

Perennial Notes

November 6, 1995

Teenagers in the Garden

Don't laugh. This is a serious topic. As the father of two teenagers, I speak from experience. It is true that mine don't know a daffodil from a delphinium, but they do know their fruits and vegetables. Why just asked them anything you want about "Squashed Pumpkins", * "Banana-rama", * "Mighty Lemon Drops", * "Blind Melon", * "Red Hot Chile Peppers", * or the "Mango Jam"*. Recently, with a "little" cajoling, I was able to get my son to mow the grass in the front yard during the half time of the Greenbay Packers-Dallas Cowboys game. Despite my admonitions, he managed to decimate 90% of the newly emerging buds of *Crocus speciosus* and *Crocus gouliymi* on the edge of the perennial border. Now I have yet another year to dream about the lovely, delicate, purple flowers of *C. speciosus* with their stunning, conspicuous orange stigmata. More upsetting was the loss of this year's first appearance of *C. gouliymi* in my garden. Ever since reading that these pale, ghostly, lilac flowers were Alan Lacy's favorite autumn crocus I had been eager to find a source. This year, I finally obtained a limited quantity for a princely sum. After listening to me ranting about his carelessness, and in his rush to replace the lawn mower back under the house (only 30 seconds left in the half-time), he sideswiped the potting bench, shattering several clay pots including a recently acquired antique one with the "worm" pattern. If this wasn't torment enough, the next day my daughter gave me ten generous minutes of her time in the garden raking leaves, and in ten minutes managed to wipe out most of the *Lysimachia japonica* 'minutissima' (ah! those tiny yellow pearls of flowers) growing between the flagstones of the terrace steps I have been coddling for the past three years. Teenagers in the garden? I can hardly wait until their next garden foray.

But, as I said this is a serious piece. It was in the fall of 1993 that I first met Eric Marcelle, in the charming garden of Emily Hickey in Bailey's Harbor, Wisconsin. As it happened, we were both attending a Door County tour of the Wisconsin Woody Plants Society. Being somewhat of a dwarf hemlock aficionado (they are one of the few conifers which will grow under shady conditions), I had paused before a nice specimen of *Tsuga canadensis* 'Gentsch White'. Unfortunately, it was growing in full sun so that the "white" was barely noticeable. I mentioned this casually to the person standing beside me, and was overwhelmed with information about this particular hemlock. I was literally bowled over when I looked up to see that the source of this horticultural information was a young man whose complexion betrayed his adolescence. As I learned later, Eric was 15 years old. As my experiences with teenagers in the garden were generally less than pleasant ones, I instantly wanted to know more about this one just in case there were some redeeming features I did not know about. As it was, I spent the rest of the day absorbing knowledge from this young kid! (For a frame of reference, I am very close to the half a century mark.) This teenager not only knew the difference between a daffodil and a delphinium, but also could expound on the subtle differences between *Tricyrtis sinonome* and *Tricyrtis formosana*. It quickly became obvious, that though he was interested in all flora, his principal love was hostas and he present me with a business card from his own nursery located near Luxemburg, Wisconsin, which specializes in this genus. His second, true love, was "witches' brooms", ** and the propagation thereof and he proceeded to tell

me how he had just planted 200 conifer seedlings to serve as grafting material for the brooms. I didn't think to ask him about the "Lightning Seeds"*.

The next spring, Eric visited me in Madison, where I had arranged for him to spend time in the plant tissue culture laboratory of the University of Wisconsin's Horticulture Department and with the university's arboretum's Longnecker Gardens curator, Ed Hasselkus. I met him at the bus station and took him back to my office where he had an hour or so to kill. I later learned that he then ran the two miles nonstop up to campus, so eager was he to visit the tissue culture laboratory. His dream was setting up an operation like this at home, not a front row seat at a concert by the "Smashing Pumpkins". When I picked him up at the Arboretum that evening his pockets were bulging with seeds and cuttings and he was very excited about the day. You can imagine how well his conversation complemented that of my own teenagers at the dinner table that evening, and how much they discovered they had in common. You might say they didn't even speak the same language. Before going back home, he managed to make a quick tour through my own garden, where he easily talked me out of divisions of the few hostas he did not already have, including *H. Yingeri* as I recall. In fact, we filled up a brown suitcase from the attic with the plant acquisitions from his Madison journey.

