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CHAPTER

*North American Rock Garden Society*

# Green Dragon Tales

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[www.acnargs.org](http://www.acnargs.org)

March 2007

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## March 17 meeting: Harvey Wrightman on dryland plants, tufa workshop

"Dryland Plants" will be the subject of a talk by Harvey Wrightman at our March 17 meeting. Since 1985, Harvey has run Wrightman Alpines Nursery in Kerwood, Ont. ([www.wrightmanalpines.com](http://www.wrightmanalpines.com)), where he grows more than 2,000 species and varieties of rock garden and alpine plants.

Wrightman will provide an overview of how to set up a garden to grow plants from dry steppe climates, emphasizing the interaction between stone and plants. He will also detail the advantages of using tufa rock.

The program will begin at 1 p.m. in the Whetzel Room, 404 Plant Science Building on the Cornell Campus. Bring a bag lunch and socialize starting at noon.

Don't be put off by the construction in the area. There is plenty of parking along the south side of Tower Rd. east of Plant Science, and in the lot between Tower Rd. and the athletic fields, accessible from the east end of the lot. The easiest entrance into Plant Sciences is the door where the Conservatory meets the building. Use the

walkway between the newer greenhouses and the Conservatory. Elevator access is one flight up, due to construction.

Wrightman will also be offering a **tufa-drilling and planting workshop** immediately after the presentation at the Kenneth Post Laboratory Greenhouses on Tower Rd., Cornell University. **Registration is limited to the first 15 chapter members** who send a \$35 check (payable to ACNARGS) to our treasurer, Carolyn Yeager (400 Irish Settlement Road, Freeville NY 13068, cao2@cornell.edu, 607-844-9462). At this writing, there are **still three spots left**. The chapter is subsidizing half the actual \$70 cost of the workshop. The fee includes a small piece of tufa and seedling to plant the tufa after it's drilled. Bring a cordless electric drill. Wrightman will bring the bits. For those who aren't among the lucky first 15 to register, Wrightman welcomes spectators at no charge.

There is the possibility of a **dish-to-pass supper with Harvey** the evening of Friday March 16 or Saturday March 17. If you would like to be notified about plans, please contact Craig Cramer: cdcramer@twcny.rr.com or 607-539-7233.

***Robin Bell, program coordinator***

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### **Plan(t) now for April 'Seedling Exchange'**

In lieu of the usual plant sale, we'll be having a 'Seedling Exchange' at our April 21 meeting. After a great presentation by Liz Knowles, we'll dig into our seedlings, divide them up, and hope to see them again in your garden and at one of our plant sales. You may bring your seedlings in individual pots or one large pot. We'll have soil, pots, and labels on hand to help with the transfer to a good home. You do not have to bring seedlings to get seedlings. Oh, and did I mention that this exchange is free! free! free!?

Folks are also welcome to bring divisions of plants, labeled, and potted or not, to be reserved for the May plant sale. In the meantime, good luck with your seeds and may you be able to share your successes in April!

***David Mitchell, plant sale coordinator***

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### **Garden tour plans**

Plans are coming together for garden tours this season, so mark your calendars:

**April 28, Stonecrop, Gardens, Cold Springs N.Y.** ([www.stonecrop.org](http://www.stonecrop.org)). That's also the day of Stonecrop's spring sale, featuring the best plants, planted tufa specimens and planted troughs from Wrightman Nurseries and Alpine Mt. Echo. Find more information about the sale here: [www.wrightmanalpines.com/stonecrop](http://www.wrightmanalpines.com/stonecrop)

**June 14 (or thereabouts) Quebec gardens.** We are planning a two- or three-day trip to Quebec, Canada to visit Maria Galetti's Alpine Mt Echo Gardens in Sutton, Quebec, near the Vermont border ([www.alpinemtecho.com](http://www.alpinemtecho.com)). Then we will travel north 2 hours beyond Quebec City to visit Frank Cabot's garden. Les Quatre Vents. Frank is the

founder of Garden Conservancy. A website about his garden is here:  
[pss.uvm.edu/ppp/gardens/gm0802.htm](http://pss.uvm.edu/ppp/gardens/gm0802.htm).

