

## ADIRONDACK CHAPTER

*North American Rock Garden Society*

# Green Dragon Tales

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- Aug. 27 Picnic & Plant Sale
- From the Chair
- Membership Update
- Gardening in Sand
- News from National: Post-Conference
- About the Conference
- Upcoming ACNARGS Programs
- Calendar of other garden programs
- Photo of the Month

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May/June 2016

## AUGUST 27: ANNUAL PICNIC AND MEMBER-ONLY PLANT SALE

*David Mitchell, Plant Sales Chair*

We hope you've been enjoying the summer. Please think about potting up plants now for the sale in August. Please consider potting up divisions of a few of your choice plants.

Plans are set for this year's members' plant sale to be held at Upper Buttermilk State Park inside and outside the picnic pavilion (directions at the end of this article). Note this is a members-only sale. To fully participate in the sale, we invite and welcome non-members to join (or renew) at the meeting. Membership for 2016 is still only \$10 for individuals (or \$15 per household). It's still a great value since we have half of our program year ahead of us. Membership forms will be available at the picnic.

The schedule for 8/27 is as follows:

10:00 a.m. Arrive, get your plant sale number and help with sale set-up.

11:00 a.m. Plant sale begins; early arrivals get first pick

12:00 noon Lunch

(Optional, after lunch): Walk the beautiful gorge trail a little or a lot

As in past years, it pays to arrive early and sign in. There's always a broad selection of plants at great prices. You may even see some grown-out seedlings from our spring seedling exchange. For the treasured and special plants – and we should have some real gems, we will have a silent auction table. Remember this is one of only two fundraisers for the Chapter and these funds are critical to bring in informed, quality program speakers.

Note that after 10 a.m. the state park charges a vehicle use fee of \$7, unless you hold a 2016 season park pass.

Directions: For those unfamiliar with the upper entrance to Buttermilk State Park, the simplest way to get to there is via Route 96B also known as Danby Road that goes by Ithaca College. Turn at W. King Road where there is a traffic light and road signage to the Park. Stay on King Road to the park entrance – again marked by a sign – on the left. The picnic shelter where we will meet is just beyond the immediate parking area. There will be temporary parking near the shelter for unloading. Here's the link to a Park map: <http://www.nysparks.com/parks/attachments/ButtermilkFallsParkMap.pdf>).

## FROM THE CHAIR

*John Gilrein, ACNARGS Chair*

What a summer! Seems like we're in California, though it actually rained a little today. It has been a challenging summer, with my best friend being the watering can, and next best friend the hose. My vegetable garden is doing well, thanks to routine irrigation. The rock garden is surviving, with infrequent watering.

I lost at least one dwarf conifer, due to it being newly planted in 2015 and getting little supplemental watering. Another dwarf conifer is struggling after being uprooted by the workers installing siding on the adjacent garage and being rescued/potted while starting to dry up (to be fair to the crew, there was no room for ladders other than in the garden). I was afraid I would lose some pricey plants I installed this year (a dwarf oriental spruce, a columnar Japanese holly, and a *Stewartia*), so these have had a good weekly watering to keep them going. I'm afraid for trees and shrubs I planted in the woods in April, as these only got watered a few times; I'm not sure they will make it.

I hope you all have had enough water to keep your most valuable plants watered. Seems strange to be hoping for a big thunderstorm or some other deluge, but we haven't had a truly ground soaking rain for about 2 months.

The 2016 drought has been a good test for what does well on almost no rain. So far, most established trees are OK. *Santolina* (lavender cotton), lavender, *Onosma*, and *Daphne* are doing well. *Podocarpum peltatum* (native May apple) has gone dormant; *Viola canadensis* has wilted; *Geranium macrorrhizum* in sun is looking stressed; *Magnolia sieboldii* has some leaves that have dried up. The lawn is barely growing, and the weeds in ornamental gardens are not doing much in the less watered plots. At least one of our dwarf conifers at Wurster did not make it through the summer drought. After all this heat and lack of rain, it reinforces that I would not want to live in desert climate (though I know places like Santa Fe, NM are very nice in the Fall), at least not without an automatic watering system.

