



Paeonia obovata J. McKenney

Potomac Valley
Chapter
North American Rock
Garden Society

PVC Bulletin

January 2015



Galanthus e. elwesii J. McKenney

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<http://www.pvcnargs.org/>

You can pay your dues by sending your check for \$15 (payable to PVC NARGS) to Margot Ellis, 2417 N Taylor St., Arlington, VA 22207 4pvctreas@gmail.com

2015 Calendar

Programs are Saturday mornings and, unless otherwise noted.
Doors open at 9:30 am for coffee with lecture at 10 am

January to Feb 5 NARGS members Seed exchange! www.nargs.org

Feb 28 - Betty Ann Addison "Rock Gardens in the Landscape" Betty Ann is a passionate advocate for landscapes that are inspired by, and work with nature. She designed the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, Lyndale Park Peace (Rock) Garden and has experience with designing many other rock gardens with an emphasis on sustainability. Betty Ann is a nationally known landscape designer, author, lecturer and photographer. Betty Ann and partners have a small Minnesota nursery for unique alpines, dwarf conifers and rhododendrons. www.GardensofRiceCreek.com

Location: Bethesda-Chevy Chase Regional Services Center, 4805 Edgemoor Lane, Bethesda, MD 20814 (free parking [entrance on Edgemoor] under the building) <http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/bcc/>
Doors open at 9:30, lecture at 10 am

March 1 – March 20 - Surplus seed list and web ordering www.nargs.org

April 11 - 10 am to Noon

Open House, social at Dick & Freddi Hammerschlags. Joint with Mason-Dixon chapter.

April 19 (Sunday) gates open at 9:30 am tour begins at 10 am

Field trip to Hillwood's Rock Garden and Japanese-style Garden. Led by Bill Johnson. Hillwood Museum & Gardens, 4155 Linnean Ave NW, Washington, D.C. 20008

April 25 Field trip to Mill Pond Garden in Lewes, Delaware. The owner of this wonderful private estate will be our guide; he will also share information about the Delaware Botanic Gardens. The Delaware Botanic Gardens is a ten year, multi-phase plan to create a major public garden near Dagsboro in Sussex County that reflects southern Delaware's unique coastal plain. Ground breaking is planned for early spring 2015, with an opening of the first phase of the garden in 2017.

Optional stop at Peppers nursery, a real treasure trove....

May 7 – 10 (*May 10 is Mother's day!*)

NARGS Annual Meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan www.nargs.org
Weber's Inn, 3050 Jackson Road, Ann Arbor, MI, 48103

May 16

Green Spring Plant Sale, Green Spring Gardens, Alexandria, VA

May 23

Plant Exchange, at Sarah Strickler's , more to follow

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The deadline for submissions to the next issue of this bulletin is February 15, 2015

President's Message January 2015

It's catalogue season. Several have already come in and others will follow. Any time from last month until next month we'll get the "friendly reminder" emails that the on-line sites (which always have more, and usually with pictures, than the paper catalogues) of these same places are Ready For The Spring. Farewell and adieu to our disposable income for the next three months.

Farewell and adieu.... I'm writing this at the office, Monday Jan 26th, and looking out from the twelfth floor at billowing snow. I'm dreading going home. Not the journey... what I have to do when I get there.

Anyone who has been to our house in the past ten years will remember Tucky. He was the black and white outside cat—not our cat at all, officially he belonged down the hill, but he liked our kitty kibbles better than their kitty kibbles.... And we bribed him

shamelessly, because he was a great vole catcher. We called him "Dead Skunk (In The Middle Of The Road)" because he WOULD sleep in the middle of the driveway. And if he wasn't already there as you came up the drive, he would get there and park himself slap bang in the middle of it. And then the next three minutes were spent in persuading him that you had the right of way. He was our Construction Superintendent; whatever you were doing in the garden he was with you, either underfoot or lying on top of what you had just planted. Whenever he found Dan in his studio, he curled up on the outside of the glass door and kept guard. He was also the one up on the porch (he would wait and get between your legs *going up the steps*, every blessed time) waiting for food and informing any and all visitors that he WAS our INSIDE cat, locked out by accident, and would you please let him in?

Last week he got his wish. We found him, thin and curled up on a nest of leaves, and walking oddly when he got up. We brought him into the first floor bathroom, and took him to the vet. Diagnosis, hyperthyroid; antibiotics were given and thyroid medication prescribed. For the next week, he would eat (not kibbles, but tuna would do it) but drank little at first—then not at all.

Today both hind legs would not work. Dan took him to the vet this morning for the last time. He's waiting until I get home, and then we will go out in the snow and dig a hole in the frozen ground.

Not all the stones in a garden are for the plants.