A sign up sheet for all the trips will be distributed at the next meeting. More details to come in future newsletters. Contact me if you have questions: [bj1@cornell.edu](mailto:bj1@cornell.edu), 607-539-6484.

***Billie Jean Isbell, Garden trips/tours coordinator***

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**Mark your calendar: 2007 program line-up**

**March 17 – Chapter Study Group** meets at Wurster Memorial Garden, Tompkins County Cooperative Extension, 615 Willow Ave., Ithaca, N.Y. 10 to 11:30 a.m.

**March 17 - Harvey Wrightman**, Wrightman Alpines, Kerwood, Ont., will speak on dryland plants. 404 Plant Science. Brown bag lunch at noon. Program begins at 1 p.m. Tufa workshop/demonstration (pre-registration required) immediately following.

**April 21 - Liz Knowles**, a gardener and tour organizer from Toronto on “Echoes of wild places: a Hockley Valley, Ontario gardener pushes the limits.” Tompkins County Cooperative Extension, 615 Willow Ave., Ithaca, NY. Brown bag lunch at noon. Program begins at 1 p.m. **Seedling exchange** follows program.

**April 28 – Garden tour: Stonecrop Gardens, Cold Springs N.Y.** Featuring plant sale by Wrightman Nurseries and Alpine Mt. Echo.

**May 19 - Plant Sale**, Ithaca High School

**June 14 (or thereabouts) - Quebec gardens tour.** A two- or three-day trip to visit Maria Galetti's Alpine Mt Echo Gardens in Sutton, Quebec, and Frank Cabot's garden. Les Quatre Vents.

**August date TBD - Picnic and members-only plant sale.** Bill Plummer, Gangs Mills (near Painted Post), N.Y., will host.

**September 15 - Ellen Hornig**, proprietor of Seneca Hill Perennials and well known to many chapter members, will talk on woodland plants and other treasures from her garden/nursery. Location to be announced.

**October 21 - Janis Ruksans**, owner of Ruksans Bulbs Nursery in Latvia, a world renowned bulb grower and collector and author of five books on bulbs will speak. **Note this meeting will be on a Sunday** due to Ruksans' tight speaking schedule. 404 Plant Science. Brown bag lunch at noon. Program begins at 1 p.m.

**November 10 - Annual meeting and dish-to-pass.** 404 Plant Science. Brown bag lunch at noon. Location to be announced.

## Letter from the Chair

Greetings all,

While you all were meeting on February 17th, I was visiting the market in San Ignacio, Belize, Central America trying out new foods and stocking up on all the wonderful tropical fruit in season. Then it was on to San Pedro on Ambergris Caye for a few days seaside. What wonderful plants – and wildlife (birds being my main and most visible interest) I saw! For me it feels life-changing. (You can talk to me more about that if you want.)

Anyway, this was the first time I actually got away in winter and I highly recommend it. 90-degree temperatures and sunny skies aren't a bad remedy.

I understand our meeting was in the capable hands of Robin Bell and that several of you stepped up to become our members-share program. Thank you! I'm excited about our March meeting – with both a talk and tufa workshop being offered by Harvey Wrightman. Please join me! We'll definitely be on the down-side of winter. Have you started your seeds yet? (I did as soon as I came back.)

With thoughts of good gardening,

***Carol Eichler, chair***

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### Time to renew!

If the technology worked the way it's supposed to, you will find the membership form attached to this newsletter if your dues are due. If you aren't sure, drop an email to Carolyn Yeager at [cao2@cornell.edu](mailto:cao2@cornell.edu).

