



Creating a Crevice Garden: A Shared Journey

Text and photos by David Pulman and Jeremy Schmidt

David: As my wife Clare and I were having “Covid catalyzed” discussions about whether it made sense for us to leave North Carolina and relocate nearer to family, the subject of the garden was raised. Our Chapel Hill garden — which had undergone a five-year make-over, including the addition of two crevice gardens — was our place, important to us. A place to do satisfying work and a wonderful environment to relax and enjoy ourselves. A decision “family vs garden” didn’t take long to make: “we can easily build a new garden” was my assessment (it must have been the wine talking!). The decision to move to Georgia was made.

We ended up buying a newly built house complete with three different types of sod laid over builders rubble and compacted Georgia clay. A “full on” new garden? - in the cold light of day, not that easy!

However, as we planned the garden, the one constant was that we wanted another crevice garden at the heart of it. The harmony of plant and stone was too much to resist. Our previous two crevice gardens had been built by Jeremy Schmidt, and we had established such a good rapport that I was convinced we could plan a garden from distance. The design could be an iterative email process; I could get a contractor to do the prep work: because Jeremy had already taught me how to select and buy stone and then he could just drop by for a few days and do his magic. So when I put this proposal to him, I was absolutely delighted when, with great enthusiasm, he accepted the challenge.

We talked in a relaxed manner about many design topics: the problem I was having was to determine the position of the crevice garden relative to other elements of the garden we wanted (herbaceous perennial border; herb garden; woodland garden; Japanese stylistic area). The design tool that helped resolve this was big cardboard boxes and turf marking paint.

This visualization process identified the sweet spot in a garden that only had a high to low drop of about 4 feet.



Jeremy, through a bit of detective work, identified the only bulk source of Permatil in the state and fortuitously was also a good source of bespoke planting medium. We ended up with 28 cubic yards of a Permatil (44%), river sand (28%), worm castings (28%) blend.

Our previous two crevice gardens had allowed us to develop a great way of working. We jointly agree the big design points; Clare and I declare the things we would like to incorporate and Jeremy reflects on the art of the possible. After that I become a rudimentary laborer and coffee maker, and Jeremy does what he does best - stack stone.



We agreed the foundation design. An 18” deep cavity that sloped up to 12” at the edge would define the work perimeter. A 3000-lb flat boulder would be positioned to act as a “sitting stone.” Clare and I are both fond of the Burren in the west of Ireland so we wanted to incorporate klints. As much as possible we wanted this to be toddler friendly as our



granddaughter would be a frequent visitor. Jeremy suggested six pallets of stone would do the trick.

After a little anxiety, two days before J– Day, the pre-installation preparation had been completed. Jeremy gave me the good news - his better half, Meghan Fidler, a great stone stacker in her own right, was also coming to Georgia.

We were off!

Jeremy’s narration:

Just a couple hours after participating online in the February 6, 2021, *NARGS Rocks Crevices* virtual study day, I received an email from David informing me of his and Clare’s family-based decision to relocate. Over the past two decades, the Pulmans created a beautiful stone-based garden, and they recently commissioned two of my best crevice creations. Suddenly, their exceptional Chapel Hill garden and my part in it was changing hands...but that’s love in the time of Covid. And in the very next sentence, David invited me to build a crevice feature as a centerpiece in his new garden. Yes...of course, yes...is there any other reasonable answer to such a proposal? It must have been the beer talking. The decision to travel to Georgia was made.

From Valentine’s Day through Halloween, months of emails and phone calls transpired—as if tossing a ball back and forth over a very high wall—and planning our great escarpment. I never felt less than confident about the early November culmination. I had worked with the Pulmans enough to know I would arrive at a worksite approximately like we both imagined—with lots of great stone.

And it was on!

Day Zero.