I hope everyone is thinking about what plants to bring to the picnic. I have some NARGS seedlings to bring. Hope to see you, and cooler weather, in August for our picnic, for the kick off of our fall season.

John

## MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

*Mary Stauble, Membership Coordinator*

Welcome 7 new members who joined our Chapter at the May plant sale: Zulma Iguina, Eleanor Dozier, Lois Levitan, Stephanie Heslop, Ann Manzano, Anna Stalter, and John Campione.

## ROCK GARDENING IN SAND

*Peter Korn*

I took up gardening twelve years ago, when I basically knew nothing about flowers except for the most common perennials. I bought a house in southern Sweden at Örkelljunga with a plot of land of about 0.7 acre, where I tried out many different soil mixtures and killed thousands of plants in the process. The advantage of not knowing much about gardening is that you have to find your way by trial and error. I have never gone by the book, and I find following the rules very tiresome. So I tend to tear up the rulebook and simply do as I please. I began growing plants in pure sand when I was still living in Örkelljunga. I have since moved to Eskilsby, about 18 miles east of Göteborg (Gothenburg) in the west of Sweden.

Why grow in sand? The main reason I like sandbed rock gardening is that it is so easy: Just tip a pile of sand onto the lawn; cover it with various kinds of rocks; and you have the perfect rock garden. On the south side of the sandbed you can grow cactus and other warmth-loving plants, while on the north side you can grow plants that prefer to be a little cooler. That is about as difficult as it gets. However, just having numerous piles of sand would be rather boring, so you might like to be a little more creative.

The siting of the rock garden is the most important consideration, depending on what you wish to grow in it. But you can make a sandbed anywhere. All you have to do is choose plants to suit the location. A rock garden is often sited in a south-facing position, making it suitable for many plants from the Mediterranean, the western United States and Central Asia. However, this would be far too warm for high-alpine plants from places like the Himalayas and New Zealand.



*One view of Peter Korn's garden*

I have a very large garden with a variety of natural features, where I can build numerous rock gardens under all conceivable conditions. Steep south-facing slopes with exposed rock, oak woods, fir woods (only four large firs remain since the recent storms) and a small bog with a cool spring in the middle of the plot. On the south-facing slopes I have built rock gardens in gneiss and limestone. In this case, I want to

create conditions that are as warm and dry as possible in this, one of the wettest parts of Sweden. Late summer tends to be so warm and dry that bulbs receive a real roasting and cactus have a chance to mature properly.

On the sunny, north-facing slopes I have rock gardens for those plants that like dry, well drained but not too warm conditions. In the woods I have mainly peat beds for forest plants, but here too I intend to build rock gardens for ferns, primroses, and other plants that like shady, well-drained conditions.

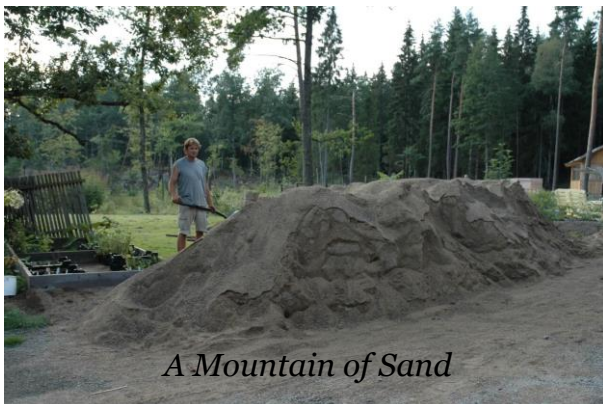
Then there are those plants that like dry, well-drained soil but cold and wet conditions. This kind of environment can be hard to create. I have started building rock gardens out in the bog, where the cold springs cool them from below. I try to site these where they will be shaded by a tree in the middle of the day when it is warmest. I also try to angle the beds so that they receive as much sun as possible without overheating. This combination produces a rock garden that is sunny and dry yet cool and damp. The alternative is to create a wet bed on a north-facing slope (build a pond, fill it with sand, and build a rock garden on top). Here I grow various high-alpine plants, as well as trying out all kinds of things that will not grow anywhere else.

