

# Perennial Notes

July 31, 1995

The major disadvantage of having a garden and working on it is that one leaves oneself with no leisure to study the result one has laboriously achieved or, more likely, failed to achieve.....In the garden, from March to the end of April is youth, from May to June is middle youth; after the end of July, we enter the painful stage when we know we are going on sixty....(Vita Sackville-West, Sissinghurst).

This issue of Perennial Notes is dedicated to the memory of Charles (Chuck) Northrop, 1921-1995, see below.

## August Meeting

The August meeting will be a potluck supper with the Hosta Society on Thursday, August 17 in the Allen Centennial Garden on the UW campus. This is a lovely spot and we will have a guided tour. Plan to arrive about 6:30 PM. Bring a lawn chair, as places to sit will be in short supply. Drinks (coffee, soft drinks, lemonade) will be supplied. Details about the September tour in Door County will be discussed. No post card reminders will be mailed out for the August meeting.

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## Impressions

By Marlyn Sachtjen

I hope you make the time often to visit other gardens. What do you remember about the gardens you visit? I'm always on the lookout for new plants and new combinations. We notice the structure of trees in the winter, but to make a lasting summer impression that includes trees and shrubs, forethought is necessary.

From my kitchen window I see a drooping *Prunus maacki* underplanted with *Lilium* 'Enchantment', *Asclepias tuberosa* (butterfly flower), a *Viburnum argentea* 'Marginata' and the foliage of *Uvularia* and a perennial geranium.. The grouping is a knockout. Another long term grouping includes *Allium sphaerocephalum* (drumstick allium), *Calamagrostis* grass (its sterile) and shaded pink *Liliums* with an *Arborvitae* 'Emerald Green' as a background. This arborvitae starts to develop spires during its seventh year and makes a lasting impression. Other arborvitae's tend to stay lumpy with no special growth pattern.

The *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Aureum' (yellow locust) is a perfect foil for the *Primula* family. *Primulas* can tolerate dry places if they are shaded. I grow mine from seed sprinkled in place, then mused up. They are never transplanted. *Heuchera micrantha* 'Palace Purple' has WOW POWER. I don't know anything it doesn't look well with, particularly *Spirea bullata*, *Picea pungens* 'Globosa' <sup>1</sup> and *Hieraceum lanatum*. <sup>2</sup> Or outline a path with it and *Athyrium goeringianum* (Japanese painted fern) and intersperse them with mauve shaded semi-aquilegias.

*Aquilegia flabellata* 'alba' is another impressive plant with blue-leafed *Hosta* and *Allium caeruleum*. Think about alliums for outstanding effects together with varieties of plants. They are special and have no problems, blooming for a long time. *Allium caeruleum* is also great with *Thalictrum* especially the native species. All manner of *Sedums* have become important in my garden. *Sedum* 'Autumn Joy' is another receptive plant that looks great all winter. Try it with *Picea pungens* and short grasses.

Some aggressive companion plants help to control each other. *Rudbeckia triloba* and *Artemisia* 'Silver King' are a handsome fall couple and don't forget about *Achillea* 'Paprika'. It's a must even while fading. Its best with solid color companions, i.e. small one foot tall yellow day lilies and *Patrinia*. Be sure to add dwarf conifers and dwarf shrubs in your designs. They stay in context size wise and give a year-round appealing visual portrait. Every plant discussed is hardy and tough. I hope you incorporate these into your gardens.

Editor's notes:

1. A dwarf, blue spruce, globular form.
2. I had no idea on this one. A gray leaved member of the hawkweed family from Southern Europe. Marlyn admits that this one grows a little too well. A picture of this lovely plant is found on page 143 (Vol II) of Phillips and Rix's Perennials (Random House). If you don't have this two volume, paper bound set, get it. Little information on cultivation, but oh the pictures!

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### Gardening on the Tracks

One of the joys of having a dog, is getting to walk it. Many of my plant friends know this only too well, as the two of us frequently stroll unannounced and uninvited into *your* garden. One of our favorite walks, as with many Westside dogs and their would be masters, is the stretch of railroad tracks which runs from Camp Randall to the Beltline just East of Odana Hills Golf Course. Though I am told these tracks run to such far off sounding places as Freeport, Illinois, presently they service only the Brunzell Lumber Company, just across the Beltline. Beyond this point they are reportedly unusable. Needless to say the trains run very infrequently, once or twice a week or less. The biggest commotion along the tracks is raised not by trains, but by Westside residents, who turn out in droves to protest the occasional forays of railroad company war parties armed with defoliant sprays and chain saws, attacking the thickets of buck thorn, box elder, and bush honeysuckle attempting to obliterate the right of way. After these incursions, it is true that the tracks take on the appearance of a war zone, but I am always amazed at how rapidly these foreign invaders recover--in fact, they grow even more luxuriantly after such devastation. The tracks are complete with their own "water feature", an overgrown drainage ditch which flows from the Beltline replete with pop bottles, beer cans, and assorted paper products on the way to various culverts which pass under Midvale Boulevard and eventually lead through the West side neighborhoods of Nakoma, Dungeon and Monroe, terminating in the various desilting ponds on the north side of Lake Wingra. All along its right of way the tracks are a repository for garden wastes (read this as 'compost piles'), as well as the "berms" of brush left by the chain saws. But as you will see, one man's yard waste can be yet another's gardening pleasure.

