

Heather Notes

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Discovering the Dainty Darleys by Daphne Everett

The author ran a commercial heather nursery for more than 30 years. She is editor of The (British) Heather Society bulletin, and with her husband she now opens their 2½ acre garden, "The Garden at The Bannut," in Herefordshire, England, to the public in summer. Among many other things, the garden contains a half acre of heather and perhaps the most photographed feature—a heather knot garden.

Erica x darleyensis is a hybrid between *Erica carnea*, a native of the European alpine regions, and *Erica erigena* from the rather gentler regions of Spain, Portugal, Morocco and western Ireland. It is a most useful heather, being vigorous and lime tolerant. It flowers in winter and early spring when color in the garden is at a premium. Many cultivars have the bonus of colored tips to their spring foliage.

The first known plant arose as a seedling in the nurseries of James Smith of Darley Dale in Derbyshire, England in the early 1890s. At first no one was sure precisely what it was, and in its early days it was given a variety of names. In his booklet **A Guide to the Naming of Plants**, David McClintock tells us that the new plant was first called *E. mediterranea hybrida*, with the names *E. carnea hybrida* and *E. herbacea hybrida* also being used. Then, in 1900, J.W. Bean of Kew produced the name *Erica hybrida* for it, but changed it in 1914 to *Erica x darleyensis* (in honor of the area where

it was found.) The cultivar name 'Darley Dale' was given later to this first *darleyensis* hybrid, in order to distinguish it from the second, 'George Rendall', which appeared in 1936.

The once famous firm of James Smith & Sons of Darley Dale was established in 1827. At their nurseries high in the Derbyshire hills they grew a vast range of plants and, by early in the 20th century, they had expanded to cover 250 acres. The family boasted that, because of the altitude (up to 1,100 feet above sea level), their stock could be relied upon to thrive in the most inhospitable conditions. In fact, one of their heather-growing areas was given the name Siberia, because it was so exposed. For many years there were two

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unrelated firms of a similar name trading in the same area: James Smith & Sons (Darley Dale) Ltd. and James Smith (Scotland Nurseries) Ltd. There was fierce rivalry between the two firms, as each tried to persuade prospective customers not to buy from its rival.

James Smith (Darley Dale) Ltd. was one of the earliest British nurseries to sell hardy heathers, many of which were produced for the "lucky white heather" trade. They also introduced several cultivars of their own raising: *Calluna vulgaris* (then called *Erica vulgaris*) 'Darleyensis', 'Tricolorifolia', 'Salmon-

(Continued on page 2)

Darleyensis Report from Readers

In USDA zone 4, Molly Martin is growing several *E. x darleyensis* cultivars that appear to be happy on her Vermont hillside. She writes, "A 'Kramer's Rote' planted on an east-facing hillside last spring, survived the heat and drought of last summer, and came through the winter with no perceptible damage. It looks robust and is loaded with buds which I can hope will still be in flower when the snow melts next spring.

"A 'White Perfection' was planted in a north-facing rock garden created by our construction crew from excavated rock, stones and trucked-in sand. Because of the poor soil, the plant was watered frequently during last summer's drought and was covered with a thick blanket of white pine needles for winter. I'm happy to report it suffered no damage from either heat or cold, and has doubled in size in a year's time.

"In 1997, a 'Mary Helen'

(Continued on page 3)

Dainty Darleys...

(Continued from page 1)

oides', and 'Hammondii Aurea' during the 1920s and, later, *Erica tetralix* 'Darleyensis'.

In their 1913 catalogue, when the nurseries were in the hands of the third generation James Smith, they stated: "These nurseries are specially famed for the culture of Hardy Heathers, including the lucky White Scotch Heathers. Our stock consists upwards of Half a Million saleable plants in 50 distinct varieties. We are undoubtedly the largest growers in the World".

The price of their heather plants at

However, the deliberate cross ... made by nurseryman Kurt Kramer in Germany in 1981 is still the most outstanding of them all.

that time was £8 per thousand.

