

Perennial Notes

January 9, 1996

Adonis, Adonis, Adonis

It was in the year 1905 that the late Henry Francis Dupont planted the "March Bank" at his private residence, Winterthur, near Wilmington, Delaware. Though this garden is renowned for its azalea woods and early flowering shrubs (the famous quince walk), it is the earlier seasonal display on the March Bank which makes it unique among American gardens in my mind. This rather steep hillside, covering a number of acres, rises up directly behind the principal residence and can be viewed from most of its rooms. The bank was populated even at this time by very large deciduous trees including grand specimens of beech, oak, and sycamore. It was Mr. Dupont's plan to keep it as a "natural" garden and he had the forest floor planted with mostly early spring small bulbs, the peak bloom of which would occur in March at this site in northern Delaware along the Pennsylvania border. These plantings included *Galanthus nivalis* (snowdrops), *Eranthis hyemalis* (winter aconite), *Puschkenia scilloides*, *Scilla siberica*, *Chinodoxa luciliae* (glory of the snow), *Adonis amurensis*, as well as groupings of *Hellebores* around the edges. Quantities planted were appropriate for someone with the name Dupont, and after 90 additional years of naturalizing, the sight today of the March Bank at peak bloom is one of the great wonders of the gardening world. At first glance, on a warm, sunny, late March afternoon, one's breath is taken away by the never ending carpet of intermingling shades of blue created by hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) of *Puschkenia*, *Scilla*, and *Chinodoxa*. However it is the large drifts of shimmering gold which always capture the final focus of a gardener's eye, for it is very likely, that even the most sophisticated of American gardeners, has never seen the likes of this before. Hello, *Adonis*.

In Greek mythology, Adonis was the corn god, the god of vegetation. He was worshipped by the Greeks, and before them the Syrians and Babylonians. As a boy he was adored both by Aphrodite and Persephone, who quarreled over him until Zeus settled the dispute by deciding that Adonis should stay above ground with the goddess of love for part of the year, and in the underworld with the goddess of death for the rest of it. When he returned to the world again, all nature would revive, and when he went back to Persephone there would be great sorrow. Elaborate annual festivals and celebrations evolved around the resurrection and death of Adonis. One can even see parallels in the ceremonies of Christianity which followed those of the Greeks, namely as in Easter and St. John's Day (midsummer's eve, the summer solstice). Adonis, the flower, is very aptly named for it appears at Easter and its delicate ferny foliage has disappeared before the end of June. It is unfair, however, that Zeus allowed Adonis to spend the majority of the year with Persephone.

There are two common species of the genus *Adonis*--*A. amurensis* and *A. vernalis*. *Amurensis* is native to Japan and Manchuria and is the more widely grown including the one grown at Winterthur. A double ('Flora-pleno') cultivar exists and the Japanese have developed copper, orange, pink, and white flowered forms not generally available. *A. vernalis*, native to Europe, is said to be slightly more hardy but blooms 3-6 weeks later than *A. amurensis*. The flowers of *A. amurensis* open in April here in Madison and depending on the weather, can have a period of bloom that extends for many weeks. A number of blooms appear along the flower stalks in succession, extending the bloom period. The yellow daisy like flowers, of perhaps a hundred petals, open as flat as a dinner plate on a sunny day and measure about two inches across. The plant is not a bulb but has a fibrous root system. Though it can be grown from seed, the individual plants are slow to form showy clumps. It grows well in woodland conditions in well drained soil. As at Winterthur, they are most effective when displayed in mass but a large individual clump is a show stopper even for a small garden in Wisconsin. Unfortunately, because it is slow to propagate, it seems to be rarely available in the trade. At the present time, I know of no commercial mail order source. Mail order firms which listed it in the past several years (including White Flower Farm) no longer are carrying it. Apparently, its roots were supplied by a European grower who is not meeting the demand at present. If you do find a source for it, order some for yourself before letting everyone else know about it. Expect to pay at least \$10 a plant, and for a small one at best.

As noted at Winterthur, the plant is very long lived and it will form impressive drifts if you've got the financial resources and 90 years to wait. In Rosemary Verey's newest book, Secret Gardens, there is a piece by Lindie Wilson of Charlotte, NC. In 1986 she purchased the home and garden which had belonged to the famed American garden writer Elizabeth Lawrence. Elizabeth had moved into a nursing home in the mid-1970's and the garden had been totally neglected until this time. After a fall and winter of remodeling the house, Lindie turned her attention to what little was left of this wonderful garden about which so much was written. As Lindie reports, her first of many surprises, was a clump of blooming *Adonis amurensis* which appeared in February. Indeed, Elizabeth had written about her *Adonis* in a column which appeared in the Charlotte Observer in 1963. A gift from a gardening friend in Cincinnati, she lamented that she was "unable to find it in the trade." She also commented that "It is easily established, but does not increase much." A plant worthy of dreams, may each of you find it in your own secret garden or March Bank this spring. And as Elizabeth also once wrote, "...gardening would not be so much fun if there were not always something to search for."

Coming Events

21 January, 1996, 11 AM Olbrich Gardens--Annual pot luck brunch. Bring a dish to pass. Coffee, tea and cups will be provided. Bring your own utensils, napkins, and plates. We will have excellent entertainment for a cold January, miles and miles away from Spring. Adria Sager, local artist, and art history teacher at MATC will speak on "An Artist's Impression of Monet's Garden". Adria paints Monet's garden and has visited it many times. She will take the opportunity to plug her upcoming guided tour 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". Please sign up for a time slot to man our booth at the January brunch.

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 Jung's 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. 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? We will have a series of "work parties" in members gardens in May to pot up divisions of plants.

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 21. 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"?)

THE PERENNIAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP 1996

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() INDIVIDUAL.....\$5.00

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Please mail completed form and checks made out to The Perennial Society to:

Richard Bloomquist
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Madison, WI 53711 (274-8326)

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() Programs () Plant Sale () Mailings () Community projects

() WHA-TV 1996 Gardening Expo