In the waning light of our travel day, David and Clare gave Meghan and me a 360 degrees tour of their new home and future garden. During our preamble amble we were introduced to a wonderfully



prepped worksite, complete with a central, optimally pre-set boulder—ready for a crevice garden. That night in the hotel room, I imagined ways to recreate the most improbable and most aesthetically appealing natural design in the space and timeframe provided. I fast-forwarded through millennia; I witnessed natural forces pushing, bending, folding, and weathering the crevice formation up to present day, and then watched the plantings mature for the next five years. I built and bulldozed the Pulman’s crevice garden several times that night. Meghan says I dig in my sleep. It’s probably true.

Day One.

Six pallets of stone were staged conveniently adjacent to the worksite. David sent me several pictures of crevice and klint stone options from a large Atlanta area Site One supply yard. We settled on three stone shapes, all branded as part of the Tennessee Fieldstone series, and all apparently from the same quarry. Three pallets of Capstone provided the main body of the crevices. These stones ranged somewhere between stout quadrilaterals and isosceles triangles, averaging 30-200 lbs each, and 5-8” thick. Two pallets of Long Stack were flagged for use as steppable, plantable, klintstones. These were consistently French fry-shaped, and 5-12” thick depending on orientation. Finally, one pallet of Medium Veneer was selected primarily to define the edges in conjunction with the large stones. These were 3-6” thick and 10-50 lbs—really just a smaller version of the Capstones. Three shapes and sizes of stone, all from the same quarry, and possessing handsomely weathered-but-squared faces and edges. We could not have custom ordered more optimal crevice stones.

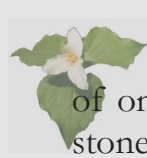


All that just to describe our rocks!?! Yes. Day one, we cut the cages—thus activating the stone.

Accompanying the placement of the first stones was an hour of ritualistic pacing, pondering, and face-scrunching. I’ve learned from experience that 25% or more of the total crevice installation will share similar spacing/orientation/dialect with the initial five-or-so contiguous stones. So, when we stacked the first stones, we had already mentally committed to the macro-concepts of the installation.

For this project, the klint was the obvious starting point. We took our time determining how the klint would interface and aesthetically elevate the large, central boulder—and then how the klint would transition into raised crevices. By the time we stacked the first five klint stones, we had committed to the grain, spacing, and location

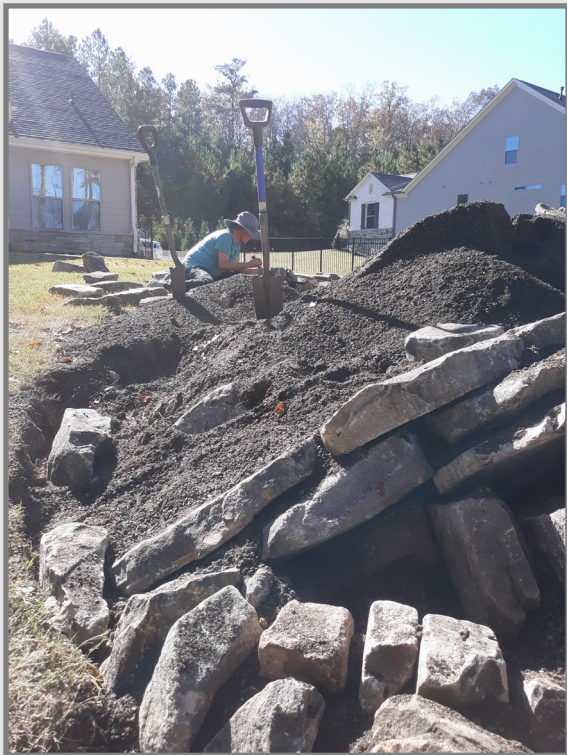




of one-third of the total square footage of the project! By the end of the first day we had set about 50 stones, all as part of the klint.

Day Two.

For two reasons, we ignored the klint at the start of day two. We focused our efforts instead as far away from our first day's work as possible—stacking raised crevices at the downhill extent of the installation. Reason one...after spending an entire day to move through only about 50 stones, our calculated pivot bypassed the “stackers block” we encountered the previous afternoon. Shifting our location within the crevice garden footprint provided an instant plethora of easy stacking choices; and suddenly the project was moving as fast as we could place stone. Second reason...by stacking from low to high, each consecutive stone was ready to support the next stone—a valuable lesson I've had to learn more than once.