The 1913 catalogue included a section on "American Plants." The description read: "This class of plants is another of our special lines, the quality giving universal satisfaction, which can be testified by many of the Nobility and Gentry throughout England, Scotland and Ireland, to whom we have had the honour of supplying large quantities."

In those days "nobility and gentry" would often be met at Darley Dale or Matlock Railways stations and transported to the nurseries in style.

The "American Plants" listed were: *Andromeda*, *Arctostaphylos*, *Azalea*, *Bruckenthalia*, *Bryanthus* (synonym for *Phyllodoce*) *Calluna* (see *Erica*), *Clethra*, *Daboecia* and *Empetrum*. I am not sure how some of these came to be included in a list of American plants!

The last James Smith of Darley Dale died in 1979 and the business closed with his death.

There are now many *Erica x darleyensis* cultivars. **The Handy Guide to Heathers** lists 27 (excluding synonyms), some of which arose as seedlings and some as sports. I shall just comment on a few of my favorites.

Erica x darleyensis 'Silberschmelze' is, I understand from your editor, widely grown in the USA. It arose in Germany as a sport on 'Darley Dale'. In my own opinion it has been superseded by a sport from 'Silberschmelze' itself, which has been named 'White Perfection'. The flowers are much whiter and the foliage much greener than on the parent plant.

'Ghost Hills' is a darker-flowered sport from 'Darley Dale', which was found in Norfolk, England, by nurseryman Jack Brummage. A golden/bronze foliated seedling (which also was found in the nursery) was named *Erica x darleyensis* 'Jack H. Brummage' in his honor. This has been a very popular variety in Britain for many years but has recently been challenged by a newer, brighter cultivar called 'Mary Helen'.

The pale lilac 'Jenny Porter', the slightly darker 'Margaret Porter' and 'J.W. Porter'—described as heliotrope, were all raised as seedlings many years ago by J.W. Porter from Northern Ireland. They are still well worth growing.

However, the deliberate cross between *Erica carnea* 'Myretoun Ruby' and *Erica erigena* 'Brightness' made by nurseryman Kurt Kramer in Germany in 1981, is still the most outstanding of them all. *Erica x darleyensis* 'Kramer's Rote', with its magenta flowers, almost the same color as 'Myretoun Ruby', on attractive bronze/green foliage, is a plant not to be missed.

Sitting here in my little office in Herefordshire, England, really does not qualify me to say whether *Erica x darleyensis* will grow well in the north-eastern states of the USA. Your editor tells me that 'George Rendall' is grown successfully in inland Maine (about zone 4) and that 'Silberschmelze' is hardy all over New England—whereas

(Continued from page 2)

David Small says in **The Handy Guide to Heathers** that they are hardy only down to zone 7. So, having (I hope) whetted your appetites for these most attractive and useful plants, I think I must take the coward's way out and finish my story here. However, I do

Growing Darleys in New Jersey

by Joyce Descloux

Erica x darleyensis can be among the most spectacular ericas for winter and spring blossom when they're happy, but here in northern New Jersey they are not nearly as easy as the *E. carneas*. I would rate them ideal in USDA zones 7 and 8, zone 6, where I garden, with caution. Since they are kind of iffy here, I would think they'd need extra protection in even colder zones 5 and 4, such as covering with evergreens. That, however, would limit their flowering period to spring.

Because of their hybrid background, there is a wide divergence in cultivars as to habit of growth and hardiness, depending on which parent influenced them most. While I have grown every one I could get, many have not made the grade here, the main reasons being the stems split badly in extreme conditions. Also, because they are taller than the *carneas*, they often rise above snow cover which protects the latter, and are then noticed and browsed on by foraging deer, who also trample them, breaking stems further. When this happens repeatedly, it's disheartening.