Jim and Tucky

photo Dan Weil

Check this out in the November/December issue of *Horticulture* magazine

Growing rock garden plants in our climate can be challenging. The two most important factors for success are good drainage and excellent air circulation. These can be achieved in raised berms and troughs. Sand beds and gravel beds (or a deep gravel mulch) can also provide the necessary drainage. Another idea is presented in an article in the November/December 2014 issue of *Horticulture* (pp. 54-59). "Between the Cracks" by Colorado gardener Kenneth J. Seth is about crevice gardens which are constructed with relatively thin rocks placed vertically, parallel and close together, forming narrow crevices for growing rock-loving plants. The author provides the step by step details about their construction and

soil mixes. A number of plants that he grows in the crevices are illustrated. Although the plants that we might successfully grow here will likely be different, this type of garden should be an effective way of growing rock garden plants in our area.
Bob Faden

Seed starting

Some of us are hibernators and some of us are estivators and some of us keep going all year long,

I happen to be an estivator: I try hard to believe that July and August do not exist, that they are just bad dreams that will go away when I wake up. And it comes as a surprise to some people who know me how much I really like winter. Once the ground freezes, there's not much to be done in the garden. Old books contain many alluring references to days spent by the fire with newly arrived seed catalogs or good gardening books. Those books were written before central heating was common, and the seat before the fire had the practical purpose of supplementing several extra layers of clothing in keeping the reader warm in what by modern standards were probably insufferably cold quarters. If, like me, you are trying to economize by keeping the heater thermostat set much lower than most people would tolerate these days, it's easy to empathize with gardeners who lived in the early part of the twentieth century before the near universality of centrally heated houses.

And appealing as that image of the gardener snuggled in a cozy chair, book in hand before a warming fire, is, some of us know that there is a lot more for the gardener to do than read. This is the season for focusing on seeds: reading catalogs, ordering seed (but yikes! Who among us is really ready for \$6 and \$7 seed packets containing 24 seeds?), dusting off the light tables and actually giving into the impulse to plant a few seeds. It's probably a rare gardener who does not feel the itch to start seeds indoors at this time of year. You're a new gardener indeed if you have not yet experienced firsthand the problems and disappointments which can result from such efforts.

Experienced gardeners know it's much too early to plant just about anything, but even experienced gardeners probably give in to the urge and get a few pots going.

Years ago I worked with a man who as a young man lived in the tobacco growing country of North Carolina. He surprised me one year by telling me that they planted tobacco seed outside in cloth covered frames in January! The closely related ornamental tobaccos are treated by most gardeners as tender annuals and are often candidates for early sowing indoors under lights. I don't know if this business of starting seeds indoors is something the horticulture industry has trained us to do, or if it is just something which bored gardeners trapped indoors and on the verge of cabin fever dreamed up as an antidote to the seasonal slump, but its prevalence has all but erased any collective knowledge on the part of gardeners about the alternatives.

One alternative, and this one comes as a real surprise to most gardeners, at least most beginning gardeners, is that as my tobacco growing friend knew long ago, seeds of most frost tender annuals can be planted outside now with impunity. Consider the annuals in your garden which self sow: all of these are ideal candidates for sowing now. The seeds will lie dormant until conditions outside are right. There are two main disadvantages to this method: the seeds might not germinate soon enough for the resulting seedlings to bloom or bear fruit before frost, and if the seeds are simply scattered on the ground there is a good chance that they will become bird food. So that's where the professionally grown six packs of, for instance, fibrous begonias, come in handy: you can buy those in the spring and plant them out in the garden beside the blooming tulips. Self-sown fibrous begonias come into bloom very late, but it does happen.

Why wait for now to plant seeds outside instead of sowing in the warmer weather of autumn? It's because that warm autumnal weather, so pleasant to the gardener, will cause some seed to germinate immediately. Seed which remains viable under sub-zero conditions is one thing; the resulting seedlings on the other hand will be destroyed by the slightest freeze. If you are going to try this outdoor winter sowing

method, wait until the chance of mild spells is well behind us.

There is another category of plants which can be sown now but which should have been sown back in early autumn. These are the ones sometimes called winter annuals because although they complete their life cycle within a twelve month year (and are thus, literally, annuals), their growth cycle spans two calendar years. They germinate in the autumn, the resulting seedlings survive the winter and surge into growth in the spring. The art of growing these plants has been mostly lost among modern gardeners. The sight of the five foot larkspurs and three and four foot "corn poppy bushes" in my garden stops most visiting gardeners in their tracks: only if they are sown in the autumn will the grand potential of these plants be realized. Seed sown "as early as the ground can be worked" (as so many copy-cat writers put it) will produce two foot runts with a short period of bloom. It's too late to get these effects for this year, but make a note to plant seed next September. Unlike the case with the germination of tender plants, you want these to germinate in the fall: the unpromising little seedlings which result are as tough as nails, and while they show little progress above ground, they are actually forming strong root systems which will support the late winter-early spring surge.