### **Soils and Mixtures**

As mentioned above, I tried out a wide variety of soil mixtures and many worked well. The disadvantage of mixtures containing any kind of compost is that they decompose. After a year or two, all that is left is some rather sticky topsoil, no matter how fluffy it was to begin with. Rock gardens and beds are always best when new. Everything grows easily, and you think you are an excellent gardener. Then, after a few years have elapsed, the soil starts to compact. You can no longer insert your arm up to the elbow in the peat bed, and the rock garden is far too wet, except in summer when it is rock-hard and dry as dust.

What's more, there is tough competition between roots, and nothing grows so easily anymore. You have the same problems even if you plant in sand: after a few years, it doesn't go so well. The difference is that the bed is still well drained and you still have the same sand that you built the bed with. I have now stopped using any kind of compost in my rock gardens and have also switched to pure natural sand for perennials.

I still kill thousands of plants but also try to grow anything that has the slightest chance of survival. If a plant can withstand frost, then it might work. I plant several thousand new varieties every year, and it is amazing how many survive. If it works, then I try to plant at least one tray (40 specimens) of each variety. There is always one that is hardier than the rest, and if I can just get one to survive, I can cultivate it further. I have no real inhibitions and really try to grow everything I come across, mostly from seed.



*A Mountain of Sand*

### **More About the Sand**

I don't use the finest grade sand, as it can be too compact. When I moved to Eskilsby, I ordered sand from all the local gravel pits so that I could test which was the best in which to plant. There were clear differences, but I don't know what they

were. I did not send the sand for any kind of analysis and was content to conclude that the sand from Landvetter area was the best. It is just a matter of trial and error. The sandbed should be as large as possible and 8 to 16 inches deep. Nothing must be mixed with the sand! It doesn't really matter what is underneath. I usually build a shell out of the original soil, which is completely useless as anything other than fill (old pinewood). If you are siting the bed on a lawn, it does not need to be excavated first. Most of the grass will die off, and it is easier to remove any that survives than to excavate the lawn beforehand.

A sandbed should always be raised. If you dig a pit and fill it with sand, it will fill with water during the winter. It is also good if the bed slopes in one direction, to ensure that no water can ever stand. The sand should preferably be covered with something: crushed stone, natural stone, bark or whatever takes your fancy. The main point is that it is coarse, provide drainage and reduce evaporation. It is easiest to plant the bed before or while you add the covering layer, especially if you are using coarse material. When I plant, I remove any soil the plants may previously have been grown in. Otherwise, they will not take root in the sand but will keep their roots in the clump of soil and wither away when the clump dries out.

### **Advantages of Sand**

The advantages of sand are that it never gets really wet and dries up very fast on the surface. It also retains moisture very well. Look at a beach in the summer: four inches down it is always damp, no matter how warm and dry it is on the surface.

I never water anything in my garden except possibly once when I plant it. If it is a dry bed, it should contain plants that prefer to be dry. There are plenty of fun-to-grow desert plants that will never die of thirst. Since the surface is very dry and barren, weeds will not thrive, and any that take root are easily cleared. If you live in a very dry area or are one of those people who cannot bear to see their favorite plants lying dry on the ground in summer, then the sand is very easily dampened even when it has become thoroughly dry.



*Planted Sandbed*

However, there are very few plants that die of thirst. Often they simply wither but recover in the autumn. If they fail to do so, then it was obviously the wrong place for that particular plant. If you "torment" plants sufficiently, they will acquire a large root system and cope much better with future dry spells. Roots grow very easily in sand, and often the plants end up with an extensive, deep root system. They probably also compensate for the lack of nutrition with a larger root system.