Success with *Erica x darleyensis* here, then depends on very careful siting. They need protection, not only from deer, but from icy winter winds that damage the plants more than extreme temperatures, I think. Because my property slopes to the southeast and gets morning sun, I have found they grow well in that aspect sheltered on the northwest by the house, or by a heavy planting of rhododendrons on the other side. They are easily viewed from the

house, and their blossoming is a welcome sight during the drab winter days. I protect them from deer by using my repellent mixture several times in late fall on the entire surrounding area. My favorite darleys are: 'Jack H. Brummage,' which has colored foliage tips year-round and is a reliable grower. Low-growing, in habit more like a *carnea* than some of the others, it has rosy flowers. 'Furzy'—dark purplish foliage and magenta flowers from early November to early May. Excellent! 'George Rendall'—an 18" mound of pink flowers throughout winter and spring, with colored foliage tips. I've had this plant since 1986, and it has proven very hardy, with minimal winter

hope that members will write to *Heather Notes* telling of their own successes, or otherwise, with growing *Erica x darleyensis*. The information gained will be interesting and extremely useful, and I, for one, shall look forward to reading it! ♦

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'Ghost Hills'—similar to the above, also very hardy.

'Jenny Porter'—a different blossom color, palest lilac, which looks almost cream or white. It's a nice contrast to the pink ones.

'White Perfection'—a newer variety with pure white flowers and bright green foliage, it is an excellent grower, much better than the older whites.

'Kramer's Rote'—this is too new with me, two or three years, to have stood the test of time, but seems most promising. ♦

(Continued from page 2)

that was planted on the east-facing hillside has grown into a beautiful specimen, out-performing all its heather brethren. So far, it has required no trimming of browned tips or cutting out of dead centers and no removal of frost-damaged stems. Its mounding habit is full without being overly dense—a truly lovely plant!"

Ella May Wulff, in the much milder climate of Philomath, Oregon writes: "My *E. x darleyensis* 'Kramer's Rote' began blooming in November last year! Just to be sure I didn't have an oddball, I checked my local garden center. Their plants of 'Kramer's Rote' were also in bloom. The plant continued in bloom for a long time. It is super."

Marjorie Walsh of Maine offers a tantalizing twist: "Is *E. carnea* 'Winter Beauty' really a *darleyensis*?" she theorizes. "It behaves like one to me." This plant grows happily in her zone 5-6 boundary home garden, and she thinks it may have been misidentified as a *carnea* from the beginning. ♦

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Officers

Judy Doyle, president
85 Maynard Road
Brooklyn, CT 06234
(860) 774-4250
rdoyle@snet.net

Barberie "Bunny" van Valey
vice president
Mink Hill Farm
203 Gould Road
Warner, NH 03278
(603) 456-3619
bhvv@comcast.net

Betty Dayton, recording sec.
63 Hickory Hill Circle
Osterville, MA 02655
(508) 428-1563
edayton@cape.net

Jill Miller, corresponding sec.
PO Box 1280
New London, NH 03257
(603) 763-5574
jmpill@tda.net

Vivagean Merz, treasurer
55 Upland Avenue
Falmouth, MA 02540-2323
(508) 548-3282
vivagean@capecod.net

Directors

Karis Beggs
PO Box 2293
Conway, NH 03838
(603) 447-6203

Harry Bowen
30 Chase Road
Falmouth, MA 02540
(508) 548-3113

Joyce Descloux
32 Longridge Rd.
Randolph, NJ 07869
ajdx@worldnet.att.net

From the president

by Judy Doyle

Hello, Everyone

I am your newly elected president, Judy Doyle, of Brooklyn, Connecticut. My husband, Ralph, and I live in a small town in the northeast corner of the state, still so rural in nature that our Visitors' District has dubbed us "The Quiet Corner." But we are not far from I-395 (6 miles), Providence (30 miles), Hartford (60 miles), and that famous casino (25 miles±.)

We have a home-based retail perennial and herb nursery. We have been steadily adding to our offerings of heather, and we have more than 75 varieties in our own gardens.

I have noted an increase in the awareness and appreciation of heather among our customers in the past few years, more or less following the upward trend in home gardening and the increased sophistication of American gardeners. This is good news to heather enthusiasts. More interest among the general public invariably results in a response from wholesale growers, nurseries, and retail garden shops. Expect to see more heather varieties available in the coming seasons, especially callunas. Currently, however, the only access to a broad selection is via mail-order catalogs.