Later that summer, he accompanied me to the 1994 Midwest Hosta meeting in Dubuque, Iowa, where some of you may have had the chance to meet him. He had a wonderful time and wowed everyone including Bob Olson (president of the American Hosta Society) with his knowledge. While we were waiting for lunch, I introduced him to Maryann Stinson from Klehm's Nursery and I was not surprised when she already was acquainted with him. As she put it, she was so glad to finally meet the kid who had been ordering wholesale by telephone from her since he was 11 years old. During the meeting's prolonged auction, several of us slipped off to visit Dennis Hermsen's pig farm in Farley, Iowa. This is no ordinary pig farm as you might have guessed. Dennis (on the board of directors at the Dubuque Arboretum) has an unequaled(?) passion for garden conifers and particularly for "witches brooms". He has a conifer business on the side (of the pig barns, literally) and has a stunning display of conifers which is very enjoyable, after you get accustomed to the prevailing odor about the place. We were all aghast at Eric's knowledge of conifers and he and Dennis spent what seemed like an eternity going over each cutting and graft in several hoop houses. In fact, if we hadn't dragged him away with us, I'm sure he and Dennis would still be talking "witches brooms".

Back at home the next day, he volunteered to help out in the garden and we made short work of a mulching job. He was interested in all aspects of the garden and asked me about every plant he wasn't familiar with, often talking me out of a division. We then proceeded to the Flower Factory where Eric bought \$250 worth of hostas for his nursery, as he had not spent his plant budget for the year. Before going home, we dropped by Chris Bylsma's place, home of a friend, neighbor, and PS member. Eric was anxious to see her spontaneous sport of *Hosta* 'August Moon', which Chris has named *H.* 'Nakoma Moon'. To see a teenager in rapture over a plant was truly mind boggling. Back on the bus he went, with another large suitcase full of plants. He vowed to wheedle Chris out of division of her unique hosta upon his next visit.

As you have surmised, Eric is an exceptional teenager and I personally long for the day I will be able to share with my own grown up children, my enjoyment of the garden. For his profound horticultural knowledge, he has received both state and national recognition. He will be traveling to Niagara Falls, NY this month to compete for Wisconsin in the National Junior Horticultural Association's annual competition. In last year's contest in Biloxi, MS, he placed second and two years ago placed third in the competition held in

Pittsburgh. The contest consists of three parts--a written exam, and oral exam identifying plants, and a judging competition. To represent the state in this national event, he was required to finish first or second in the state competition.

During September's Perennial/Hosta Societies tour of Door County, I finally had the opportunity to visit Eric's nursery in Kewaunee County on a country road near Luxemburg. I am not sure what I had expected, perhaps a haphazard gemisch of plant material knowing Eric's propensity for plant collecting. What I found was a tidy, orderly and impressive nursery. It prominently featured hostas and I purchased lovely, fragrant, blooming clumps of *Hosta* 'Aphrodite' and *Hosta* 'Summer Fragrance' (both have *H. Plantaginea* in their pedigree), as well as *Hosta* 'Patriot', all at very reasonable prices. As I was leaving, Eric presented Ed Hasselkus with his own introduction-- *Pinus strobus* 'chunky' for the collection at Longnecker Gardens. This was a graft from a white pine witches' broom Eric has discovered a mile up the road from his home.

As I pulled in the drive-way after a wonderful weekend trip, strains of the "Red Hot Chile Peppers" wafted through the trunks of the white oaks. For the time being, such acoustical contributions to the garden scene were about all I expected, or wanted, from the teens inside the house. I knew things could be much worse. After all, such musical incantations were sure to produce their own hosta sports or "witches brooms".

* For those of you who do not have teenagers, names of popular (?) rock groups.

** If you are not into garden (dwarf) conifers, this refers to frequent mutant branches which appear rather frequently on standard conifers. Propagations from "witches brooms" are the source of most new garden conifers.

Jean and Walter Rideouts' Favorite Hostas

Can you imagine this illustrious couple in their next life limited to just **ten** hostas? Can you imagine a worse torture? Such was the difficult charge they were given, and the results are listed below. I am told that they did this without "too much" agony.