As you may have gathered, walking the tracks is not reminiscent of Longwood Gardens or Dumbarton Oaks, particularly when you realize (often with your feet) why most people are walking their dogs along there in the first place. But, they are not entirely without

gardening merit, or I wouldn't be boring you with this piece. My favorite part of the tracks stretches from Glenway, across Odand Road and Midvale Boulevard, to a point just short of the Beltline. Most of this stretch is very "wooded", or occasionally "de-wooded" as the case may be. A typical walk begins in Glenway Park, a neglected, peopleless, green space. However, its dramatic topography deserves better, and indeed its very preservation reflects someone's vision of an earlier time. Built on the site of an old quarry, the park rises up from Cross Street, proceeding into a rocky ravine vaguely resembling Parfrey's Glenn in Sauk County, but devoid of the wildflowers excepting some large clumps of Dutchman's breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*) in the spring. It ends on the top of a very large man-made mound, nearly level with the tracks and literally crowned with a strange circle of large rectangular rocks. For those of you who are familiar with the nearby Ho Nee Um Woods of the Arboretum, you would recognize the rocks as yet another "council ring", a hall mark of the work of one of Madison's greatest landscape architect, Jens Jensen. (Well, all right, there is no "Jens Jensen Drive" on the Lake Monona causeway.) For he is the master visionary behind this park though I shudder to think of what he would think of his "vision" today. Opening around 1950, it was one of the last parks designed before his death in 1951, and was the site of a popular city summer day camp for children in the 1950's. So here my mind and body walk with Jens Jensen, founder of the Clearing and its school in Door County, founder of the Friends of Our Native Landscape, collaborator of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, and landscape designer for the rich and famous including Henry Ford and his vast estate, Fair Lane, in Dearborn, Michigan.

All along its course, the tracks are bordered periodically by garden plots, the devotees taking advantage of the open spaces of the right of way. These remind me of the "Kolonies", small villages of charming garden plots often complete with tiny cottages or lean-toos, which line the railroad tracks in many urban areas of Europe, especially Germany. Most of these sport vegetable gardens and large clumps of overgrown perennials. I am acquainted with many of the gardeners, often on a first name basis only, and frequently stop to chat about the weather, my dog, or this year's tomato crop. Not surprisingly, I often return home with a sack of tomatoes or bush beans, a few zucchini squash, a pint of raspberries or strawberries, and occasionally a favorite peony blossom or two. For these are fine generous people who are delighted to share the largess of the tracks with the dog walkers, who do not make room for vegies in their own gardens. The tracks are also a source of wild berries including delicious black caps in early July and in a few locations in August, elderberries and some of the finest blackberries you could ever put into a pie. Now, don't ask me about the location of those blackberries. There are usually just enough for two pies!

The tracks are an unusual nursery of sorts, unusual in the fact that all of the plant material has either escaped or was discarded (read 'composted') from more "established" gardens. Furthermore, this one does not except credit cards (or cash) and isn't closed by 4:30 on Sunday afternoons (I never understood why the Bruce Company has to close so early). Indeed, it is the Salvation Army of Garden Centers. Large clumps of *Hosta lancifolia*, and *Hosta fortunei* 'Albomarginata' are always available. Masses of sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), *Ajuga reptans*, moneyplant (*Lysimachia nummularia*) and *Lamium galeobolam* 'variegatum' run nearly up to the tracks at some points, require no sales clerks for assistance, and you are allowed to take all you want for the same low price. Soon these plants can be running away in *your* garden, too. I know of several clumps of purple New England asters (*Aster novae-angliae*) and the giant Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum commutatum*) from which selections have been made for my own woodland garden. There is also a special wild flower section with pussy toes (not the pink one!), stately ostrich (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) and bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) ferns, white trout lily (*Erythronium americanum*), and hidden away, a few plants of wood anemone (*Anemone quinquefolia*). These are hard enough to find that I think the manager is