Your Northeast Heather Society has been doing a good job of spreading the word, and has plans to do even more. We are going to have a booth at the 2001 Connecticut Flower and Garden Show this coming February. We will stock it with all sorts of heather temptations, including plants, books, stationery, tote bags, informative brochures, etc. Especially plants! Volunteers are needed to run the booth, so if you and a friend or relative can be there at any time during the show—even for an hour—please let me know. Volunteers will get discounts on lodging and parking, and passes to the show of course. Some 35,000 visitors are expected. Let's be there to greet and meet them. You didn't have any plans for February anyway, right?

Plans are also in the works for our annual conference, to be held in September of 2001. That is always our biggest event, but next year's will be even more important, as it's our turn to host the North American Heather Society.

Members of both groups are expected from overseas and all over the USA. We hope to hold the conference near New York City. The planning committee is working hard to pull it all together, get the information out to members, and let you start planning.

I hope you can take part in at least one meeting this coming year; you will be glad you did. This is a great group of people, and your membership offers you the opportunity to meet fellow gardeners, visit wonderful private and public gardens, and travel to interesting locations. Whether you are a new member or not, there is a wealth of information for you to take home whenever, wherever we gather.

From the Quiet Corner, Judy Doyle ❖

Organization Update

by Judy Wiksten

One of the "housekeeping" items on the annual conference agenda was a bylaws change, approved unanimously. The happy result is evident in the margins of these two pages: a greatly expanded board of directors to help steer our little ship of state for the next two years.

In addition to six elected directors

(up from the previous limit of three,) NEHS now has an appointed executive board consisting of a technical advisor, a past president, a historian/archivist and a newsletter editor.

This infusion of new blood, along with continuity from the past, makes for some interesting possibilities in the 2000-2002 term. ❖

The Plant Doctor

by Harry Bowen

Dear Doctor,

I have a hypertufa trough planted with callunas, but I'm worried what will happen to it when the really cold, zero-degree weather hits. Surely it will freeze solid, then thaw out repeatedly. I don't have a greenhouse to protect it in. What is your advice?

J.R.W., Massachusetts

Dear J.R.W.:

The essence of my reply is to guard against wide swings in temperature, thus protecting the plants' root systems from alternate freezing and thawing—which leads to heaving.

Very conservative treatment would be to seek an area in open shade, place it directly on the ground, and cover the trough with pine bark or a similar stable insulating material. You may wish to cover the plants loosely with evergreen

boughs, but not Reemay™ or other compressible materials. This may be on the north side of your house or elsewhere out of direct sunlight but sheltered from the harsh wintery winds.

Following this advice, you would avoid setting it out on brick or granite, which absorb heat actively in daylight. And you should avoid a sunny exposure (southeast) where the trough could take up heat. Avoid any open areas where wind could chill it badly, such as a back porch.

Finally, you should monitor it throughout the winter for adequate hydration, but avoid overwatering. A simple finger test of the soil should tell you if the hydration is adequate.

Good luck to you—troughs are a lot of fun besides providing a handy instant garden. ❖

Snapshot Gallery:



NEHS CONFERENCE-GOERS got some gardening tips from Dr. John Craighead, in hat at right, during a tour of his private gardens last month. They are, left to right: Larry Martin, Roxanne Hiltz, George McQueen, Judy Wiksten, Dr. Craighead, Karis Beggs, and Jill Miller. More conference highlights and photos are on pages 6-7.