After we bent and folded several stones into place, Meghan discovered an opportunity a few feet away to incorporate a small rubble island of misfit rocks. Separated from the main crevices by the walkable expanse constructed during day one, the small feature added a measure of balance to the large central boulder, and gave a voice to stone less likely to fit elsewhere in the project. She even re-homed a few “impossible-to-stack” quartz rocks native to the property. I've had excellent success with similar small rubble “accents” in previous crevice installations, including at the Pulmans' former garden. When done right, a patch, a vein, or a

pocket of rubble is no less aesthetic or plantable. And Meghan stacked it right. Joined together, “unusable” stones serve to heighten the story being told—all while stretching stone supply.

Another 80 puzzle pieces registered, and a bigger picture taking shape. Like long brushstrokes, stones reached out to make first contact with the central boulder. And out of no-



where, rocks conjured stairs and a bisecting path. Edges were becoming defined. The space was evolving into place.



Day Three.

To avoid blowing through all the ideal, easy-to-place stones before completion, I stacked through a stone



supply as linearly as possible. To accommodate this tactical randomization, I non-selectively siphoned a few stones from each pallet into small 10-15 stone queue available within arms' reach of where I am working. The recurrent short-term objective is to empty the queue before staging the next stone amalgamation. Adhering to this discipline while freely skipping around to multiple stacking points guarantees consistent material supply throughout the duration of crevice garden installation. However, I've found that this practice not only supports a healthy supply chain, but also facilitates an unlikely alliance between capricious creativity and laser-focused objectivity. More specifically, if stone choices for the stacking challenge at hand are restricted only to what is within reach, then the meticulous comprehension of each stone's shape and attitude are also within reach. A boundless imagination can apply this detailed short-term memory queue to execute perfect stone combinations. Whereas, to select the "perfect" stone from the pallet is rather short-sighted in comparison.

Why such a protracted and roundabout introduction to day three? Because we were halfway through our stone supply and halfway through the project. If we had been cherry-picking in the first two days, we would already have run out of cherries. With the exception of making short work of the Long Stack stones to finish the klint, and setting aside a few large stepping stones, we were systematically slicing through stone pallets like one would slice through of loaf of bread.

Also, Day Three

Mentally and physically—and more so emotionally—day three was unavoidably a difficult haul. Physical exhaustion can be mitigated by redistributing the load across a network of 600 muscles, but there is only one brain to conduct their orchestral movements. Somewhere beyond the halfway point of every multi-day crevice construction project I've completed, whether over a span of four days or over two years, momentum stalls, and a doldrum settles in. Mental vision blurs as completion remains elusively out of sight. Every inch of progress requires willpower, muscle memory, discipline, and an exaggerated deep breath between the placement of each stone.

Stacking challenges intensified during the second half of the Pulmans' crevice project. We were faced compounding constraints—like uniting disjunct stacking points into a contiguous crevice garden. No more skipping around from point to point—we had to close out sections we avoided earlier. Regardless of how delightful the Tennessee Fieldstone was to have and to hold at the beginning of the project, some muscles were as worn out as my Pearl Jam playlist on Pandora. It became more difficult to stay receptive to the unique details



and personality each rock had to offer to the story we were stacking. By lunch the third day we weren't running low on great stones, we were running short on mental bandwidth. The sun advanced as it does across the southern November sky, while Meghan and I pressed on to the best of our ability. We moved one stone at a time; we spoke to each other one word at a time. Day three was really just one quarter of the project timeline, but it felt much longer. Yet each piece was placed with great care and consideration—there was no compro-



mise. Another stone set...a pause for Clare's ham and cheese sandwiches on multi-grain bread, sliced diagonally, with crust removed...a diet soda...a deep breath...pick up another stone from the queue...a granola bar...a sip of David's scalding hot afternoon coffee...and then a deep breath. Another stone set. By the time the shadows stretched across the crevices late that afternoon, the end was in sight.