Likewise, they gain in hardiness and maturity. In the spring, the combination of cold nights with ground frost and strong sun during the day often causes me problems. The

spring sunshine frequently kills more plants than the winter. Sand does not contain so much water, so the ground frost is not so hard and melts very quickly when the sun warms the surface. This gives the plants a source of water so that they do not wither to death.

Sensitive evergreens fare much better in sand. If you grow pot plants in sandbeds, you will often find that those that have taken root in the sand grow much better than those in the pots. However, personally I do not think that growing plants in sand-filled pots is effective.

### **Disadvantages of Sandbeds**

The disadvantages of sand are possible leaching and lack of nutrition. My oldest rock gardens are currently five years old and are still growing well. If you wish, you can add a little of your preferred fertilizer. I sometimes use a small amount, but only in those areas where I have slightly larger plants. I might try some kind of mineral fertilizer with zero nitrogen content, but rainfall still provides enough of that. If I notice a lack of minerals setting in, I will have to look for something suitable.



*Sandbed “dressed”*

Annual rainfall where I live averages around 45 inches per year, most of it when it is not wanted. Winter fluctuates between mild and cold, with temperatures above freezing one week but down to -22 F at their coldest, and rarely any certainty of snow cover. Spring is often cold and late.

There are numerous arguments against growing plants in a sandbed, but usually only from people who have never tried it themselves. People who have tried it are surprised that it can indeed be done. If you don't try, you won't know, and anything that works is right. One tip is to think big! A small pile of sand won't work. Order two truckloads of sand straight away. That still won't be enough.

[This article and accompanying photos has been edited from “The Rock Garden” 119:106-111 (2007), the *Journal of the Scottish Rock Garden Club*, Anton Edwards, editor, and are reprinted here by permission.]

## **NEWS FROM NATIONAL: POST-CONFERENCE INFO**

*Carol Eichler, Newsletter Editor*

A sold-out conference with over 250 plant-crazed attendees provided evidence that interest in rock gardening is widespread. As proxy from our Chapter I joined a meeting

with other Chapter Chairs to get an update from the NARGS Board. I wish I could say it was all good news but it was not. NARGS National, our parent organization, is facing a financial crisis. Membership to NARGS is declining. Dues as the major revenue source have not been able to keep up with expenses. What's positive about this Board is that it is actively taking measures to turn this financial situation around. And they are acknowledging that they need help from the Chapters to do so (more on this in a bit).

They have taken the obvious first steps – to cut expenses to “bare bones.” Their decision to temporarily drop the speaker tours is one example. There were discussions about the *Quarterly*, because it is the single most costly item in the budget and the decision was made to continue to print it in hard copy, in other words, to make no changes. The *Quarterly* is perhaps the most valued of the member benefits.

To remedy a deficit budget, more revenue is needed and they are taking a multi-pronged approach. One of the most exciting will be to offer plant-oriented tours in 2017 – one will be to the Dolomites in summer, the other has yet to be determined. Together with the active pursuit of tiered and corporate memberships, these steps will start to close the deficit gap, but it's still not enough.

Here's where the Board is asking for Chapter involvement. Only a fraction of Chapter members become NARGS members. Unlike (perhaps all) other national gardening organizations, NARGS has never required its Chapters or their members to pay an affiliation fee. The Board fell short of requiring a mandatory monetary contribution but they are asking each Chapter to consider how they can support the national organization financially and in other ways.

Involvement implies a two-way exchange and National openly admits it needs to do a better job. So the question arises What can the Chapters do for National? Would local chapters exist without National? How do the Chapters benefit from National? Why do so few Chapter members become NARGS members? What would make National more appealing for Chapter members to join? How can National better support its Chapters?

The current NARGS Board are invested in the long-term success of National and are taking active steps to strengthen the organization. Those of us at the Chapter level should ask ourselves “are we prepared to do the same?” The future of NARGS is at stake.