Beth Gardner
7 Garden Road
Wellesley, MA 02181
(781) 235-7707
gardnerb@pmc.edu

David Jeffries
1268 Canton Ave.
Milton, MA 02186
(617) 333-0178

Donald A.M. Mackay
135 Deerfield Lane
Pleasantville, NY 10570
(914) 769-6553
tomackay@aol.com

Executive Board

Molly Martin, past pres
Whitaker Farm Road
PO Box 14
Marlboro, VT 05344
(802) 254-6209
molar56@sover.net

Dr. Mark C. Starrett,
technical advisor
University of Vermont
Hills Science Building
Burlington, VT 05405-0082
(802) 656-4567
mark.starrett@uvm.edu

Marjorie Walsh, historian
1270 Hallowell-Litchfield Rd.
West Gardiner, ME 04345
(207) 724-3369

Judy Wiksten, editor
9 Tispaquin Street
Middleboro, MA 02346-3337
(508) 947-1109
tispaquin@mtm.com

All submissions to *Heather Notes* will be accepted for publication, and may be edited for clarity and length. Please include your name and phone number so that you can be contacted in the event that more than minor editorial changes are necessary.

Deadlines for each issue

January.....Dec. 20
April.....March 20
July.....June 20
October.....Sept. 20

Cooking for your Heathers

by Judy Wiksten

Good gardeners know: you can never have too much compost. When preparing a new bed for ericaceous plants, there's nothing like it to amend the soil and improve the tilth. Here's my recipe for acid compost, a tasty choice for heathers.

The ingredients are pine needles, oak or maple leaves, coffee grounds and a little horse manure: most things you wouldn't put in a "sweet" compost pile.

Pine needles come in abundance after the first heavy rain in October. Raked up, bagged and brought home for minding through the lawnmower, they are delightfully free, if labor-intensive.

Oak leaves (pH 4.4) or sugar maple leaves (pH 4.3) usually come with all the hard work done, raked up and bagged by forest-dwelling friends. Ask around; most folks love to get rid of them, but somebody should run them through the lawnmower or shredder prior to use.

Amass items #1 and #2 in quantity (at least six bags of each) before you

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Conference Notes:

Heather in Vermont

by Jill Miller

Driving north on Rt. 89 through a torrential downpour, thoughts of boating on Lake Champlain in the rain were foremost. However, my daughter, the prophet, assured me that the sun would be shining over northern Vermont. Curiously enough (are children ever wrong?) by 2 p.m. the skies turned blue, right on cue. So began the annual conference of the NEHS, September 15, 16, and 17 in Burlington, VT.

We all assembled in front of the



left to right, Judy Doyle, Bunny van Valey, Molly Martin, Judy Wiksten and Jill Miller enjoyed a "teatime" lake cruise Friday.

...we boarded the Spirit of Ethan Allen II for a cruise of Lake Champlain, a pleasant beginning to an exciting weekend.

Howard Johnson Hotel and proceeded by van to the waterfront where we boarded the *Spirit of Ethan Allen II* for a cruise of Lake Champlain, a pleasant beginning to an exciting weekend.

Cocktails and dinner followed at the Lake View Bar and Grill, conveniently located next door to the hotel. The evening speaker was Hank van Dine who is vice president of the NAHS, a

member of NEHS and owner of the wholesale Acorn Ridge Nursery in Grande Isle, VT. He presented beautiful slides of his nursery and offered an interesting explanation of how he takes cuttings, as well as the medium and fertilizer he uses for their growth. The spectacular callunas he brought were evidence of his success.

We had game time with a crossword puzzle of heaths and heathers and a game card for "name that plant" devised by Harry Bowen, with prizes for the winners awarded the next night.

Saturday began with Dr. John Craighead as the morning speaker. He is a retired UVM professor of medicine and a knowledgeable heath and heather enthusiast. His discussion of his recent trip to South Africa where he researched the spread of ericas was fascinating. There is no solid information as to why South Africa is such a "hotspot" of plant evolution, pouring forth so many unique species, but climate along with bird and insect pollination seem to play a part.

After his presentation we were off to Dr. Craighead's lovely home with its extensive gardens. The house and



Spectacular views over Lake Champlain and a cat named Shade awaited us at the gardens of retired UVM professor Dr. John Craighead.

gardens sit on top of a hill with a panoramic vista of the valley, Lake Champlain, and the mountains beyond.