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### Study group plans

The new chapter study group will meet at March 17 at the Wurster Memorial Garden, Tompkins County Cooperative Extension, 615 Willow Ave., Ithaca, N.Y. 10 to 11:30 a.m. All members are welcome. Bring tools and work clothes and plan to attend the Chapter's general meeting at Cornell starting with lunch at noon and program at 1 p.m.

The overlying goal is for each participant to learn more about rock gardening through hands-on experience and to develop ways to share this knowledge with the greater membership. The group will also be photographing plants through the year and considering how to make the Wurster Garden a more effective teaching tool through the website and other interpretive materials.

For the immediate future the group is looking forward to spring so they can begin the traditional tasks of taking stock, cleaning up, and dividing and potting plants. They have established a "garden alert" e-mail/phone network to be able to mobilize quickly when work needs to be done. With a garden tour/class scheduled for Saturday, April 28

through Tompkins County Cooperative Extension, they want to be sure the garden is looking at its best.

If you wish to be placed on the email alert (or phone if you do not have e-mail), or have other questions please contact Carol Eichler (cme24@cornell.edu or 607-387-5823).

**Carol Eichler, chair**

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### Species Iris Group

For those who missed the Feb. 17 meeting, here's a little information about SIGNA, the Species Iris Group of North America. SIGNA is a section of the American Iris Society. There are currently between 600 and 700 members from around the world.

Membership is \$12/ per year, and gets you two 30- to 40-page bulletins a year with lots of color and interesting articles on various iris species. It also allows you access to SIGNA's seed exchange. This year's seed list arrived in mid-January and had 365 different seed lots available.

You can join SIGNA by downloading a membership form from their web site. Or contact me at krw25@cornell.edu or 607-272-0822, and I can get you one. You can order from the seed exchange and join at the same time, and it's not too late to start seed for this year.

Check out SIGNA's web site at [www.signa.org](http://www.signa.org). Also look for the data base web site at [www.badbear.com/signa/signa.pl?introduction](http://www.badbear.com/signa/signa.pl?introduction). This site has fascinating in-depth information and photos of many irises and other irids.

If you're interested in a copy of the pamphlet *An Introductory Guide to Species Iris and SIGNA*, which I edited, please let me know. This 48-page booklet answers all the frequently asked questions about how to grow about 60 relatively easy iris species.

**Ken Walkup**

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### Plant profile: Hellebores

Hellebores are some of the stars in the world of garden plants. When grown in favorable conditions, hellebores are long-lived, bloom early in the season and have a long bloom time, are resistant to pests and diseases, and require little care.

Hellebores are not normally susceptible to browsing by deer. Many years of breeding in the England, Germany and the U.S. have brought tremendous diversity of color, flower form and size, as well as double and semidouble flowers. Hellebore flowers are available in green, white, cream, yellow, pink, red, and shades of purple to nearly black, with either solid colors or spotted. Hellebores, which generally had nodding flowers, now can be found with outward facing or upright facing flowers. Hellebores also have sturdy, attractive foliage and are evergreen, with one exception. The commonly grown hellebores are Lenten Roses, *H. x hybridus* (formerly *H. orientalis*), and Christmas Roses, *H. niger*.



Hellebores are perennial herbaceous plants in the buttercup family, Ranunculaceae. There are at least 15 species of hellebores. In the wild, the natural distribution of hellebore species is concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe, mainly in the mountains. The hot spot for observing wild hellebores is in the countries formerly part of Yugoslavia, including Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia. One outlier species is *Helleborus thibetanus*, Tibetan Hellebore, native to a small area of Central China.