keeping them back for himself, though I must confess that I have picked up a few of these for my own woodland garden. In the special wet lands and water gardening area, the draining ditch is stocked with large quantities of Pennsylvania sedge and *Equisetum arvense*. The latter was an especially difficult plant, requiring several trips, but now it is a prominent feature of my wild garden. This is the same *Equisetum* that lines McAffrey Drive as it skirts the south side of Lake Wingra in the Arboretum (no digging allowed, either), the one I have observed in the wooded areas of the grounds of Frederick the Great's San Souci Palace in Potsdam, and along the banks of the Schuylkill River near Philadelphia. I like to think of it as a continuous green thread girdling the Northern Hemisphere. It is a wonderful plant, with a yellow green color, and a unique feathery form and texture. It pops up here and there in the garden, making very pleasing and unimagined plant associations. Furthermore, the garden center on the tracks is the only known local source of this specialty item. There are also bargains on large quantities of Virginia blue bells (*Mertensia virginica*), blood root (*Sanquinaria canadensis*), dames rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*), snake root (*Eupatorium rugosum*), and frosty aster (*Aster divaricatus*).

There is also a special area devoted to ornaments and various structural elements for the garden, including interesting rocks and weathered stumps cast down on the tracks by less appreciative souls. Four years ago, my son and I found a large, overlooked hollowed out log on a clearance sale. Transporting (no delivery service) it to the back reaches of the garden, it is planted with tuberous begonias every summer. For the past few years, I have also been lugging home piece by piece a cache of warm, weathered yellow bricks which are available only during the winter months due to the covering of underbrush. Similarly, an old hand forged wrench and various forged railroad pins and stakes lost by railroad workers of a couple of generations ago serve a second life as hose guards. A well used picnic table has become my potting bench.

I would be remiss without mentioning the wildlife found along the tracks. These are a special feature. There are the usual large numbers of groundhogs, rabbits, and occasional deer sightings. In the winter months, the coyotes are easily spotted in the late afternoon light along the edges of the golf course. And then there are the birds, many of which are probably attracted by the many feeders in the adjoining yards. In the fall, a large and beautiful purple smoke tree (*Cotinus coggygria* 'purpureus') serves as a feeder for magnificent flocks of cedar wax wings. In the spring and summer, large numbers of gold finches and house finches (hopefully nesting in someone else's hanging baskets) are present. And in the winter, there are flocks of juncos and rare but memorable sightings of pine siskins, purple finches, and rose breasted grosbeaks. Birds of prey include great horned owls, screech owls, and a number of species of hawks which are hard for me to specifically identify. Canada geese (presumably from the ponds on Odana golf course) are occasionally found feeding in the Pennsylvania sedges along the drainage ditch.

Though the East end of my walk begins with Jens Jensen, it is at the far west end, a mere few hundred yards from the Beltline, that I past through the garden of Charles Northrop, which is the only Gold Medal Award (Pennsylvania Horticulture Society) winning garden along the tracks. The garden is entered from a narrow, damp trail overgrown with bush honeysuckle, by stepping out onto a wide sunny grass path. The path is lined for a hundred feet on both sides with Chuck's wildflower garden. Everything is grown from seed, often painstakingly started in his basement long before the growing season begins. The dazzling colors and variety of flowers viewed over the last 15 years has been mine boggling. There was the year when the right side of the path was planted with a seemingly endless ten foot swath of orange wall flower (*Erysimum asperum*) and the left side similarly planted with a mixture of poppies of every color. Spectacular!! Or the year when the right side was solid with red cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) and left side

