



*Arisaema taiwanense* 'Silver Heron' D. Hougen

POTOMAC VALLEY CHAPTER  
NORTH AMERICAN ROCK  
GARDEN SOCIETY

## *PVC BULLETIN*

MAY 2009



*Persicaria polymorpha* D. Hougen

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

Deadline for next edition **June 15, 2009**

**HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN TO PAY YOUR DUES? If so, send your check for \$15 to Margot Ellis, 2417 N Taylor St., Arlington, VA 22207**

### **Calendar**

July 25, home of Val and Bill Lorenz, **our annual picnic**. More details in the July *PVC Bulletin*.

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### **Chairman's Message**

Having just completed a very successful Green Spring sale and once again taken advantage of Alice's hospitality to hold the PVC-NARGS plant exchange, we need to take time for a deep breath and see where we stand on the year's activities. Our next event is the picnic at the home of Val and Bill Lorenz on July 25 and then our September meeting (another plant exchange) and our annual meeting and slide show in the late fall.

We're also looking for a speaker for early fall.

We have some open slots to fill and are looking for volunteers. Most critical is a chairman for the nominating committee. Once the committee has its chair in place, it can begin the job of filling the open positions on an interim basis. Those who volunteer would be possible candidates for complete 2-year terms starting in January. The jobs currently unfilled are:

Chairman of the Membership Committee

Chairman of the Program Committee

These are key jobs upon which the future of PVC-NARGS depends.

Peony and Iris season is upon us now. I was recently given a Siberian Iris called 'Strawberry Fair' which is outstanding. The wide very ruffled falls are held out flat and the standards are also nicely ruffled. In the past I had been disappointed in the slow progress in the further refinement of Siberians. I'd grown tired of the "plain janes" of that tribe, but recently have started noticed some real progress. Google 'Iris Strawberry Fair' and see what I mean.

Paul Botting

### Some member notes

**Wayne Goldstein**, a member of PVC since 1995, died suddenly at the end of April. In his working life a landscape designer, he will be remembered mostly for his civic activism in Montgomery County. He was passionate about historic preservation and land conservation and was a strong advocate for thoughtful land use and cautious redevelopment. He was a regular attendee at our plant exchanges, and we will miss him.

Our sympathies go to **Margot Ellis** on the loss last month of her father.

Alice Nicolson

### A tour of the gravel garden



On May 2, 2009 a number of us took advantage of the chance to tour the gravel garden and research greenhouses of the Smithsonian Research Center in Suitland, Maryland. The gravel gardens are the work of Mike Bordelon and Audrey Faden. Mike explained the origin of the gardens this way: the greenhouses often experienced broken glass panes after the lawn crews mowed the area and inadvertently sent stones hurling into the greenhouse glass. By eliminating the lawn there and replacing it with the gravel gardens, the area no longer has to be mowed.

The gravel is local bank run gravel; the particle size varies and the overall color is a sort of rusty brown which will be familiar to anyone with deep roots in this area. As Audrey noted, this color compliments many flower colors well, in fact it seems to bring up the colors in some plants.

The plants in the gravel garden which seemed to elicit the most comment were the plants of *Asphodeline taurica*. These were very distinctive: domes and columns of narrow blue gray foliage unlike anything in the locally native flora. The columnar ones were the ones getting ready to bloom – the actual inflorescence had not yet appeared, but the plants were stretching upward and producing a neat effect.

*Campanula glomerata* 'Joan Elliot' was in full bloom as were several broad mats

of pinks and moss phlox; a mat of *Euphorbia myrsinites* in bloom caught several eyes. *Asarina procumbens* bloomed here and there, often peeking from between rocks. There were *Draba* and a broad mass of one of the big bladder pod crucifers. Various cactuses poked up here and there.

It was a real treat to see so much space given over to this novel treatment.

After viewing the gravel garden, we broke up into groups to tour the greenhouses. One was given over mostly to zingiberaceous plants, another to commelinaceous plants, and other houses had mixed residents.

I hope we get a chance to see the gravel garden again in the future: it will be interesting to see how things fill in and develop over time.

Here are some more views of the gravel garden:



### **Redbuds as I've never seen them before**

The day before the gravel garden tour I was in Pittsburgh to help with a rock garden show. Wayne picked me up at the crack of dawn to get there by 10 A.M. The day was overcast, with intermittent sunshine, and everything was wet or damp from recent rain. The local farmland is verdant, lush, and at this time of year postcard perfect. The views down into the farmed valleys were wonderful. At one point we passed a hillside covered with *Trillium grandiflorum*. That we even noticed them at 65 mph is an indication of just how broad and extensive this group was.