#### **Lenten Rose, *Helleborus x hybridus* (*H. orientalis*)**

Lenten rose was formerly considered to be *H. orientalis*, but recent study has revealed that Lenten roses are hybrids of several species, thus the species name change from *orientalis* to *x hybridus*. Lenten Rose is the most commonly available hellebore and is available in the greatest variety of colors. This hellebore

has received the lion's share of attention with breeding. Many growers of renown in the plant world are involved in breeding hellebores in the U.S. and "across the pond." Since asexual propagation (tissue culture or dividing plants) is impractical, most hellebore plants are propagated from seed. With a seed-grown plant from a named seed strain, one can be assured of good parentage. But the characteristics of the plant, including the exact color, may be unknown. If a specific color (or any other characteristic) is extremely important, purchasing a plant in flower is the best way to assure satisfaction.

The *H. orientalis* parent of this hybrid has a very large geographic range, from Greece to the Caucasus. Plant size is approximately 15 inches tall in flower to several feet wide for mature plants. Lenten rose is hardy to Zone 4 (-30 degrees F).

### **Christmas Rose, *Helleborus niger***

Christmas rose has the largest flowers of the hellebores, up to 5 inches in diameter.

This is an early-flowering species, flowering in the winter in mild climates but in early spring in our cold climate. Flowers are normally white but age to pink, and pink-flushed white flowers are also available. The legendary cultivar 'Potter's Wheel' had very large flowers. Though lost in its pure form, seed strains from this plant are said to be available. Seed strains available include 'Blackthorn' strain, with red stems and pink buds, and 'Eco Potter's Wheel', a large flowered cultivar. Christmas rose is hardy to Zone 3 (-40 degrees F).

### **Stinking Hellebore, *Helleborus foetidus***

Stinking hellebore, also called bear's foot, may be the largest hellebore, growing up to 3 feet tall and several feet wide. The name is a bit of a misnomer, since it's only the crushed foliage that has a mildly unpleasant odor. Flowers are chartreuse in large clusters and foliage is dark green. This species is more susceptible to rot and dry soil was recommended by the reference to enhance longevity. This, unlike the other species, is not a long lived plant. Stinking hellebore is considered hardy to Zone 6, with reports of success also in Zones 4 and 5. Reliability of flowering may be impaired in our climate by extreme cold and/or lack of snow cover. Seed strains available include 'Gold Bullion' with foliage that is gold or gold variegated and 'Wester Flisk' with red stems.

### **Tibetan Hellebore, *Helleborus thibetanus***

Though this is an exotic, desirable plant with beautiful flowers, Tibetan hellebore was unknown until the 1990s, and is not as commonly available from nurseries as other hellebores. Flowers of this species are pink, and may have red veins, on a scape 12 to 20 inches tall. This species may be planted in full sun or light shade, as the plants are summer dormant, and spring sunshine is needed for flowering. Loam or clay soil is recommended. Tibetan hellebore is hardy to approximately Zone 5 (-20 degrees F).

### **Growing Hellebores**

Hellebores have similar cultural requirements. They do best in a site with part shade in the warm months. Planting under the shade of deciduous trees allows the plants to receive sun after the leaves have fallen until after the plants bloom. Christmas roses (*H. niger*) reportedly will do well with more shade than other hellebores. Deep shade is not recommended, as this will reduce flowering. Hellebores may grow in an open area in the wild, but receive shade from neighboring plants, e.g. grasses or bracken fern, in the summer. Hellebores need good drainage, and if grown in heavy clay soil should be grown on a slope to provide drainage. Tibetan hellebore reportedly will tolerate winter wet conditions, similar to its native area of low meadows in China. A low planting spot for Tibetan hellebore would not be preferable in our climate, due to the risk for the repeated freezing of the stem leading to crown rot.

Hellebores prefer fertile soil with a pH near neutral. Though many European hellebores originate in areas with limestone bedrock, the ideal pH is between 6 and 7, per Burrell and Tyler. Hellebores are tolerant of a wide range of soil pH, but liming is recommended for very acidic soils. My reference did not explain why the ideal pH is lower than the pH of alkaline soils where many wild hellebores grow. Since these are long-lived plants, enriching the soil is recommended before planting. Seed-grown hellebores grow relatively slowly and take a few years to reach blooming size, but they are worth the wait. Leaves of evergreen hellebores may end up damaged and unattractive after our long winter, and cultural recommendations usually suggest cutting off the previous year's foliage in early spring, so it does not detract from the show of flowers and fresh foliage. I haven't been convinced that this is necessary. Let your individual preference guide you when to remove the leaves.

