

Welcome to the March 2021 edition of Shade Monthly.

Finally it feels like spring might be on its way! I always welcome the longer days and the increasing strength in the sun at this time of year, and seeing the plants and animals responding all around us.

The weather has been quite interesting here in Fife during February – days of thick snow and an unusual low overnight temperature of -17.3°C has left me wandering round the garden, checking that everything has come through. Time will tell – plants are often so much tougher than we think.

Thank you very much to our contributors this month – we have three terrific articles for you. First is an update from Walt Bubelis in Washington State, USA with highlights from his garden, and second is a plant focus on the interesting genus *Scopiolus* by Keith Ferguson. Finally I am very pleased to include an article from Alastair Fitter on creating a peat wall without peat. As Alastair notes, the need to stop using peat in horticulture becomes ever more pressing, and so experimenting with alternatives and sharing the results is vital.

This will be my last issue as editor of Shade Monthly, so I wanted to thank everyone who has contributed content over the past year. A big thank you too to Tony Bays for proof reading and to the S&W committee. Please continue sending any text or photos to shadmonthly@gmail.com as they are always very much appreciated.

Enjoy your gardens this spring and keep safe and well.



Seattle Notes – January/February 2021

Text and photos by Walt Bubelis

Torrential rains started off our new year, the second wettest on record. Young seedlings are getting more than they can cope with; some I've placed under clear plastic sheeting to replicate a cool greenhouse with minimal water.

Blooming since mid-December is a *Camellia saluenensis* 'Apple Blossom'. Some term this a japonica but it is so ahead of my sole *C. japonica*, I wonder if I have a hybrid instead. Even my williamsii hybrids are not showing color. A 'Showa-no-sakae' sasanqua started even earlier and is continuing as well, spent blossoms providing a pink path. A yellow floral carpet greets me on a different path all from a large *Mahonia x media* 'Charity'. A close companion, *Hoheria* 'Glory of Amlwch' benefits from not being subjected to the full force of the winds and direct sunlight that strikes the *Mahonia*. Lighter yellow is appearing on the dangling hazelnut catkins; between rains, a layer of pollen coats nearby foliage. It also heralds the beginning of allergy season for me; the grove of red alders nearby will soon begin their contribution of aerial pollen.



Figure 1 *Camellia saluenensis* 'Apple Blossom'

Soon, I'll be sowing seed again hopefully from the HPS seed exchange and some from the Mediterranean Garden Society as well. I continually try my luck with southern hemisphere plants and am pleasantly surprised at times. What I can't place in the garden goes to the Edmonds College horticulture program where I taught for some 40 years. Some become teaching examples, the majority are offered in plant sales.

Various bulbs are showing their presence so this is the last chance to apply any mulch, even a thin coating so as not to smother anything. Not needing mulch though is a nice mat of *Mitchella repens* (Partridge berry) home to a beginning clump of *Galanthus nivalis* 'Flore Pleno'. Cyclamens are in their annual progression with *C. graecum* finishing, then *C. coum* 'Shell Pink' followed by *Cyclamen coum* Pewter Group 'Maurice Dryden'. The ants sow the seed from these that I don't with each nicely enlarging its territory. Same goes with the Asarums – I forget to seek them out and lo and behold, they've spread out too. I've had varying degrees of success lifting and separating young self-sown seedlings. The next attempt will place transplants onto an outdoor shelf high above the reach of the average slug.



Figure 2 *Mitchella repens*

With our acidic soils, we don't get many snails but we do get 5 distinctly different species of slugs. Quite rare now and not a garden pest as it prefers native material is the banana slug, so called due to a yellow-green coloration and approaching 6-8" in length. It's still in the forests where it can surprise you at eye level and above on trunks of coniferous trees. More insidious are the gray garden slugs (*Deroceras reticulatum*), *Arion ater* (black slug) and *Arion rufus* (large red slug), all European imports. Instead of any molluscicides, I place around the garden and nursery pots small wooden 'tunnels'; slugs seek these out for shelter and then are easily disposed of when turned over and then placed back. Much safer for my cat and you can monitor their populations rather than seeing damaged leaves. Early vigilance helps reduce later populations too. One prize I forgot about protecting and showing slug damage is *Calanthe sieboldii*; I hope it will revive this coming spring.



Figure 3 *Galanthus nivalis* 'Flore Pleno'

We're due for an extended spate of below freezing weather. With so much emerging and now losing acclimatization, this will be a test of the hardiest. More later, keep well.

Walt Bubelis

walthorticulture@comcast.net

Professor Emeritus, Horticulture, Edmonds College



Figure 4 *Calanthe sieboldii*

Scoliopus

Text and photos by Keith Ferguson

A rather insignificant genus of 2 species from the west coast of North America. Perennials with short rhizomes, low growing with small but showy flowers and unpleasant odour. They occur in coniferous woodland. Flower in early spring. Closely related to *Trillium*.

S.hallii - leaves 8-14cms long usually without purple spots. Tepals 6-10 mm. Very local in one small area of southern Oregon. Not succeeded in finding in wild.

S.bigelovii - leaves 14-24cms long leaves with purple spots. Tepals 12-19mm. More widespread but again local occurring from north of San Francisco to near the Oregon border.

We grow both species in our shade garden where they have persisted with minimum attention for near 10 years. We have found *S.bigelovii* in the wild after a long search through woodland in June near the coast of northern California where it was still in leaf and the fruit pods were buried in the leaf litter.