So what can you be doing now seed-wise? Reserve space on the light tables for those plants which require three or four months to reach blooming size. Other than those, resist the temptation to start other sorts now. When you get the urge to play with seeds, there are other groups of seeds which can absorb your attention now: for one, there are the seeds you will be soon be receiving from the seed exchanges. For another, there will be the seeds in plastic zip lock bags, seeds you started during the summer as these seeds ripened. These are the sorts of seeds which require alternating periods of warm moist conditions followed by cold moist conditions (and in some cases another iteration of this cycle). Many of the choicest garden plants start out this way, and if you did not start them as they ripened, the initial warm moist phase can be started now indoors and allowed to run for about three months, then the bags of seeds can be put

in in the refrigerator for another three months (these timings are approximate – your natural curiosity will probably have you checking the seeds now and then, and if they have done something, move them on to the next phase).

Be wary of this: older garden literature tended to promote the idea that freezing in itself was the magic trick to getting some seeds to germinate. And yes, there are seeds which respond favorably to freezing. At one time a major seed house claimed that it was the answer to germinating their hellebore seed. It wasn't. Since so many seeds from the seed exchanges arrive in mid winter, what can you do with those which don't need freezing? If you plant them outside now and allow them to freeze, it probably will not kill them, but it will delay their eventual germination. If they are known to be the sorts which require an initial period of warm moist conditions, then get them started now in zip lock bags.

Some photos are attached which show seeds germinating after that initial warm period. Notice that it's the roots which appear first in most cases. True leaves will not appear until they have had a cold period. If you have started a lot of these seeds and are holding them in zip lock bags, it can be a real pleasure during the winter to check the bags out periodically for progress. In most cases, once the roots appear, the bags can be transferred to cold storage (in the fridge or a cold frame). The ones shown in the images will go into cold storage soon. The timing until outdoor conditions moderate is just about perfect. Then they will be potted up or planted out.

Last month one of the images on the masthead was of the infructescence provided by Carolyn Beck of *Paeonia obovata*. See what's there this time: the germinating seeds shown this time are some of those same seeds shown last time. Ed

Iris cretensis



Iris cretensis (aka *Iris unguicularis cretensis*) is a real charmer. It's a tiny version of its larger relatives *I. unguicularis* and *I. lazica*. Some treat all three as forms of one variable species.

I've heard that *Iris cretensis* survives in the Chicago area, so it should be safe in our local gardens. But the flowers and flower buds are susceptible to freeze damage, so a place in a protected cold frame will make it more likely that you will get the prized blossoms in good form at this time of year. Ed

Heucheras cause a flutter

Isn't it interesting that these plants, known up until late in the twentieth century almost exclusively as "coral bells", are now almost invariably called "heucheras". And this shift in usage is associated with a change in how we gardeners look at them and use them: no longer are they grown for their flowers – now they are primarily grown (or at least marketed) for their foliage. They came in for some attention from Adrian Higgins recently, and his article prompted a flurry of comments on the Four Seasons on-line discussion group.

Decades ago I had a thirty foot border lined with what was distributed then as (nominally) *Heuchera sanguinea*, "coral bells". This name "coral bells" was not a cultivar name: it seems to have been used as the vernacular equivalent of the binomial *Heuchera sanguinea*. "Sanguinea" suggests that something about the plant was blood red; but it was not the flowers - they were distinctly coral pink. And that's why we grew it. For a really charming group in the garden,

combine coral bells with columbines and perennial flax.

This plant differed from the cultivars now being sold so widely (and expensively!): it thrived in local gardens, in retentive clay/loam. Many of the new cultivars quickly acquired a reputation for being unreliable under local conditions: they rot during the summer, apparently even when used as rock garden plants. Not so the old coral bells: the only care they got from me was to be dug every few years, divided, and then replanted. It didn't take long to build up enough plants for that thirty-foot border, and before long I was giving plants to neighbors.

Few of us paid much attention to the foliage back in those days, and to judge by the way the local wild species *Heuchera americana* persisted in the local woods, wild flower poachers were not much interested in the long petioled foliage of that one (nor were the small, dingy white blooms on widely sprawling stems appreciated). For a while a somewhat tidier strain of this species was distributed under the name 'Dale's Strain'. The plants I remember of 'Dale's Strain' sometimes had foliage subtly marbled in pewter, plum and green. This might be a good place for hybridizers of the future to start anew to build a strain of heucheras adapted to eastern gardens. And maybe adapted not only to eastern gardens but to eastern tastes: do we really need those hybrids with foliage the color of rust and brown grocery bags and with all the grace of rock tripe?