After the show, we were in no hurry and decided to take the southern route home: we drove down into West Virginia and then picked up route 68 east. This turned out to be a good choice. The road cuts were spectacular. But the prettiest part of the scenery came from something I would not have expected. The redbuds in the area were just coming into full bloom. The cool temperatures had allowed the flowers to keep their intense magenta color. But there was more: the ground there is evidently mostly rock, maybe even coal seams. It was still wet from the rain and formed an inky black background to the flowers of the

redbuds. Mile after mile, over and over, we passed clumps of hundreds of redbuds, their brilliant flowers displayed more beautifully than I had ever seen them before against the black background of the wet rock. What a glorious sight this was!

### ***Helleborus niger* ‘HGC Jacob’**

Several years ago Dixie Hougen and I were having a good talk about *Helleborus niger* in our gardens. To begin with, not many local gardeners seem to grow this species. There is a wide spread belief (not without some foundation) that it is more difficult to grow than the typical garden hellebores of the *Helleborus* × *hybridus* group.

Among serious hellebore growers who have no trouble growing it there is another objection: plants in our gardens bloom late, well after the garden hellebores and long after *Helleborus foetidus*.

I grow a form notable for huge flowers (I’ve measured flowers over five inches across) which eventually fade to a sort of dusty pink. This plant has been in my garden for a long time, and it presents no cultural problems. It might be the answer to a dream except for one thing: it rarely blooms before March. By then I’ve seen plenty of hellebores, and a white one, even a big white one, is hardly all that fetching.

When Dixie and I were having that talk, I mentioned that I thought I had seen *Helleborus niger* cultivars mentioned in the older German literature, cultivars selected for specific bloom dates ranging from November through the winter months. Dixie had never heard of these,

and since her enthusiasm for things *Helleborus* was a lot more reaching than mine, I assumed that these forms had never made it to our country (if, indeed, they still exist anywhere).

Early this year I was in the local Whole Foods Market and noticed some hellebores for sale in the florist corner. They were in gallon pots and were thick with foliage and, by that time, mostly spent flowers. On second look I realized that they were *Helleborus niger*. Since most seemed to have lots of developing seed pods, and since the price was very right, I bought some. It was only when I got them home that I discovered what I had.

The tag which comes with the plants states “Unlike other *Helleborus* varieties on the market, the “HELLEBORUS GOLD COLLECTION” varieties are propagated by division and not by seed.”...

“HGC JACOB is a true Christmas Rose flowering at Christmas”.

Will it flower at Christmas in our climate? I’ll let you know next year.



Label supplied with *Helleborus niger* ‘HGC Jacob’

After the above went out in the draft version for review by board members, Dixie wrote to me to fill me in again

about the Phair plant. Here's what she said "I know you know of George Phair's consistent 12/15 *Helleborus niger* from the old Wayside, but I don't think I have mentioned to you, Jim, that the plant Cecie thought had died, has not died and bloomed on its usual date this last year. I am really interested in the behavior of 'Jacob' in his new Maryland home but I doubt he will settle down for a year or so." And noticing that this cultivar 'Jacob' is not mentioned in her references, Dixie contacted Judith Knott Tyler. I soon got an email from Judith with some more information about the German *Helleborus niger* efforts. This is fascinating. Here's what Judith said: "The cultivar 'Jacob' is one of Joseph Heuger's hellebores from Germany propagated via tissue culture. Joseph and his breeder visited us here and we reciprocated. We visited his place in 2004, and they had truly the most extensive collection of *Helleborus niger* we saw anywhere: more than one hundred different clones, in huge clay pots. They grow many *Helleborus niger* outside in sun in "clay" and dig them for repotting. They also grow plants that bloom in about a 1" pot - really not much bigger than a thimble size - pots that they sell for people to put in the Christmas Crèche. They are a wholesale nursery and do not have a retail site. The nursery was a marvel of German engineering, plants rarely touched by human hands, all done by computers, moved throughout the place on rolling benches. The *Helleborus niger* plants are sold here by Yoder to other growers.