Large Hostas

'Blue Angel'

Largest of the blue hostas. The leaves are blue-gree and heavily textured. Flowers are white. Like all blue hostas it thrives in quite deep shade.

montana 'Aureomarginata'

This one has large pointed green leaves with wide yellow margins. It comes up very early in the spring so must be covered if a late frost is predicted. A great favorite with everyone.

'Paul's Glory'

With gold leaves and a blue-green margin, it is similar to 'Gold Standard' but even prettier. Still expensive but worth it.

'Sum and Substance'

Huge, chartreuse gold, heavy-substanced leaves which can reach two feet across. Clumps can be six feet wide in a mature plant. Definitely a specimen plant.

'Sun Power'

Leaves a brilliant gold and somewhat pointed and twisted. It has an upright, vase-shaped habitus. Very vigorous, especially if it receives morning sun.

Small to Medium Hostas**'Golden Tiara'**

Green with chartreuse margins. Low growing and an excellent edger. Multiplies fast.

'Hadspen Blue'

One of the best blues. The leaves are a lovely, deep blue with thick heavy substance.

'Invincible'

The leaves are a glossy green with wavy margins. Flowers are light lavender and fragrant. Catalogs say that it is pest resistant (hence invincible) but our experience is that slugs love it.

'Little Aurora'

Leaves are all gold, cupped and puckered. Unlike many small, gold hostas, the leaves are thick. Grows rapidly.

'So Sweet'

Has white margins on light green, glossy leaves. One of the few hostas with fragrant white flowers.

Editors comments: I agree with them on all accounts except for 'Paul's Glory'. Though it is a very nice hosta, it is not worth \$30 when you can get 'Gold Standard' for \$5. It breaks one of my cardinal rules--never pay more than \$20 for a hosta. Remember when 'Great Expectations' was \$200? This spring one of the mail order catalogs was giving it away with a \$50 order or more, and it is now commonly available for \$15.

Coming Events

15 November, 7 pm Olbrich Gardens--Jack Ferreri, local rock garden guru, will talk on rock gardens and how to make one. Jack has a wonderful slide collection and this is sure to be a memorable presentation. We hope to visit his garden next spring.

Please bring slides of your garden for John Cannon and John Fritsch to use for their slide and sound show at the January brunch. We are trying to develop a theme of different kinds of gardens.

21 January, 1996, 11 AM Olbrich Gardens--Annual pot luck brunch. We will have excellent entertainment for a cold January, miles and miles away from Spring. Andrea Sager, local artist, and art history teacher at MATC will speak on "An Artist's Impression of Monet's Garden". Andrea paints Monet's garden and has visited it many times. She will take the opportunity to plug her upcoming guided trip to France in the summer of 1996. John Cannon and John Fritsch will also have another slide and music show of members gardens--these shows are fantastic as you all know.

17, 18 February. WHA garden exposition at the Dane County Forum. We will have a booth and sponsor a presentation on the 17th of February entitled "A Tour of Madison's Secret Gardens"

21 February, 7 PM. Olbrich Gardens--Continuing our Monet theme, Marilyn Buscher of Windy Oaks Aquatics, Eagle, WI will speak on water gardening. Marilyn designs water features and gardens. She grows aquatic plants largely for the wholesale trade, including Jungs garden centers locally.

24 February Saturday AM. "A walk with Steve Lesch", founder of the Perennial Society, and garden designer par excellence and co-owner of CR Stephenson. For this Saturday morning's walk we will accompany Steve over two acres of "virgin" garden turf with great potential and expectations on the part of its owner PS member Katherine Kane. The property has a view of Goose Lake and its marsh as well as Badger Prairie Park, and a house on the property will be finished by this time. After our walk, Steve will sketch out his grand plans over coffee and pastries.

20 March 7 PM Olbrich Gardens. Rich Eyhre, owner of Rich's Fox Willow Pines Nursery, Woodstock, IL, will present a talk on garden conifers. Rich supplies the garden conifers for the Olbrich Gardens plant sale.

April. We are planning a garden tour of early blooming spring bulbs and rock garden plants. Date will be announced as the spring season develops. Jack Ferri's garden in Cross Plains will be likely be included.