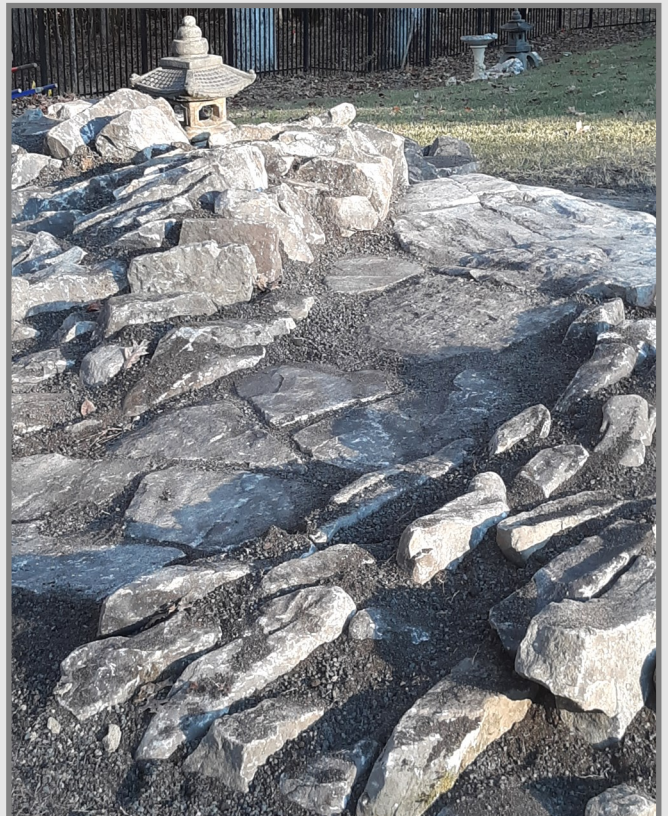
Day four.



What could possibly be more important than the first 95% of the project? Answer: the final 5%. After all, if the last few stones are noticeably thrown together in frustration or surrender or haste, the entire crevice garden will be defined by that small percentage of futility. If the final decisions are enacted with similar confidence and passion as when the first stones were liberated from their cages, then a unified story is told. If no one can point out the last few stones in the project, I take it as a good sign.

With the completed project close at hand, we hit day four with renewed energy—

our brains were synchronized and sharp. We were as hungry to close out the final voids as we were to stock our opening statements on a clean slate. There was a granddaughter ramp to engineer behind the central boulder for high-speed toddler access, but the main challenge of the day was to shovel 1.5 cubic yards of surplus crevice soil out of the way of the final edge and crevices. David helped us greatly with schlepping the soil mix further to the side, closing out the klint, and with laying several steppers for the ramp. We also worked with David and Clare to select, move, and place a *toro* (a Japanese stone lantern) at the apex of the crevice garden. They had transported three such stone lanterns from their previous North Carolina garden, so we had three to choose from on site. Clare was right—the first *toro* we chose was too large for the space. We took a breather, regrouped, and moved a slightly smaller *toro* into place. Thus, consensus was reached on the second try. The day was delightfully punctuated by a visit from premier horticulturists Lisa Bartlett and Ozzie Johnson—the Pulmans new crevice garden was already drawing people together! Lisa and Ozzie dropped off a beautiful Japanese native *Allium kiiense* as a crevice warming gift. By noon on day four, we finished the project, opening the next chapter in the story of these stones.



David and Clare’s investment in the planning and preparation, and our ongoing communication ensured that we were on the same page from the start. In the context of love for family, and a passion for nature, David and Clare provided very clear expectations of how they intended to inhabit the central rocky feature; and immersed in an environment of non-stop hospitality, we were supplied exactly what we needed to accomplish the Pulmans goals. Truly, Meghan and I are honored to be a part of this garden. These stones were drawn together to tell the story of family—from the ground up.