We couldn't include any of their plants in our book because they had not been released by name; they came out a bit later. They are releasing a new series of tissue culture *Helleborus* × *hybridus*

plants that they guarantee to bloom the first year from a 72 cell flat. I can't quite see it happening myself, but I've ordered some, and we'll try them. We sent them seed for several years to help get their *hybridus* program off the ground.

We have several *Helleborus niger* clones here that have bloomed reliably before Christmas each year for the last eight or so years. One is a hybrid of ours that is a fertile, failed *Helleborus* × *nigercors* cross that really puts on a show in a hypertufa container. Another, the strain we call 'Wilder Strain' we got from Tony Avent who got it from Bobby Wilder who got it from the old (Ohio) Wayside. I wonder if it's the same strain as the Phair's? "

For more information about the German hellebore factory, see

[http://www.helleborus.de/engl/hgc\\_eng.htm](http://www.helleborus.de/engl/hgc_eng.htm)

## May 19 frost

When I was a young gardener a long-time Washington area gardener several times assured me that the last frost date for area was May 5. The progressively milder winters we have been experiencing make May 5 seem like an excessively conservative date. These days the local big box stores are offering tender bedding plants and vegetables in late March and earliest April. I wouldn't want to be working in those stores on the days when night freezes are predicted – or dealing with the imprudent early birds who planted impatiens and tomatoes in early April only to learn the hard way that that is much too early for areas outside the beltway (and sometimes inside the beltway).

While in Pittsburgh recently I noticed the sign near the cash register in a nursery: the local safe date was given as May 19. I thought of them the other day when we experienced a drop in temperatures on May 19 – I was wondering if they got a record breaking late frost or freeze this year.

Our house is on the top of a low rise. When I walk Biscuit in the morning, I generally notice a distinct drop in temperature as we walk downhill; this drop occurs all at once – there is the distinct impression of passing from a warmer place to a colder, damper place. One of the lowest spots in the immediate neighborhood is a local ball field: I've often seen frost there when there is none to be seen anywhere else nearby.

This morning while walking Biscuit I met one of my dog and gardening friends as she was walking up to catch the train. She has been keeping low temperature records for about twenty years, and she mentioned that this year provided another record for her: on May 19, that ball field had frost! Air temperatures in the area that morning were about 37° F – but in places the grass was hoar and crunchy on the ball field.

Once again I was glad that I was not working in a nursery dealing with the disgruntled early birds who planted tender plants much too early.

And speaking of early birds: I have Google daily quotes loaded on my pc. Yesterday provided this one: “The early bird gets the worm; the second mouse gets the cheese”.

### ***Paeonia* ‘Garden Treasure’**

Most garden peonies are big for rock garden use, and this one is not tiny. But it represents a breakthrough in peony breeding, and it provides a new look in garden peonies. It's a hybrid of a herbaceous garden peony and a tree peony: it has the foliage of a tree peony but it does not form woody stems above ground. This cultivar, ‘Garden Treasure’ was raised by Don Hollingsworth and was introduced in 1984. It is said to form broad clumps several feet across (Hollingsworth says a mound five feet across with four to five dozen flowers).

The first hybrids of this group arrived in the west almost forty years ago. I still remember receiving the catalog of the Louis Smirnow company in which the first of these herbaceous-tree hybrids was offered. At that time no one apparently knew what they were: even the Smirnow catalog expressed doubts about them. Smirnow had acquired them from the Japanese hybridizer Itoh (or his widow) and offered ‘Yellow Crown’ for, as I recall, \$25 each. Back then that was a much bigger bite than it is now. I also grow ‘Yellow Crown’ (not from that original offering but acquired much later).

At the recent Green Spring sale one of the vendors had nice pots of several of these inter-divisional (or inter-sectional) peony hybrids for \$40 each. That's a lot for a peony, but it puts these beautiful plants within reach. The cultivars I noticed then were ‘Bartzella’ and ‘Copper Kettle’.

If you have room for only one peony (a terrible affliction, that) it might as well be one of these new hybrids. They combine well the exotic colors of the

tree peonies with the comparatively restrained growth of the herbaceous sorts.



*Paeonia* 'Garden Treasure'

J. McKenney

## Some nursery gleanings from western Virginia

### *Raoulia*

I saw some raoulias for sale in a nursery in western Virginia. Since the name is one most of us who have read the British rock garden literature know, and since few if any of us actually grow these plants, I stopped to take a careful look. I'm not sure we're missing anything: the plants had a crusty feel and looked as if they were made of snips of dirty aluminum foil. Am I missing something here? I didn't buy one, but I'll be back there in a few weeks, and if any are left I might give one a try.

