

Heather Notes

October, 2001

Volume 11, Number 4

10 Reasons to Love *Erica carnea*

by Joyce Descloux

I have grown *Erica carnea* for thirty years, and have come to think of it as my favorite plant. As the season turns into winter, these little shrubs are festooned with myriad small creamy buds, expanding now for their flowering season just ahead, which can begin as early as November and last through May.

Why do I so love the carneas? Let me count the ways:

1. They are **evergreen!** No bare spots to look at all winter long, or leafless branches. Like other evergreens, whether needled conifers or broad-leaved laurel and rhododendron, it is a defining presence in the horticultural architecture of the garden. Unlike those upright and statuesque plants, however, the carneas play a more modest role as groundcover. They are the garden's "rugs" and "carpets."

2. The carneas give us **winter bloom**, a colorful tapestry of white, pink and purple red, to cheer us through the wintry weather. They do not bloom for us, though, but for the bumblebees and other insects, which find little nectar at this time of year. For these small creatures this plant is a lifeline. Walk out to watch and listen to them buzzing about the ericas on a frosty day.

3. Carneas are **very hardy** (rated USDA Zone 4.) They are native to the Alps of Switzerland, Italy, Austria and the Dolomite Alps east of the Adriatic Sea. These mountains were thrust up

from layers of sea sediment containing an abundance of marine shells, so rocks and soils of this region are rich in lime. Yet, carneas seem indifferent to soil and will grow as well in the acid soils of our Northeast.

4. *E. carnea* is a **long lived and adaptable** plant. It can easily be grown near concrete walls or cement paths where the Scotch heather, *Calluna vulgaris*, would not thrive. Carneas can tolerate continually dry soil, and also tree shade, though they will not bloom as well. They survive chipmunks tunneling under them, cats rolling on them, deer nibbling them – all without much visible complaint.

5. These are ideal plants for **no maintenance** gardens, as they require

Carneas seem indifferent to soil and will grow as well in the acid soils of our Northeast.

practically none. No pruning, or very little if they roam too far; no deadheading; no watering, except in extreme drought; and no fertilizing, ever.

6. *E. carnea* is **easy to propagate** – by layering, by cuttings or by seed. I often remove self-layered branches to start new plantings. These establish quickly if the new site has a similar soil, and when stones are set around the sprig to keep the soil moist and cool. Even cuttings can be rooted this way, if kept shaded. I have never deliberately sown seed, but have had a few

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Welcome, New Members

Heather on Main Street

by Molly Martin

The author designed and executed an award-winning display this summer near her hometown in Vermont. One thing about window displays is that they don't photograph well, but HN asked her to describe it.

The Brattleboro Floral Arts and Garden Club held a standard flower show in September in a prime location on Main Street. A standard show has strict rules of entry for three divisions: education, design and horticulture. Certified judges comment and rank all entrants. One of the educational displays was on heaths and heathers and took up a 10 x 4-foot storefront window.

A hinged pair of white doors divided the window and served to showcase a display of large colored photographs contributed by Vermont NEHS gardeners. Photos were mounted under the title, "HEATHER on the hills...and in the valleys." Pictures from Don and Lela

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... Erica carnea

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volunteers pop up, always at the sunny foot of a stone wall.

7. Carneas are **inexpensive** and **easy to obtain**, making them ideal plants for beginners' gardens or larger landscape groundcover. They are offered by many nurseries. I recommend dealing with specialist heather nurseries, though, for their wider choice of cultivars, their knowledgeable culture and also, for their support of NEHS.

8. There is a **large selection** of cultivars available now, with many new

If there is such a thing as The Perfect Plant, Erica carnea comes the closest to any I have grown.

yellow foliated varieties. These can provide a sunny contrast to the green ones, which darken in winter. The foliage colors can range from yellow to orange-red, blue-green, plum and almost black, depending on the weather and the cultivar.

9. Carneas have **many uses**. In the garden they can ramble as groundcover, festoon a wall, face down taller shrubs like rhododendrons, or line a path. They make good container plants, especially for large tubs and hanging baskets, where they spill gracefully over the sides. As winter decoration, they can be tucked into holiday wreaths and bouquets. Blossoming branches brought inside will often root if kept in moist floral foam in a cool room.

10. Carneas are **disease and pest free** plants. They are enduring, easy to obtain, plant and grow. They are tidy, as well as lovely, in foliage and in flower.