Our next stop was the Basin Harbor Club in Vergennes where we had a very

(Continued on page 7)

Rocky Dale
Gardens in
Bristol, VT
includes some
lovely heathers
in the display
area, proving
to prospective
buyers that
stock is hardy
in Northern
Vermont.



tasty lunch followed by a tour of their gardens conducted by their head gardener. Of special interest was the fossil rock and new water garden.

Next on the agenda was a bus ride to Rocky Dale Gardens in Bristol where we met Holly Weir, the owner. After hearing a brief history of her business, we wandered through her gardens to discover her creative world with its extensive variety of shrubs and perennials.

Lake View Bar and Grill. Following the annual business meeting and election, and announcement of the prize winners from the previous night, we adjourned to a round robin of discussions focused on three interesting topics.

By 10 p.m. most participants were brimming with heather and preferred to think about a pillow. It had been a long day, packed with fascinating presentations, beautiful gardens and good food. Don't miss next year! ❖

By 10 p.m. most participants were brimming with heather and preferred to think about a pillow.

Vivian Branscofsky, owner of Little Siberia in Granville is going to be known as the "Heather Queen of Vermont."



The last nursery of the day was Little Siberia in Granville where the owners, Vivian and Fritz Branscofsky, introduced us to their extensive gardens that include 800 varieties of perennials and 65 varieties of heather. No wonder Vivian aspires to be known as the "Heather Queen of Vermont."

After a forty-five minute ride back to the hotel we had time for a quick "face lift" in our rooms prior to cocktails and dinner at the now-familiar



Mark Starrett and Donald Mackay, with Rocky Dale owner Holly Weir, both found her 95-page catalogue irresistible, and did some shopping.

(Continued from page 6)

make arrangements for item #3—coffee grounds. I'm talking serious coffee volume here, not the morning home-perc. To be succinct, obtain two or three five-gallon buckets and the friendship of a Dunkin' Donuts employee. Agree on a daily pick-up time, and exchange one full bucket for a sparkling clean empty one.

Horse manure is the fire to start the compost furnace. Fresh is fine, aged is okay, so long as it's the pure stuff, not shavings; a couple or three wheelbarrowstull is plenty.

Starting with a base of horse manure, layer and dampen the ingredients in the usual compost-making manner, ending with the daily five-gallon layer of coffee grounds. About a cubic yard of material is sufficient to get the organic furnace stoked up.

This brew heats up quickly and smells nice to those not offended by a piney-coffee aroma.

Turn it once after a week, again at the end of week two, and your compost should be "cooked" to a beautiful brown crumble in about a month or six weeks.

Bon appetit! ❖

Coming Events:
**Meeting Dates
for 2001 Listed**

Please mark these dates on your new calendar:

Saturday, Jan. 13—Winter meeting at Tower Hill Botanic Garden in Boylston, MA. It's always nice to beat the winter blahs with a big whiff of living green, and there's plenty of that in the Worcester County Horticultural Society's elegant new orangerie. We will brown-bag our lunch and hear a speaker to be announced.

Saturday, April 28—Come and join the annual pruning party in New Hampshire, an NEHS spring tradition. Each year we travel to The Fells in Newbury to prune the heather beds

and some of the naturalized heathers that cascade down the hillside toward Lake Sunapee. It's a chance to learn "hands-on" pruning techniques, as well as a lot of fun.

Saturday, July 21—The summer meeting brings us to North Conway, NH and the home of Karis Beggs. Kay and her husband have a heath and heather garden with a decidedly Celtic flavor, and she says we might be in for a Scottish surprise before the day is over.

Weekend of Sept. 14-16—The big event of the year brings NEHS to the Big Apple for the first time. Annual conference plans call for a venue in Westchester County, NY with a foray by bus into the city to discover one or two of its botanical treasures. It's our turn to host the North American Heather Society, so expect an extensive program and some guests from afar. Reserve the dates on your calendar now for what promises to be an exciting weekend in Metro New York! ❖

Northeast Heather Society
55 Upland Avenue
Falmouth, MA 02540-2323