Hellebores are normally pest free, but they can be afflicted by crown rot, black spot, and Botrytis mold. Disease is more of a problem in nursery-grown plants. Good air circulation promotes the health of your plants. There are aphids that will afflict hellebores and slugs reportedly can be concern, though my slugs have not yet shown any fondness for hellebore foliage.

### **Propagation from seed**

Hellebores are not difficult to grow from seed when one understands their germination requirements. Cold stratification is required (a cold, moist period needed to simulate winter conditions which allows the seed to germinate) for 8 to 12 weeks. The conventional germination method was to plant the seeds, provide 6 to 12 weeks of warm conditions, followed by 8 to 12 weeks of cold conditions (or refrigeration), followed by 6 to 12 weeks of warm conditions, which should result in germination. Seed germinates best when fresh, though seeds that are not fresh seeds may be soaked overnight to improve germination rates. Old seed may need a year or two (several warm and cold cycles) to germinate. Hellebores have self-sown readily in the garden for me and Cole Burrell. If you have a good area to start seeds in the garden, sowing the seeds soon after they ripen (the seeds should be loose in the follicles and may have turned from brown to black). You should not expect flowering for 3 to 4 years after germination. No instant gratification for hellebore lovers!

### **Public Gardens with hellebores:**

- Royal Botanical Garden, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, [www.rbg.ca](http://www.rbg.ca)
- Wave Hill, Bronx, NY, [www.wavehill.org](http://www.wavehill.org)
- Scott Arboretum, Swarthmore, PA, [www.scottarboretum.org](http://www.scottarboretum.org)

### **Sources for hellebore plants**

Hellebore plants are more expensive than many other perennials. It seems like a reasonable investment if one buys plants of one of the long-lived species. Also, like new cultivars of other perennials, one should expect to pay more for special cultivars. Below are some East coast sources:

- Pine Knot Farms Perennials, 681 Rockchurch Rd., Clarksville, VA 23927. (804)-252-1990. [www.pineknotfarms.com](http://www.pineknotfarms.com).
- Eco-Gardens, PO Box 1227, Decatur, GA, 30031. (404) 294-6468.
- Piccadilly Farm, 1971 Whippoorwill Road, Bishop, GA 30621. (706)-769-6516.
- Arrowhead Alpines, PO Box 857, Fowlerville, MI 48836. (517)-223-3581. [www.arrowheadalpines.com](http://www.arrowheadalpines.com).
- Graham's Hellebores (from Gloucestershire, UK). Available from c/o Dixie Hougen, 2101 Wittington Blvd., Alexandria, VA 22308. [www.hellebores.hort.net](http://www.hellebores.hort.net).

### **Reference:**

C. Colston Burrell and Judith Knott Tyler, 2006, Hellebores, A Comprehensive Guide, Timber Press.

### **John Gilrein, Plant of the Month coordinator**

**Editor's note:** Graham Rice reports in his Transatlantic Plantsman blog that hellebores from renowned breeder Marietta O'Byrne will soon be available via TerraNova nurseries. Read more: [http://transatlanticplantsman.typepad.com/transatlantic\\_plantsman/2007/03/hellebores\\_from.html](http://transatlanticplantsman.typepad.com/transatlantic_plantsman/2007/03/hellebores_from.html)

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### **Norman Singer Endowment**

The Norman Singer Endowment Fund of the North American Rock Garden Society is soliciting applicants for the coming year. Applications should be in by March 31, so that they may be considered by the Committee and brought up for a vote at the NARGS Annual Meeting, June 14-17.