David’s last word:

With the physical crevice garden complete (everyone who visits is mightily impressed) then it is time to turn attention to the planting— in my mind something equally difficult! I have brought my list of plants that did well in North Carolina which is a good place to start. There will be a trawl of the market place but any suggestions from NARGS members will gratefully be received!

Time is not infinite as there are the other elements of the garden to be installed and then planted up. This will be a more stressful process as in addition to “doing a garden” I have to build relationships with the contractors from scratch. I anticipate a more hands on process and if you wish to follow progress then check out the blog at AndAllenGarden.com.

No matter how it all turns out, this is a lot of fun! ☞



Ten weeks after planting

NARGS Award of Merit

By Bobby Ward

[The Award of Merit was established in 1965 to honor a person who has made outstanding contributions to rock and alpine gardening and to the North American Rock Garden Society.]

Jeremy Schmidt, Raleigh, North Carolina

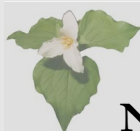
Jeremy is part of the movement of young NARGS members who are bringing new perspectives and philosophy to the art and science of rock gardening. His mega-project was the creation, in 2016, of a 300-foot-long crevice garden constructed entirely from recycled concrete at Juniper Level Botanic Garden in Raleigh, funded in part by a grant from the NARGS Norman Singer Endowment Fund.

He has installed several crevice gardens in private homes in the piedmont region of North Carolina and one in Atlanta; lectured at the NARGS annual meeting in 2017; and appeared on two NARGS Zoom webinars during the COVID pandemic. Jeremy has written articles for the NARGS *Rock Garden Quarterly*, given several presentations to East Coast NARGS chapters, and is one of the participants in the installation of a crevice garden, funded in part by a NARGS Norman Singer Endowment Grant, in Portland, Oregon, in June 2022, during the annual meeting of the American Public Gardens Association.

He is clearly one of the bright young stars in the NARGS firmament and is the Southeast complement of the Kenton Seth and Paul Spriggs duo (authors of “The Crevice Garden”). They are, in essence “The Three Musketeers” of crevice gardening in North America. 🍷

Congratulations, Jeremy





**Piedmont Chapter
NARGS Speakers & Events
Fall 2022 — Spring 2023
(via Zoom and in person)**

**September 17, 2022
Jeremy Schmidt**

Juniper Level Botanic Garden
Raleigh NC

**“Installing a Crevice Garden in
Portland, Oregon”**

October 15, 2022

Patrick McMillan

Juniper Level Botanic Garden
Apex, N.C.

**“Creating a Natural Community Garden with
Southeastern Native Plants”**

November 5, 2022

Linda Cochran

NARGS Traveling Speaker
Port Ludlow, Washington

**“Inspired by Nature:
Photography and Digital Painting”**

January 21, 2023

(member “mini talks”)

**David White: Adirondacks NARGS
Pre-Conference Tour**

**Tim Alderton: VOA Field Trip
Amelia Lane: NARGS Swiss Trip**

February 11, 2023

Hsuan Chen

NCSU Horticultural Science
Raleigh, NC

**“What’s the Fun about
Plant Tissue Culture?”**

March 18, 2023 Todd Boland

NARGS Traveling Speaker
Memorial University of NF Bot. Garden
St John’s, Newfoundland

April 15, 2023

**Jay Sifford, Landscape Designer
Davidson, NC**

**“Making Garden Magic: Designing
Gardening Spaces**

Membership Form

Piedmont Chapter—NARGS

Membership year is from July 1 to June 30

Membership Options: Individual: \$15
Circle one. Household: \$20

Name: _____

Second person name: _____

City: _____ **State:** _____ **Zip:** _____

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Visit <https://www.piedmontnargs.org/> to learn more about
the Piedmont Chapter