was solid with blue lobelia (*Lobelia syphilitica*). Both beds were also dotted periodically with queen anne's lace (*Daucus carota*) and white yarrow (*Achillea grandiflora*). What a patriotic picture, and talk about fireworks! Some years there were large drifts of variously colored *Monarda*, blue flax (*Linum perenne*), *Rudbeckias*, and butterfly flower (*Asclepias tuberosa*). Other times there were rattlesnake master (*Eryngium* sp?), bachelor buttons (*Centaurea montana*), mulleins (*Verbascum thapsus*), firewheels (*Gaillardia grandiflora*), and queen of the prairie (*Filipendula rubra*). If it could be grown from seed, he had tried it. He also grew a large number of prairie grasses which flared dramatically in the breezes and persisted through the winter months. As I recall it, his crowning glory and proudest achievement was the six by six foot mass of pale lavender giant penstemmons (*Penstemon grandiflora*) he succeeded in bringing into full bloom one year. This is an endangered or nearly endangered species in Wisconsin. Up the hill from the tracks, his garden was filled with many pass-along-perennials from his mother and grandmother's gardens in northern Wisconsin. He did allow plenty of room for a vegetable garden and was always trying out rather exotic types of tomatoes. There were yellow ones from Czechoslovakia and purplish ones from Siberia. I liked to think that he exchanged seed with people in all these places, but I understand that he mostly ordered them from the catalogues. I also recall one particularly good year in which one side of the path was planted with a particularly unusual, native wild flower mix from his daughter in Idaho. Chuck was in his garden, morning, noon and evening after he retired, and after a tour around it with him, we would often retreat to the coolness of the screen porch to join his wife, Eileen, regally overseeing things from the top of the hill. Chuck was an unheralded gardener, known only to the walkers of the tracks. He was willing to talk and share plants (and tomatoes) with all comers, and seemed to relish the visits from his uninvited guest(s). This year, I am happy to report that the garden is still dotted with mulleins, poppies, bachelor buttons, butterfly flower, Rudbeckia, yarrow, rattlesnake master, and wall flowers, but there is a sadness about the place. You see, Chuck did not make it through this past winter. Just like those lavender penstemmons, he didn't come out to greet his friends this spring. You will be missed by the dogwalkers, Chuck, but the world of beauty you sowed and reaped along the tracks will not be forgotten.

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### Coming Events

August 13 12-4 PM Olbrich Gardens "Sunday in the Park". Please call Frank Greer at 233-4686 if you can help with our booth.

August 17-See above.

September 9,10...Door County Tour with the Hosta Society. We will plan to meet for a box lunch at Greg Meissner's Nursery and Display Gardens on Co. T outside of Sturgeon Bay. Four other gardens in the Baileys Harbor area will be toured that afternoon, including Emily Hickey's. Fish boil Saturday night at Latham Smith Lodge. On Sunday, tours of two additional nurseries are planned. (Marcelle's Plantscapes and the House of Hostas). For lodging reservations, call Leatham Smith Lodge (414-743-5555) or Maritime Inn (414-743-7231) in Sturgeon Bay.

Sept 30, Oct 1. Combined meeting of the Wisconsin Woody Plant Society and Central Chapter of the American Conifer Society. Lectures, dwarf conifer sale/auction, tours. Call Ed Hasselkus (238-1451) for details.

October 18, 7PM. Business meeting, Olbrich Gardens, upstairs meeting room. We have lots to discuss--new officers, changes in By Laws, newsletter continuation, annual sale, next year's program. Our membership stands at just over a 100. We need to make plans if we are to continue growing. A surprise slide show may be available if we get our work done. Call Frank Greer, 233-4686, if you want to place an item on the agenda.

October 26, 7 PM. Joint program with Hosta Society. Olbrich Gardens. Guest speaker will be Dr. Jim Wilkens from Jackson, Michigan. Talk will feature his fabulous garden and have a theme of "plant adaptations".

November 12, 1 PM Olbrich Gardens. Elizabeth Neese, North American Rock Garden Society Speaker on the Flora of Utah. Sponsored by the Rock Garden Society.

November 15, 7 PM. Olbrich Gardens. Jack Ferreri, local rock garden guru with a national reputation, will speak on "Making a Rock Garden". To be followed up with a tour of Jack's Garden in the Spring of 1996.

January 21 1100 1996 Perennial Society/Hosta Society Sunday pot luck brunch. Olbrich Gardens. There will be suitable entertainment.

February 17 & 18 1996 Garden Expo. Dane County Forum. We will have a booth.

### PAST EVENTS

Our second annual sale on May 27th was a rousing success. We cleared over \$1000, nearly tripling the proceeds of last year's sale. Thanks to every one who helped with all aspects. It was great fun and there were lots of bargains. Special thanks to Tom Cottington and Lois Kinlen who donated lots of plants. Thanks to CR Stephenson and Flower Factory for donating plants not available from any one's gardens. Special thanks to Joan Sevrera for hosting the event. Begin planning for next year's sale!! What can *you* donate and how can *you* help??

June 12 clean up and grooming at the Urban League Headquarters on Gorham Street. As you know, we "maintain" the landscaping at this Madison community organization. Thanks to Tom Cottington, John Cannon, Pam Mather & son, and Frank Greer for getting the work done.

### Plant Sales

August 5 Iris Society Sale. Olbrich Gardens. 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM Auction at 1:00 PM.

August 19,20. Day Lily Society sale. Olbrich Gardens. 10:00AM-5:00PM Saturday and Noon to 5:PM on Sunday.

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Special thanks to Marlyn Sachtjen for her contribution to Perennial Notes. If you would like to write something for the newsletter, give Frank Greer a call at 233-4686. Otherwise, he might be calling *you*.