David at dwm23@cornell.edu or phone (607) 342-3660 before September 18. Side dishes and drinks are welcome.

Directions to Billie Jean's (534 Valley Rd., Brooktondale, N.Y., 539-6484) [Map](#).

From Ithaca: Take Rt. 79 east (State St., turns into Slaterville Rd). Note your mileage at the flashing light at Pine Tree Rd. Travel 2.4 miles to Brooktondale Rd. (Green highway sign reads Brooktondale 2 miles.) Turn right. Travel 2.5 miles on Brooktondale Rd. Billie Jean's house is on the right between the Community Center and the church. Park in the church parking lot facing Billie Jean's barn.

From Whitney Point (best route from Syracuse, Greene, Binghamton): Take Rt. 79 west. In Slaterville Springs, go .2 miles beyond the Citco station and store to first left, Creamery Rd. Turn left onto Creamery Rd. Take Creamery Rd. to the end. Turn right. (Sign says Central Chapel Rd. but it becomes Valley Rd. at that point.) Travel 2.3 miles. Billie Jean's house is on the left between the church and Community Center. Park in the church parking lot facing Billie Jean's barn.

From the Chair

I want to invite everyone to my garden for our September meeting and bring your diseased plants – in a zip-lock bag please. I'm sure I have enough diseases of my own.

I also extend an invitation for any member to bring a note pad and annotate **plants that you would like a start of from my garden**. I have so much plant material and I would like to share them. I cannot guarantee that I can name them. In fact, I'd like the membership to help me name plants. I seemed to have developed 'plant Alzheimer's' – I try to retrieve the names from my memory and I remember typically around 2 a.m. If you have a means of keeping your plant records bring them along to share.

Billie Jean Isbell

Primula allionii

This article is from Pam Eveleigh, who will speak on primulas at our October 11 meeting. Pam is a founding member of the Calgary Rock and Alpine Garden Society (CRAGS) and is currently Vice-President. She has a keen interest in Primulas and has served as a Board member and webmaster of the American Primrose Society. Her personal website www.primulaworld.com includes an image gallery of over 2,500 primula images. Pam is also an avid hiker and photographer, with a considerable knowledge of native flora.



Right: Allionii show bench by Terry Mitchell

I'm not sure when I saw my first *Primula allionii*, but I know that I've been entranced by these remarkable cushion Primulas since I started growing alpines in 1991. The plants were unobtainable locally back then - no one was growing them in Calgary - so I was thrilled when I spied them for sale at a Winter Study Weekend.

Moments after my purchase, my excitement turned to despair mixed with determination when Norman Singer examined my plants and said "Good luck. You'll need it to grow those!" Thus began a process of buy-try-kill until I got it right.

Primula allionii is native to a small area (just over 200 square kilometers) of the Maritime Alps on the French-Italian border. The main habitat is centered on the Roya Valley in France which runs in a north-south direction and is subject to strong winds and snow in winter.

The plants have a specific growing preference for calcareous cliffs, composed of rock which is similar to hard tufa but which still allows for the percolation of water. This creates pockets and crevices in which the plants grow. Sometimes they also grow in small caves, but never in the soil at the base of these cliffs. The plants flower March to April in the wild and as early as January in cultivation. The flower buds form in the fall and, like many *Primulas*, the plants can

start and stop blooming, holding their buds during cold weather. Seed is late ripening, usually October to November.

The real joy of *Primula allionii* is its enormous variability and it's potential for generating new hybrids. Wild plants deviate in size and shape of both flowers and leaves and the color ranges from pink-magenta through to blue-purple. White forms are rare though the breeder Ken Wooster was known for his white seedlings including the popular 'Snowflake'. *P. allionii* has been hybridized with at least seven other species however only one natural hybrid has been found in the wild. This is *P. x meridionalis*, a cross between *P. allionii* and *P. marginata* found in the Miniera Valley and first collected by Mr C. C. Mountfort in 1927. This collection is still in cultivation under the name 'Miniera'. Later collections of this natural hybrid show that it is as variable as its parents. All this variation adds up to a breathtaking sight when a show bench is filled with perfect domes of *Primula allionii*!

After many seasons of killing this species, what is the secret to its cultivation? I tried growing plants in clay pots plunged into sand (with limited success), in holes drilled into tufa, even in a trough filled with a tufa grit mixture. They all eventually died.

The key to success for me was realizing that Calgary is a relatively dry climate and that these *Primulas* required more moisture than provided by the methods I had been trying. Eventually I stopped babying this species and planted them directly into gritty soil tucked in beside the northeast face of large rocks and mulched with large stone chips. This worked!

For those in a more humid and wetter climate, growing *P. allionii* in tufa may be your answer as more than one rock gardener has been successful doing this. Certainly keeping the crown of the plant from contacting the soil and removing dying leaves and flowers immediately with tweezers will prevent botrytis problems. Also good ventilation and protection from direct contact of moisture on the leaves will keep your plants healthy.

Now that you have *P. allionii* growing successfully, you can't rest on your laurels. As with all plants in the Auricula Section, older leaves die back and new leaves form at the top of the stem effectively elongating the stems as the plant matures. This produces a progressively untidy cushion but these stems are perfect for cuttings which can be taken any time from after flowering through to the fall. Remove dead leaves from the stem, make a nice clean cut at the bottom, and insert into damp pure sand (slightly coarse) ensuring the sand is well firmed around the base. The fresh leaves should not be in contact with the sand and the cuttings must be well ventilated, not closed in.