If you missed Adrian Higgins' article in the Post, here's the link:

http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/home/heuchera-is-a-popular-perennial-for-shade-but-which-variety-is-best/2015/01/20/5af03cd2-9ce6-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4_story.html?wpisrc=nl_home&wpmm=1

And Jan Clark provided links to these two older articles:

http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2005-07-03/news/0507030392_1_heuchera-rock-gardens-varieties.

http://articles.philly.com/2012-07-07/entertainment/32566751_1_heucheras-coral-bells-mid-atlantic-region

The Philly.com article mentions Martha Oliver who spoke to our group in the past.

About the pronunciation of *Heuchera*: in addition to the pronunciations given in the Philly article, give consideration to HOI-sheh-ra – this comes closer to the German pronunciation of the eponym's name.

And here's the link to the completed Mt Cuba trial (thanks again, Jan):

<http://www.mtcubacenter.org/plant-trials/category/heuchera-evaluation-2012-2014/>

New Year's Day List 2015

Skimpy pickings indeed this year: the Fadens, down in the Alexandria palm belt, were the only ones who seemed to have much happening. Otherwise, even Jim Dronenburg out on his hillside facing Harper's Ferry did as well as the rest of us.

Here's the list from Audrey and Bob:

Galanthus elwesii var. *monostictus*
Forsythia sp.
Sarcococca orientalis
Camellia 'Winter's Star'
Camellia 'Winter's Beauty' [obtained under that name but it has white flowers, so more likely it is 'Winter's Cupid']
Camellia 'Snow Flurry'
Camellia 'Spring Promise'
Aster pilosus (it's a weed for us)
Rosmarinus officinalis
Daphne x transatlantica 'Summer Ice'
Erica x darleyensis 'Furzey'
Erica x darleyensis 'Mediterranean Pink'
Jasminum nudiflorum
Lonicera x purpusii 'Winter Beauty'
Prunus subhirtella 'Autumnalis Rosea'

Here's Jim D's list:

Sarcococca confusa
Mahonia hyb ('Charity?')
Helleborus niger,
H.n. 'Josef Lemper',
Galanthus elwesii v. *monostictus*
other unknown *Galanthus* half the size
last blooms on *Hamamelis virginiana*

Elaeagnus pungens

Dixie Hougen reported profuse bloom on *Chimonanthus praecox*.

Chris Herbstritt had *Narcissus cantabricus* in bloom.

John Willis reported:
Aubretia hybrid
Camellia 'April Tryst'

Here's Jim McKenney's list:

Taraxacum officinale
Elaeagnus pungens
Galanthus elwesii monostictus
Jasminum nudiflorum

And, although this is cheating a bit, *Iris cretensis* in a cold frame with *Helleborus niger* 'Jacob' and 'Josef Lemper'. These are very lush and beautiful thanks to the protection of the frame. Ed

Where have we heard something like this before?

In his 1929 *The Gardener's Bed Book*, Richardson Wright wrote this:

The Third Trial. One day, one glorious summer day, walking in his garden with E. Augustus Bowles at Waltham Cross, I complained that there were many things I simply could not grow. "But have you tried them three times?" he asked. "Never give a plant up until you've tried it thrice. The first year you may have the worst possible weather in your gardening experience, and the plant will perish. The second time you doubtless will give it an exposure or a soil that is uncongenial. On the third trial, you'll succeed. Ed

NARGS NEWS

Speaking of NARGS, did you know that our Potomac Valley Chapter is part of NARGS. And PVC has agreed to pay for **four full free one year memberships** in NARGS, for **first timers** who are keenly interested in the parent organization. The first four to contact Margot Ellis, our Treasurer, at 4pvctreas@gmail.com. **MUST BE A PVC MEMBER TO ENTER.**

Join today, NARGS is for gardening enthusiasts interested in alpine, saxatile, and low-growing perennials and woody plants. Annual dues in the U.S. and Canada for \$30.00 payable in US Funds, VISA/Mastercard accepted.

Benefits include: The award winning *Rock Garden Quarterly* with articles on alpines and North American wildflowers, illustrated in mouth watering photographs, pen and ink drawings, annual Seed Exchange (now going on) with thousands of plant species; study weekends and annual meetings in either U.S. or Canada and a book service. Join online at www.nargs.org. or write to Bobby J. Ward, Executive Secretary of NARGS, P. O. Box 18604, Raleigh, NC 27619-8604, USA.

NARGS has announced the new Annual General Meetings to be held this year in Ann Arbor, MI, May 6, 7, 8 with side trip to the Upper Peninsula. Register on line.

2016 will be held in Steamboat Springs, CO, probably June. There are at least 10 natural rock garden areas to visit. Not to be missed.

2017 will be held in Manhattan. Fabulous activities, speakers are planned, and the day trips will be out of sight. Make a note.

Betty Spar

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