In past years, we have funded rock garden projects at botanic gardens, expeditions in search of seed suitable for rock garden culture, internships requested by botanic gardens, and help with publications pertinent to alpine plants. Our funds are not unlimited - most grants are in the range of \$1,500 to a high of \$5,000. The "Guidelines" can be found on the NARGS website ([www.nargs.org](http://www.nargs.org)) - at the site map look for "Responsible Positions," then "Committees," and scroll down to "Endowment Committee Guidelines."

If interested, please send an E-mail to me Phyllis Gustafson, Chair, Norman Singer Endowment NARGS, 250 Maple Street, Central Point, OR 97502. 541-664-1775 dgusgus@charter.net  
Editor's note: Our own Wurster Memorial Garden received a \$1,500 grant which helped greatly to finance the cost of constructing this public garden located at the Tompkins County Cooperative Extension offices in Ithaca.

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### **NARGS annual meeting in West Virginia, June 14-17**

"Appalachian Mountain Refuge" is the theme of the NARGS Annual Meeting, June 14 to 17, at the Canaan Valley Resort, Davis, West Virginia.

The meeting will feature field trips to Dolly Sods Wilderness Area and Blackwater Falls State Park. Dolly Sods, at 4,200 feet, is an alpine boreal ecosystem with amazing displays of Kalmia and Rhododendron as well as acid bog flora. Blackwater Falls is at a lower altitude with an Appalachian woodland flora. Both sites are refugia, places where plants remained after the Wisconsin Glacier retreated.

Speakers will include Bill Cullina of The Garden in The Wood, Bill Grafton of West Virginia University, and Bonnie Isaac of The Carnegie Museum. They will discuss the plants we see on the field trips and why they are there.

For more information, visit [www.acnargs.org](http://www.acnargs.org) or contact Paulette and John Zabkar, [johnzabkar@aol.com](mailto:johnzabkar@aol.com) or (412) 364-5820.

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### **Other events:**

**April 28 - Wurster Rock Garden Guided Tour** led by Robin Bell and sponsored by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County. Interested in rock gardening, but don't know how to get started? Come from 10 to 11:30 for a guided tour of the demonstration Wurster Rock Garden, just off Dey St. near Extension. Robin will explain the several designs incorporated into the garden and discuss the plants represented and other easy rock garden plants. *Rain or shine!* Limit 15. \$5 fee. Pre-registration preferred. Contact Pat Curran, [pc21@cornell.edu](mailto:pc21@cornell.edu) or (607) 272-2292.

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### **People**

Questions? Want to find out how you can help the Chapter? Don't hesitate to contact one of the volunteers who help make everything happen. (This is the slate to be voted on at our Feb. meeting):

- **Chair/Membership:** Carol Eichler, [cme24@cornell.edu](mailto:cme24@cornell.edu), 607-387-5823
  - **Vice Chair/Program:** Robin Bell, [rgb2@cornell.edu](mailto:rgb2@cornell.edu), 607-272-2074
  - **Treasurer/Secretary:** Carolyn Yaeger, [cao2@cornell.edu](mailto:cao2@cornell.edu), 607-844-9462
  - **Garden trips/tours:** Billie Jean Isbell, [bj1@cornell.edu](mailto:bj1@cornell.edu), 607-539-6484
  - **Plant sales:** David Mitchell, [dwm23@cornell.edu](mailto:dwm23@cornell.edu), 607-342-3660
  - **Plant of the Month:** John Gilrein, [basecamp@alum.syracuse.edu](mailto:basecamp@alum.syracuse.edu), 315-492-0844
  - **Newsletter editor/Webmaster:** Craig Cramer, [cdcramer@twcny.rr.com](mailto:cdcramer@twcny.rr.com), 607-539-7233
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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](mailto:cdcramer@twcny.rr.com). Note: The next issue of *The Green Dragon* will be in **April**.