## ABOUT THE NARGS CONFERENCE (IN BRIEF!)

*Carol Eichler, Newsletter Editor*

If I had one word to describe the conference, I would say “FABULOUS!” After the opening reception at the Denver Botanic Gardens, Terry and I took the next morning to return and view the gardens at our leisure. Of course we spent most of that time in the rock garden but I think I liked the children's rock garden, located on



the roof of the parking garage, even better for its smaller scale.

We were then happy to escape the Front Range for the less populated, slower-paced part of Colorado west of the Continental Divide. With our rental car we were free to set our own agenda and as Terry liked to put it, “We tried to pack 2 days into one.” That meant stopping “on the way” at the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens in Vail for a speed-tour before heading north to our conference destination. Steamboat Springs is really not “on the way” to anywhere unless you’re a cattle rancher. En route it is certainly beautiful country with only an occasional car and lots of hills, hair-pin curves and views of distant mountains. Scenic for sure.

We almost missed dinner that night but our additional daytime excursions were more than worth it. Staying in the dorm at Colorado Mountain College’s “Alpine Campus” made for convenience (and helped cut our expenses) as all the meals, lectures and meeting points for the day hikes started from the College.

After Denver, we were gradually acclimated to the higher altitude of 7,000+ feet in Steamboat. We were wisely scheduled to visit gardens in Steamboat, both the public Yampa River Botanic Garden (see Photo of the Month) and several private gardens on our first day there.



*View from the Mad Creek/Red Dirt hike*

The next two days took us on hikes along some of the multi-use trails in the area to higher elevations between 8-10,000 feet – which by definition is the montane zone (lower and you’re in the foothills, 10-12,000’ is considered sub-alpine, 12,000’+ is alpine and hence above tree zone). Of the seven major life zones in Colorado, the montane supports the greatest diversity of plant and animal life. The animals – such as the pika and marmot – I was familiar with, the plants not so much.

Each evening was filled with wonderful lectures and was different from past conferences in that the majority of speakers were under the age of 40 (leading the way for the next generation of rock gardeners). The mingling with other rock gardeners from all over the U.S. and the world was an immeasurable plus. It’s so much fun to converse with other enthusiastic plant people!



*A treasured find of the montaine – Calypso bulbosa, fairy slipper orchid*

Post conference, we were invited to visit Mike Kintgen’s garden about 45 minutes north of Steamboat. Mike oversees the Alpine Garden Collection at Denver Botanic Gardens and was Conference Chair (also one of the “under 40’s”). We held high expectations for this visit and were not disappointed.





*Coveted alpine, tiny Eritricheum nanum, Alpine forget-me-not, shown close to life-size*

Although I hate to admit this, for me the highlight of the trip was not the conference but the additional day we took to visit Rocky Mountain National Park. We were so lucky to find the alpine meadows there in peak bloom! The mountains are spectacular of course but Terry and I couldn't take our eyes off all the beautiful blooming gems in the tundra only inches from ground level.

While I can offer you but a small sample of photos here, you will just have to wait until Terry's and my presentation coming up in the spring next year to see more.

## UPCOMING 2016 ACNARGS PROGRAMS

*Mark your calendars! Unless otherwise specified, all local events start with a brown bag lunch at noon with the program following at 1 pm, and take place at the renovated Whetzel Room, 404 Plant Science Building, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.*

**August 27: Member Sale and Annual Picnic**, 10 am to ~1 pm, Picnic Shelter at Upper Buttermilk State Park, Ithaca

**September 17:** Teri Dunn Chace, "Seeing Flowers," based on her best-selling, award-winning book of the same title

**Oct.15:** Jill M. Nicolaus, critterolost, author, and writer-contributor to Dave's Garden website. Topic to be announced

**Nov.12:** Elizabeth Lawson, Primroses

As we learn more details of our meetings they will be included in future newsletters, our blog, [acnargs.blogspot.com](http://acnargs.blogspot.com), and our Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/acnargs>.