### *Delosperma* 'Red Mountain' ?

That same nursery which had the *Raoulia* had a tray of *Delosperma nubigenum* with yellow flowers. But one plant stood out: it had brilliant coppery-

orange-red flowers like none I had ever seen in delospermas. That one came home with me. A Google search suggests that it might be the new cultivar 'Red Mountain'. So far the plant, still in the pot in which it was purchased, has not had more than one or two flowers open at a time. But what a gorgeous color. If this one establishes itself as a reliable garden plant, I'll be very happy.



*Delosperma* 'Red Mountain' ?

J. McKenney

### *Aquilegia alpina*

This same nursery had pots of what were labeled *Aquilegia alpina*. I'm suspicious of the name. The plants are about two feet high. It was the flowers which caught my eye: sumptuous, ample, intense pure blue with maybe a hint of purple, no distracting white or yellow parts – in short, just what I want from a garden columbine. Years ago I grew a cultivar called 'Hensoll Harebell' which was very much like this one as I remember it.

Whatever it is, I'm very glad to have it.



*Aquilegia alpina*

J. McKenney



*Ajuga* 'Chocolate Chip'

J. McKenney

## Others

I also brought home a few other things: an interestingly marked *Erodium*, a very intense blue *Ajuga*, a pink form of *Gypsophila repens*. Here they are:



*Gypsophila repens* 'Rosea'

J. McKenney



*Erodium* × *variabile* 'Bishop's Form'

J. McKenney

## My garden at ground zero

Last week the tree men took down a huge black oak which had dominated the garden. At the same time, an enormous limb from a nearby white oak was removed. Going into this, I knew that parts of the garden would be trashed in the process. I moved what I could and left the rest to fate. Fate was noisy: as the big chunks of tree came crashing down, the house shook. Utterly annihilated were an *Illicium floridanum*, one nice *Calycanthus sinensis* and a *Camellia japonica* which had been in the garden for perhaps forty years, possibly more. About half of one *Aesculus parviflora* disappeared in the rubble.

It was heartbreaking. But the tree leaned toward the house, and had it fallen onto the house as we were sleeping, it might very well have been literally skull or back breaking.

In my naïveté I had asked the tree crew to cut the wood into two-foot lengths which I could later split for use in the fireplace. Some of those two-foot lengths are over a yard in diameter. I can't budge them – they are that heavy. I might be calling in the tree crew again to break the wood into smaller pieces.

Meanwhile, the back corner of the garden is a disaster site: and that's not likely to change soon.



Some of these pieces are over three feet in diameter!  
J. McKenney

### *Asarum nobilissimum*

This odd looking flower opened about a week ago in the protected cold frame. It has a repellent, fleshy, creepy quality to it: to me it looks more like something from a pathology book than a likely candidate for our gardens. It's certainly interesting. It's in the protected cold frame because Asiatica (my source several years ago) gives it a zone 8 rating.

These flowers are about three inches across, sometimes more – much bigger than those of our native American species.

It is worth growing for the foliage alone.



*Asarum nobilissimum*

J. McKenney

### **Rose covered cottage**

With the mild weather we leave the windows and doors open as much as possible at this time of year. Ten four-foot plants of dwarf box release their familiar pungency in this weather – it's a scent which I find very agreeable – and the scent now seeps into various rooms in the house commingled with the scents of roses, pinks, mock orange, peonies, and the early honeysuckles. Your editor lives in a house which at this time of year appears to be becoming a rose covered cottage. In the picture below, the pale yellow (in the image they look white) roses you see tumbling onto the roof of the house are the nineteenth century tea-Noisette roses 'Alister Stella Gray' and 'Claire Jacquier'. My study (so to speak – it's actually my bedroom; when I wake up with a good idea, the keyboard is almost at my fingertips) is directly under them, allowing the fragrance to permeate my room day and night. This arrangement makes for great snoozes and even better dreams!



J. McKenney

### **Back issues of Horticulture magazine**

Lynn Blei is cleaning out her basement and has about 12 years of back issues of *Horticulture Magazine*. If anyone is interested, they can contact her at (301)365-4031.

### *PVC Bulletin*

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