Book Review: The Hidden Life of Trees

by Jim Hollister

The Hidden Life of Trees, What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World

by Peter Wohlleben


How they feel? How they communicate? Yeah... this guy and his book get a lot of flak for using human attributes to relate what he has learned about trees by living with them as a forester for over 30 years. And admittedly it can be off-putting at times, but the more you learn from his observations and science, the more you can appreciate and forgive how he explains the life of trees. Can trees "see"? Well, they know when the sun is shining even before they leaf out, so what do you want to call that sense? Can trees "smell"? They receive chemical signals from the air and react, so what do you want to call that sense? There are probably some PhDs out there telling me exactly what they would call these "senses", but as a layman I am happy to accept the sense of sight and smell to help me understand how these complex creatures work.

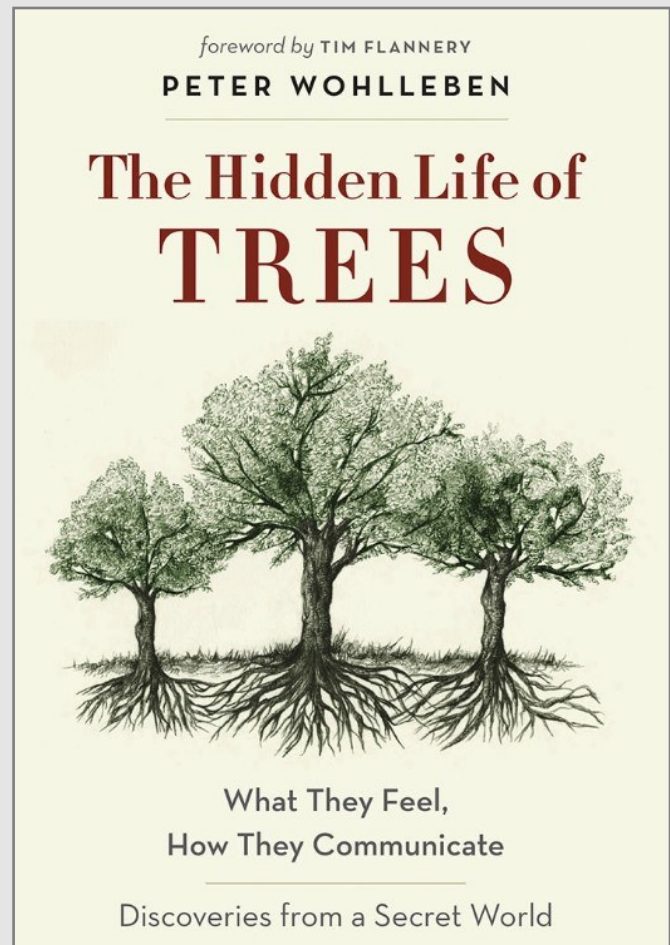
Another takeaway from this book was the forest's sense of time. There is that word again, "sense." Trees can live for hundreds or thousands of years. A tree's adolescence can last a hundred years or more, waiting for mom to fall so it can get the sunlight required to take her place. It seems to me that humans are to forests as fruit flies are to humans. At the risk of being anthropomorphic, a fruit fly goes through its whole life with a pitifully incomplete view of humans. The same can be said for most humans' understanding of a forest. This book contains an enlightening description of the birth and growth of a mature forest and some valuable insight into how our forests/natural areas/wilderness should be managed.

I found it a fascinating read. I felt a little bit guilty stripping the bark from a Bradford Pear in the woods behind the house, but it's a dog-eat-dog world out there, and maybe deep down inside I wanted the pear tree to suffer.

A few teasers: I'd be interested in your answers before and after reading.

1. Can plants learn?
2. Does a tree have feelings?
3. How long can a spruce tree live? A) 100 years B) 2,000 years C) 7,000 years D) A+B+C

Again, many dog-eared pages, because a lot of illuminating passages, but if anyone would like to borrow my copy, let me know. 