They are easily raised from seed but the seed pods need to be collected just before they “slink” into the ground. Hence the popular names “slink-lily” or “slink pod”.



Figure 1 *Scoliopus bigelovii*



Figure 2 *Scoliopus bigelovii*



Figure 3 (above) and 4 (below) *Scoliopus hallii*



The Peat-free Peat Garden

Text and photos by Alastair Fitter

Plants can be very fussy. Many garden plants are the least fussy ones, for obvious reasons, but all keen gardeners crave the opportunity to grow some of the more demanding ones, and for shade gardeners plants that like to grow on peat are a big attraction.

At one time, the solution to this craving was simple – a peat garden. You could buy bales of peat from your garden centre and as long as you had a way of keeping it wet, you had a peat garden. Now, however, there is no excuse for being unaware of the dreadful damage that has been done to natural peat habitats by gardeners' demand for peat and all responsible gardeners eschew it as a planting material or compost ingredient.

Peat is just undecomposed plant remains: it forms where the ground is waterlogged and so there is no oxygen. It forms slowly, at around 1 mm a year, but it goes on accumulating as long as the conditions are right. In Britain, peat bogs started forming around 10 000 years ago and the few that have been left undisturbed may have as much as 10 m of peat, which often grows in a mound forming a raised bog.

Peat bogs are wonderful for two reasons: one is that they create an unique habitat that in this country is home to rare and beautiful plants such as bog asphodel, sundews, bog rosemary and many sedges. The other is that they are a huge store of carbon, because that is basically what they are made of. When we dig them up and dry out the peat (or even burn it), the carbon is returned to atmosphere as CO₂, exacerbating global heating and climate change.

Problem: if a gardener wants to create a peat garden, what should they do? Peat is just organic matter, so the answer is simple: use a different form of organic matter. Four years ago, I made a non-peat peat garden, as an experiment. Here is what worked and what didn't.

I chose to use coir, because it is readily available and is a waste product of coconut production. In texture, it is much more fibrous than peat so I mixed it with spent mushroom compost, which is principally straw in a semi-decomposed state, in a roughly 2 (coir): 1 (compost) ratio. I added some home-generated compost and also bonemeal to provide an initial slow-release source of nutrients. The coir comes in compressed, dried blocks which have to be rehydrated before use.

I wanted to grow plants over a 'peat' wall so I created a bank of unwetted coir blocks (Figure 1) and filled the area behind it with the wetted coir/compost mix. That created a problem that the peat was above ground level and so would dry out, even though it is in a shaded area, so I buried a soaker hose in the peat garden so that I could wet it from below in drought periods.

That was my first mistake: I should have selected a site where the coir could be kept naturally moist and foregone my 'peat wall'. As it is I have to use water (as sparingly as I can) in high summer.

I planted the new bed up in early spring (figure 2) and the initial growth was good with *Meconopsis* 'Lingholm' and *Primula sieboldii* and *P. japonica* 'Miller's Crimson', making the early show (figure 3). The large leaves at the back are the remnants of a plant of *Inula magnifica* that I had attempted to transplant during site preparation but whose persistence ability I had under-estimated. It has now found a better home.

Figure 1. Preparing the non-peat garden in February 2017, with the line of unwetted coir blocks retaining the mixture of coir and compost behind.



Figure 2. The garden in March 2017 with newly planted *Primula* and *Meconopsis* visible.



Figure 3. The same view in May 2017: *P. japonica* 'Miller's Crimson' was useful in the first year but I have now moved it to a pond-side. The *Podophyllum* seedlings did well at first but have not bulked up recently. Note the *Inula magnifica* bursting through.

Growing *Meconopsis* in York, which is one of the lowest rainfall areas in the UK, is a challenge that others have risen to much better than I have, but my coir garden is the only place in the garden where I can even attempt it. Last year *M. sulphurea* was successful (figure 4), and *M. nepaulensis* also does well. However, thanks to its location, the garden is never going to be properly wet, and so many traditional peat garden specialities cannot survive it.

Another problem is that the site is surrounded by trees, with two large *Betula maximowicziana* to the east and several *Acer campestre* and *Prunus cerasifera*, as well as a young *Stewartia*, to the north and west. As a result the coir/compost mix is now a dense mat of roots, further drying it out. Planting anything new involves cutting out a large core of roots and backfilling the hole with fresh mixture. If starting again, I would have used a less tree-infested site.



Figure 4. *Meconopsis sulphurea* in flower in June 2019. *Linnaea borealis* is visible on the 'wall' to the left.

The coir block wall is now beginning to erode. My hope was that the roots of the plants growing in it would stabilise it and to some extent that is happening. One of the most successful 'wall' plants is *Linnaea borealis* (figure 5) which seems to want to grow down off the wall onto the path below. There are several *Shortia* and dwarf *Rhododendron* which have also established well in the wall.

My experiment in non-peat garden has been a qualified success. I chose a poor site and that means that I cannot grow anything resembling bog plants. Since what I have created is effectively a place for plants of dry shade that like a wholly organic soil, it is perhaps unsurprising that woodlanders such as *Linnaea* and also *Hylomecon* do well. But I have satisfied myself that peat is unnecessary even in a peat garden and maybe I shall do better next time.



Figure 5. *Linnaea borealis* var. *americana* in flower in the coir garden