I do this in the fall and by spring the cuttings have rooted. It is highly recommended you continually rejuvenate your plants because older cushions may die suddenly of root rot and may be more prone to botrytis. And don't forget to pass on your cuttings to others so they may discover how best to grow them in their garden. These gems should be enjoyed by every rock gardener!

Let's visit Sycamore Hill Gardens October 12

From Donna Kraft, Vice chair/program:

Pamela Eveleigh, our speaker on Sunday, October 11, said that she would like to see our autumn colors and visit gardens. She will be in the area on Columbus Day, Monday, October 12. So I've made arrangements with Karen Hanford for ACNARGS access to their private Sycamore Hill Gardens in Marcellus!

Go to www.sycamorehillgardens.com for an overview of these magnificent 25 acres! This is a wonderful opportunity for our membership to view these awesome gardens while extending accessibility to our speaker. We will meet at the gardens at 10:30 a.m. and take a leisurely tour. The Hanfords do request a \$5 per person donation for continuing support of Baltimore Woods Centers for Nature Education. Those who wish may also join us for a quick bite to eat in Skaneateles.

Karen did ask about how many people might participate, so we will be taking a poll at the September meeting. For more information or to RSVP, contact me: dkraft@twcny.rr.com, 315 696-8626. Sycamore Hill is located at 2130 Old Seneca Turnpike, Marcellus, NY 13108-9760.

Members-only plant sale and picnic

Income from the August 15 members-only plant sale: **\$737**. The satisfaction of taking home other members' favorites to try in your own garden: **Priceless**. Thanks to Lynn Purdon Yenkey for the pictures.



NARGS 2010 Annual Meeting

Mark your calendars for the 2010 NARGS annual meeting: Romancing the Rockies - The Marriage of Plant and Stone, July 11-14, 2010, Denver & Salida, Colorado

Join the Rocky Mountain Chapter of NARGS for a trip to the undiscovered Colorado that is every bit as beautiful as—but somehow more pristine and authentic—than the famous resorts

that grab headlines. The meeting is scheduled to coincide with the peak of the alpine season: come dance with Eritrichium and primulas on the very backbone of America! Information at www.rmcnargs.org and more to follow.

NARGS Seed Exchange seed list

From Joyce Fingerut, NARGS Seed Exchange Director:

The Seed Exchange Seed List will appear on the NARGS website on December 15, 2009. NARGS no longer will automatically distribute printed lists to all its members. NARGS national members who would like to receive a printed copy of the Seed List - either because of no computer, or slow internet connections - must request a copy by **November 15, 2009**. Write: Joyce Fingerut, 537 Taugwonk Road, Stonington, CT 06378-1805. Phone: 860.535.3067. Or email: alpinegarden@comcast.net

Contribute to NARGS Image Library

NARGS is creating an image library and calling on members from all chapters to contribute. The first project will be to scan the 35mm slides from the NARGS Slide Library. "Please notify all your members that we need their photos. All photos will be accepted. If they are in a non-digital format (35mm or negatives) contact me to schedule a time when they can be scanned," writes John Serowicz, who is heading up the library. For more information, see <http://acnargs.blogspot.com/2009/08/contribute-to-nargs-image-library.html> or write to John at imagelibrary@mi.rr.com.

2009 program plans

Here's the **tentative** line-up for 2009. Check future newsletters or the ACNARGS blog (<http://acnargs.blogspot.com>) for details.

Sept 19 - What's Wrong With My Plants? with Michael Loos, horticulture educator with Ohio State University Cooperative Extension, Cuyahoga County and active NARGS member. This program will be held in Billie Jean Isbell's garden in Brooktondale, where Michael will give us a real-world look at plant problems. Brown bag lunch at noon. Program at 1 p.m. Supper at David Mitchell's at 7 p.m. See article above.

Oct. 11 - Pam Eveleigh on primroses. Whetzel Room (404 Plant Sciences Building), Cornell University, Ithaca. Note that this **program is on a Sunday** – not our usual Saturday meeting time.

Oct. 12 - Trip to Sycamore Hill Gardens. 10:30 a.m. See article above for details. Contact Donna Kraft: dkraft@twcny.rr.com, 315 696-8626.

Nov. 14 - Native Plants for the Naturalistic Garden with Don Leopold, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and author of Native Plants of the Northeast. Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County, 615 Willow Ave., Ithaca.

More events

Cornell Plantations fall lecture series started Sept. 2. Here's the fall line up. All remaining lectures are 7:30 p.m., Statler Hall Auditorium. For more information, visit:
<http://www.plantations.cornell.edu/learning/lectures/2009series>

September 16: **Conservation of an Urban Oasis: Managing Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Albany Pine Bush.** Neil Gifford, Conservation Director of the Albany Pine Bush Preserve

September 30: **The Fruit Hunters.** Adam Gollner, author

October 14: **The Authentic Garden: Five Principles for Cultivating a Sense of Place.** Claire Sawyers, author and director, Scott Arboretum

October 28: **Chinese Herbs and Health.** Jean Giblette, owner, High Falls Gardens

November 11: **Farming in Iroquoia: Surprising Comparisons with European Agriculture.** Jane Mt. Pleasant, Associate Professor of Horticulture, Cornell University

People

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- Plant sales: David Mitchell, dwm23@cornell.edu, 607-342-3660
- Plant of the Month: John Gilrein, basecamp@alum.syracuse.edu, 315-492-0844
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Green Dragon Tales

Published eight times a year (Feb., March, April, May/June, July/Aug., Sept., Oct. Nov./Dec.). Submit articles by the fourth Friday of the month preceding publication to Craig Cramer: cdcramer@twcny.rr.com. Note: The next issue of *The Green Dragon* will be in October.

