

How it all started

I was born in 1941 and as a child can remember my mother growing sweetpeas up bamboo canes and the heady scent of night scented stock which grew each side of the pathway leading to the front door of our tiny tied cottage in Oswestry, Shropshire ~ but



Night scented stock



Sweetpea

I never developed much interest in gardening of any kind at that time.

In 1967 at the age of 26 I got married, went on honeymoon to Bournemouth and on our return moved into our new three bedroomed home a few months later.

Come the spring of 1968 I was faced with a back garden of builders rubble on a hard grey clay soil. I hired a man to call round with a rotary cultivator to loosen up the soil but he broke two blades and gave up! I had to use a fork and with the help of two friends got it done by midsummer.

I incorporated 28 tons of good topsoil and many bags of moss peat and builders sand.

I built a retaining wall the width (9 metres) of the garden and the rest was a lawn and a paved patio (a total length of 21 metres). Between the three side fences and the lawn was

a 60 cm wide border in which I planted a number of hybrid tea roses. The retaining wall was filled with mesembryantheums; well, they looked very nice on the promenade at Bournemouth!

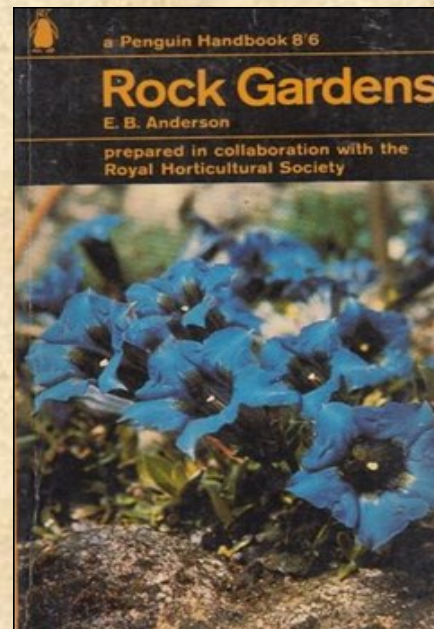


Mesembryanthemums

We didn't get a lot of sun in the Midlands that year, the mesembryanthemums never fully opened and the roses became infested with greenfly and mildew. I wasn't having fun, maintaining a garden was a chore and something I didn't enjoy! It was approaching Christmas and I put all ideas of gardening out of my mind.

Of course, in those days there was no computers and no internet and I used to get a lot of books from the library.

I came across a little paperback book called "Rock Gardens" by E. B. Anderson. Until then I had never heard of a Gentiana or a Soldanella, let alone seen one. The book described these plants in a way that attracted me to them. I wanted to know more. At the back of the book was the address of the Alpine Garden Society.



A month or two later I sent off my subscription and received my first Bulletin in March 1969. I sent off for a number of descriptive catalogues as advertised in the Bulletin.

Some of the first plants I received by mail order were a collection of Mansfield's rooted cuttings. These were 20 cuttings of their choice, a potluck mixture for the novice alpine gardener. Some of the plants I remember in that collection were: Anacyclus pyrethrum var. depressus, Arabis blepharophylla, Erigeron glaucus var. roseus, Iberis gibraltarica, Lonicera 'Baggeson's Gold', Silene schafta, Sisyrinchium brachypus and Tunica saxifraga. I then sent for choicer plants from Jack Drake and C. G. Hollett and that summer I made the journey to my first two alpine nurseries: Joe Elliott's Broadwell Nursery and Stanton Alpine Nursery in Leicester. I also drove down to Devizes in Wiltshire and came back with a number of dwarf and slow-growing conifers from the Wansdyke Nursery. Most of the plants I bought at that time went into the retaining wall that ran the width of the garden, whilst others went into the rock garden I had started. I was becoming hooked on alpine plants!

The winter of 1970 passed and in the March of 1971 I contacted the Birmingham Group Secretary, Jim Broadhurst, who told me that I would be most welcome at the next meeting. I cannot recall if it was the March or April meeting I attended, but what I do remember is that I was given a list of members' gardens that were open during the spring and summer. The first garden on the list that would be open was Roy Elliott's. I can't remember the date, but it was on a Sunday from 2 o'clock to 4 o'clock. I started out early that Sunday as I didn't know Birmingham at all and 15 West Drive, Handsworth looked quite a daunting place to find from the look of my A to Z! I got there about 40 minutes early and sat in the car for a while, waiting for my watch to show 2 o'clock. There were no other cars parked outside so I sat and waited. From where I sat I could see an attractive array of rocks and plants in the front garden.

I got out of the car for a closer look. I can't recall exactly what plants I saw in the front garden that day, (*I must have visited that garden at least 25 times during the following years*) but it was something like a clump of *Fritillaria meleagris* or *Narcissus bulbocodium* that drew me nearer. Then I heard a voice call out, 'Hello, have you come to look round the garden?' Roy Elliott stood by an open wrought iron gate and welcomed me to his garden, saying that it would be his pleasure to show me around before the hordes arrived. I walked through the gate entrance and I knew at that moment that the wonderful plants that we all loosely term as alpinists would become a consuming passion in my life. There are many plants that come to mind on those early visits to that garden: *Primula 'Carmine'* covering a scree bed by the side of the alpine house; the huge spiny dome of *Erinacea anthyllis* growing on the tufa cliff, with *Lithospermum oleifolium*, (now strictly *Lithodora oleifolia*) from the Spanish Pyrenees. I remember too, as no doubt many others will, the pride of the alpine house; *Diosphaera asperuloides* (which we must now call *Trachelium asperuloides*). This was displayed near the far exit of the alpine house, and no matter how many times you had visited the garden your midsummer return would not be complete until you had gazed upon that wonderful dome covered in sky-blue tubular flowers. In his book, *Alpine Gardening*, Roy Elliott states, 'Tens of thousands of homes have small rock gardens, whose owners have never savoured the real lure of alpinists.' I have found that statement to be very true; a number of friends and relatives to whom I have given plants will place them amongst the roses or bedding plants, not concerned about their names or where they come from. To them they are just pretty plants with impossible names. I just loved the names of these lovely mountain plants from the start. I had difficulty in pronouncing them at first, but each name is unique to a particular plant; it is an individual and stands apart from others because of its name. I was shown an outstanding plant with clusters of pale yellow bell-shaped flowers. 'That is *Phyllodoce aleutica*,' said Roy, 'It comes from that necklace of small islands that joins Alaska to Russia, the Aleutian Islands.' I asked again how it was pronounced and repeated it over and over in my mind. I promised myself that I would look up the Aleutian Islands in my world atlas when I got home. I spent four hours in that wonderful garden that day and was one of the last to leave, coming away with a number of plants, (*Paeonia mlokosewitschii* was one of them; it still flowers each year in my small, overcrowded garden) and a big piece of tufa rock. When I got home I knew I had to dismantle my poor attempts at building a 'rockery', I was going to build a 'ROCK GARDEN!'



Paeonia mlokosewitschii.

I will be 75 years old this coming April. (2016). I still find many of these names difficult to pronounce but for me the wonderful world of alpine plants have given me almost 50 years of great joy. During those years I have met some very dear and wonderful people, other alpine enthusiasts, plantsmen, and nurserymen, who have shared their passion, their knowledge and their plants. For me it has been, and still is, a wonderful and exciting journey full of great memories.

Mimulus naiandinus.



Physoplexis comosa.