NARGS Awards Recipients 2022

Ithaca, New York

Awards Committee members: **Cyndy Cromwell** (chair) (North Carolina), Florene Carney (Alaska), Don LaFond (Michigan), and Rosemary Monahan (Massachusetts)

Award of Merit: Jeremy Schmidt (North Carolina)

Carleton R. Worth Award: Vojtěch Holubec (Czech Republic)

Carleton R. Worth Award: Elizabeth Lawson (New York)

Marcel Le Piniec Award: Darrell Probst (Massachusetts)

Linc & Timmy Foster Millstream Award (Alpine Rock Garden): Bill Stark & Mary Stauble (New York)

Linc & Timmy Foster Millstream Award (Alpine Rock Garden): Chris & Jane Byra (British Columbia)

Linc & Timmy Foster Millstream Award (Special Garden): Jan Sacks & Marty Schafer (Massachusetts)

Marvin E. Black Award: Carol Eichler (New York)

Francis Cabot Award: Wave Hill Garden (New York)

Francis Cabot Award: Wurster Memorial Garden (New York)

Geoffrey Charlesworth Writing Prize: Kathy Purdy (New York)

Norman Singer Endowment Grant: jointly to Sean Hogan (Oregon), Kenton Seth (Colorado), Paul Spriggs (British Columbia), and **Jeremy Schmidt** (North Carolina)

Raulston Blooms—Plant Sale

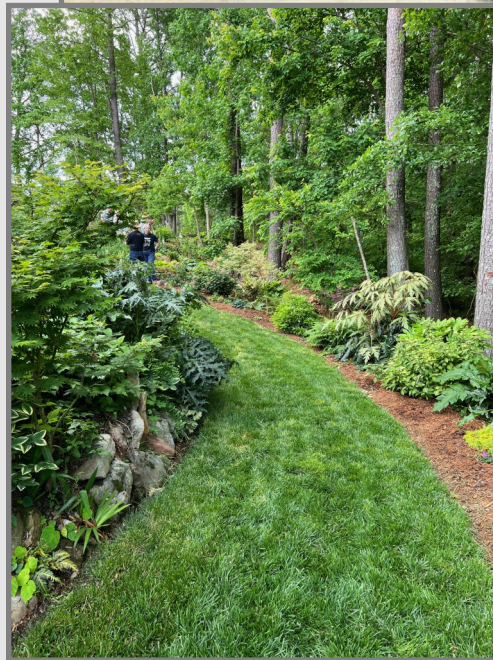
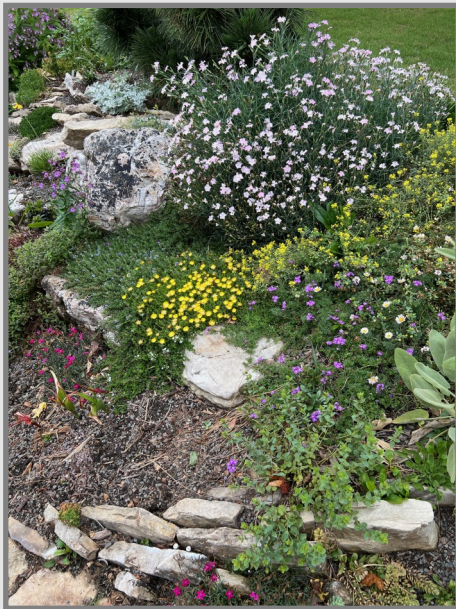
April 30, 2022



The Piedmont Chapter had a successful plant sale selling a lot of plants—close to 900—and making almost \$3,500 to support chapter activities such as scholarships for JC Raulston interns and program speaker's fees. It was well attended, offering an opportunity to introduce many new folks to the chapter and to our mission. Great plants for all.



May 15 Spring Picnic at Jim and Anita Hollister's Home



A big thank you to those who shared photos from the May picnic at Jim Hollister's garden: Nancy Doubrava, Bobby Ward, and Suzanne Edney.