25 May 9 AM. Our annual sale for members and friends in Frank Greer's garden. Have you thought about what plants you have to donate yet?

June. Date to be announced. A Saturday tour of nurseries in Northern Illinois. We will join up with the Rock Garden Society and perhaps the Wisconsin Master Gardeners for this event.

July. A local garden tour on a Wednesday evening. Garden to be announced.

August. Pot luck supper. Olbrich Gardens. Jean and Walter Rideout will lead a tour of the hosta garden including the Eunice Fisher collection. Jeff Epping (Olbrich staff horticulturalist) will tell all about the newly restored sunken garden (it is under construction as I write this) and other great plans for Olbrich.

September 29, Sunday, 1 PM Olbrich gardens. A joint meeting with the Northern Illinois-Wisconsin Rock Garden Society will feature Alexandra Berkutenko speaking on "The Flora of Far Eastern Russia. Dr. Berkutenko is with the Herbarium at the Institute of Biological Problems of the North, Russian Academy of Sciences, Magadan, Russia. She is sponsored on a national speaking tour by the NARGS.

October 16, 7 PM Olbrich Gardens. Our featured speakers will be Craig Bergman and James Grigsby of Craig Bergman Landscape Designs, Inc., Wilmette, IL. They own a nursery and garden design business and maintain 60 designer gardens in the North Shore suburbs of Chicago. They were featured in Horticulture in the last two years. The title of their talk will be "Gardeners' Expectations"

November 20 7 PM We will have a guest speaker preceded by our annual business meeting. (Vita Sackville-West on "The White Garden"?)

Past Events

The annual business meeting of the Society was held at Olbrich on the evening of November 1. The turn out was poor. I learned my lesson. Next year's business meeting will be followed by a talk by Rosemary Veery or perhaps we will bring back to life Gertrude Jekyll just for the occasion. In any event, the following officers were elected to another two year term, even though the Constitution doesn't allow it: Frank Greer, President, Tom Cottingham, Vice President. David Reese and Scott Gordon resigned their Secretary-Treasurer position after serving three years in that capacity. The society offers you its sincere thanks and hopes that you will continue as active members. In their places, Margaret MacEntire was elected Secretary and Richard Bloomquist the new Treasurer. In order to incorporate, we have to have a "Board of Directors" designated in the Constitution. Pam Mather, Stephanie Bloomquist, and Joan Severa were elected to the board. Pam will serve one year, and Joan and Stephanie two years. We will have to think of something for them to do. Stephanie has agreed to help out with the mailings.

From "Under White Oaks"

This time last year, I wrote of the unusually warm autumn we had had and the unexpected blooms of November. Well, the fall of 1995 has been vastly different and I don't anticipate any Thanksgiving primroses. In fact, I may not get all of the bulbs planted or the leaves mulched this year. However, on that first snowy morning of October 21, I took stock of blooms under my oaks. Later bloomers are a treat in the garden and something to look forward to, though risky business here in the upper Midwest. The most spectacular were those of *Begonia grandis* (hardy begonia, with extra protection in Madison) and the various members of the *Tricyrtis* (toad lily) family. *T. macranthopsis* v was a knock out with a half dozen 3 foot sprays each containing dozens of large yellow bells. It was followed close behind by *T. tamagawa* (slightly smaller yellow bells) and the beautiful flowering, arching branches of *T. hirta* 'alba marginata' and *T. hirta* 'variegata' (white and lilac flowers). Also in bloom were *T. hirta*, *T. hirta* 'white flame', *T. hirta* 'alba', *T. hirta* 'white tower', and the pale yellow *T. oschumiensis*. In bloom, and new to the garden this year, were *T. seriyu* and *T. thojen*. These had lovely orchid color flowers and had been blooming since late July. Unfortunately, their foliage and flowers resemble the fabled (in my garden) *T. formosana* 'amethystina', which did not survive three out of three winters. I suspect these two will have a similar fate, but will keep you posted. Still to bloom at this late date were *T. stolinifera* and *T. sinonome*. I am sorry to report that I got only a few blooms from two large clumps of *T. formosana* this year before the hard freeze of November second and third. *T. sinonome* did not survive the cold to flower.