## CALENDAR OF SELECT GARDEN EVENTS

*To have a garden event in your area listed send all pertinent information to Carol Eichler at [carolithaca@gmail.com](mailto:carolithaca@gmail.com)*

**July 30 & 31:** Buffalo Garden Walk, <http://www.gardenwalkbuffalo.com/>

**August 6:** Tompkins County Open Garden Day (5 gardens), Garden Conservancy benefit.  
**Tompkins County Open Day Gardens**

**August 12-13:** American Conifer Society's Northeast Regional Meeting, Keene, New Hampshire. Info at [www.conifersociety.org](http://www.conifersociety.org)

**Sept. 10:** Gathering of Gardeners, Rochester. **Gathering of Gardeners**

**May 10-15, 2017:** 3rd Czech International Rock Garden conference, Prague, Czech Republic; info at **Czech Rock Garden Conference on Facebook**.

## ABOUT US – ACNARGS

We are an all-volunteer organization and one of thirty-eight NARGS affiliated chapters active in North America. Our annual Chapter activities include 6 program-speaker meetings, the Green Dragon newsletter, web and Facebook pages, garden visits, overnight garden trips, hands-on workshops, and 3 plant sales a year. Our meetings are informal, friendly gatherings that provide a wealth of information and offer a source for unusual plants, plus the opportunity to be inspired by other gardeners. The public is always welcome.

Chapter membership starts at \$10 a year based on the calendar year. Membership includes these benefits: newsletter sent to you electronically (or option by mail for an extra fee), opportunity to travel on our planned overnight garden trips, and plant sale discounts and member only sales, including Plant-of-the-Month sales. Download a membership form here: <http://www.acnargs.org/join.pdf>.

## ABOUT NARGS NATIONAL

NARGS National is our parent organization: We encourage you to join (online at [www.nargs.org](http://www.nargs.org)) for only \$40 a year. Benefits include a seed exchange, a quarterly publication, and an on-line web site featuring an archive of past publications, a chat forum and a horticultural encyclopedia. NARGS National also conducts winter study weekends and holds its Annual Meeting in interesting places where attendees have the opportunity to visit gardens, and take field trips, often to alpine areas, as well as hear talks by outstanding plants people from around the world.

## RESPONSIBLE PEOPLE/2016 BOARD MEMBERS

*If you want to volunteer, we'd love to hear from you!*

Chair: John Gilrein, [basecamp@alum.syracuse.edu](mailto:basecamp@alum.syracuse.edu)

Program: Nari Mistry, [nbm2@cornell.edu](mailto:nbm2@cornell.edu)

Program Committee Members: **Could this be you?**

Secretary: Mary Stauble, [mes2@cornell.edu](mailto:mes2@cornell.edu)

Treasurer: BZ Marranca, [mmm10@cornell.edu](mailto:mmm10@cornell.edu)

Plant Sales Chair: David Mitchell, [dwm23@cornell.edu](mailto:dwm23@cornell.edu). **Seeking a Co-Chair for 2016 to work alongside David...Why not you?**

Plant Sales Committee Members: Michael Loos, BZ Marranca, Carol Eichler

Plant of the Month: John Gilrein, [basecamp@alum.syracuse.edu](mailto:basecamp@alum.syracuse.edu)

Membership: Mary Stauble, [mes2@cornell.edu](mailto:mes2@cornell.edu)

New Member Hospitality: Terry Humphries, [terryehumphries@gmail.com](mailto:terryehumphries@gmail.com)

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## GREEN DRAGON TALES

Published eight times a year (Jan/Feb., March, April, May/June, July/Aug., Sept., Oct. Nov./Dec.). Submit articles by the fourth Friday of the month preceding publication to Carol Eichler, [carolithaca@gmail.com](mailto:carolithaca@gmail.com). Note: The next issue of *The Green Dragon* will be our September 2016 issue. The newsletter is always posted and printable each month on our website: [www.acnargs.org](http://www.acnargs.org)

## PHOTO OF THE MONTH



*New Crevice Garden  
at Yampa River Botanic Garden, Steamboat Springs, Colorado*

Coming next issue: update from Garden Fair, update from the Rochester area day trip