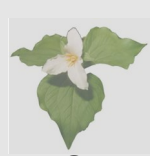


April 16 Open Garden Tour — Sandy Horn's Cary Garden

A love affair with dwarf and miniature trees, the backbone of Sandy's collection is conifers, of which she has hundreds, and Japanese maples, of which she has about 80 cultivars.



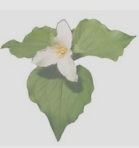
Appreciation to Tony Avent for photos of Sandy's garden and to Gail Norwood for sharing hers.



April 24 Open Garden Tour — Suzanne Edney's Apex Garden

Olderwood, a 2+ acres of gardens along the mostly green woodland rambles through moss paths and gardens, is rich with ideas for sustainability, easy design elements and plants from all over the world living in harmony with many native species. Recently I had Lineberger's tree service and Crane Guy turn my cedar circle into this rustic gazebo-like structure. In the coming months it will have twig work filling in the roof for me even have a piece of stain glass and benches and a gravel floor.





New Feature : Photo Gallery
Members Sharing Their Spring/Summer Garden and Flower Photos



Kyle Sonnenberg

This photo taken outside my
back door.

... from her back yard.

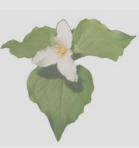


Gail Norwood
...beautiful flowers



Kyle Sonnenberg





New Feature : Photo Gallery
Members Sharing Their Spring/Summer Garden and Flower Photos



Jack Lamm's driveway



Thanks to Suzanne Edney for more photos of the Hollister garden on May 15, 2022.



NARGS Piedmont Chapter Meeting

Saturday, 10 am, September 17, 2022

McSwain Center at the Raulston Arboretum

In-person meeting, but the speaker, will be zoomed from the JCRA meeting room for attendees and members.

Jeremy Schmidt
Juniper Level Botanic Garden

“Installing a Crevice Garden in Portland, Oregon”

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OTHER SIGNIFICANT POSITIONS:

Plant Sale Manager: Tim Alderton
Plant Sale Chair: Jim Hollister

Message from the Chair: *Something Big!*

Cyndy Cromwell

Whether you know it or not, as Piedmont Chapter members you are part of something big!

I'm writing this after attending this year's NARGS annual meeting in Ithaca, New York, where all sorts of horticultural greats were gathered to enjoy wonderful talks, visits to outstanding area gardens and perhaps most important, the kindling and renewal of friendships. I finally met the great urban rock gardener Michael Riley of the Manhattan Chapter of NARGS, while catching up with so many old friends made through meetings and travel.

One of these was the legendary Liberto Dario, real name Eleftherios Dariotis, who I first met when he spoke to our chapter as a NARGS-sponsored speaker back in 2016. Along with many Piedmont Chapter members, I later enjoyed traveling throughout Greece with him on a NARGS tour in 2019. Through his sale of seeds and bulbs - catalog available by writing him at eldaebay@yahoo.com – Liberto distributes amazing plants worldwide. Many can be seen in Tony Avent's Juniper Level Botanic Garden. Follow him on Facebook and Instagram under the moniker Liberto Dario.

Bobby Ward and I were able to secure copies of the new book, *The Crevice Garden*, hot off the presses and signed by Paul Spriggs and Kenton Seth, both in attendance. A NARGS Singer Grant made possible the publication of this wonderful new work on the latest developments in modern rock gardening – showcasing our own Jeremy

Schmidt's creation at Juniper Level, among others – along with practical discussions of construction, substrates and planting.

Attending a NARGS AGM is a great way to get involved with NARGS many activities, meet like-minded folks (hint: we're all crazed plantaholics!) and make personal connections with the best in horticulture worldwide. The Piedmont Chapter was well represented by Bobby Ward and Kyle Sonnenberg this year. Next year, I hope you will consider attending the AGM in Truro, Nova Scotia – check nargs23.org for details as they are posted. The Canadian organizers gave us a preview, and I can tell you the stunning location and botanizing opportunities make this a not to be missed event.

Once your eyes are opened, you'll be amazed at the opportunities for fun and friendship that await you as a member of NARGS. Come join us! 