If there is such a thing as The Perfect Plant, *Erica carnea* comes the closest to any I have grown. Here are some recommended varieties:

Green foliage: 'Foxhollow Fairy', 'March Seedling', 'Myretoun Ruby', 'Pink Spangles', 'Pirbright Rose', 'Ruby Glow', 'R.B. Cooke', 'Snow Queen', 'Springwood White' and 'Startler.'

Yellow foliage: 'Anne Sparkes', 'Foxhollow', 'Golden Startlet', 'Sunshine Rambler' and 'Westwood Yellow.' ♦

Founders Honored

(Continued from page 4)

resource they had. At various times they served on the board, hosted meetings, presented programs, donated plants for gardens and sales, and especially, made NEHS known to their customers, vastly increasing our membership. They did much to make this society the viable, vibrant group it is today.

But the years have taken their toll. Daystar is gone and Marjorie, in poor health, is making plans to move to a retirement facility. The MacKinnons, too, have had medical concerns, and are now quietly at home in Waquoit.

We hope our members will send personal thanks to let them know how much we value and thank them for their many years of service, friendship and support. ♦

addresses:

George and Edna MacKinnon
131 Carriage Shop Rd.
PO Box 3214
Waquoit, MA 02536

Marjorie Walsh
1270 Hallowell-Litchfield Rd.
West Gardiner, ME 04345

Research Projects:

Clavaria Study

by Rich Poruban

Last winter the NEHS awarded its first research grants for scientific studies of heather-related topics. The two recipients, one in Ohio and the other in Vermont, agreed to update the membership on their progress in time for the annual meeting. Their preliminary reports follow:

It is roughly the halfway point in the time frame, and there is not much data to report. The heather cuttings rooted wonderfully in perlite under mist and were potted into more straight perlite for the experiment.

This was done to eliminate the possibility of mycorrhizae invading the roots from the potting medium. I set the cultivars as equal and did not separate "cultivar" as a factor to consider when looking at the data.

In each block three treatments were randomized. The three are a null control (plants potted and left alone except for things that all plants receive), a fungus medium without fungus control (to determine the effect of the nutrients in the fungus medium alone), and a fungus medium with fungus treatment.

I pruned all plants to remove weak and diseased shoots, to make them roughly equal in size and to make them all small enough to measure without going crazy. I measured the remaining shoots on each plant. No severed shoots were left on the pots, in order to avoid any nutrition leaching into the perlite from the debris. The only nutrition the plants will get is from the water in the mist under which they are growing, and anything that I may give them to prevent deficiencies.

The objectives of the experiment are to see if *Clavaria* colonizes the inoculated plants and to note any differences in growth that occur because of the inoculations.

Most of the time in the next six to eight months will be spent waiting and watching to see what happens. It usually takes three to six months after inoculation for any mycorrhizal fungus to infect its host, and a few more months to see if there is any measurable effect. At the end of the experiment, I will measure the growth based on shoot length and number, stain the roots to see what kinds of things are growing on the root systems, and, of course, take pictures to show you.

I hope there will be a marked

It usually takes three to six months after inoculation for any mycorrhizal fungus to infect its host.

difference between the control treatments and the fungus treatments, showing dramatically increased growth, compared to the controls. It will take me a long time to measure and crunch all the numbers so I can come up with useful data.

I am sorry I could not be at the meeting this year, but I will present my findings at the next annual meeting. ♦

Hardiness Trial

by Mark Starrett

Plants of *Calluna vulgaris* have been selected based on recommendations by local and regional growers, members of the Northeast Heather Society, as well as the literature and personal observations. Selections are based in the following criteria: aesthetic quality (flowers/foilage), habit of growth (upright or mounded), ease of cultivation, potential for suitable cold-hardiness in USDA zone 4, and availability in the trade. ♦

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Avery, Vivian and Fritz Branschofsky, Jack and Sue Lilly, and Joe Gravel stopped people in their tracks with their brilliance.

In addition to this photo gallery, the display had several other props - a wooden bench, a wrought iron table, bags of peat and pine mulch, and flagstones to support a dozen live plants - heaths in green plastic pots on one side and heather in clay pots on the other. Two small blackboards outlined the differences between the two species and the care for each. Mickey Mill, another Vermont NEHS member, made a lovely heather nosegay that rested front and center on the iron table calling attention to the NEHS membership envelopes next to it.

The judges liked what they saw and awarded the window the ribbon for the educational class. Let us hope passersby, perhaps unfamiliar with heathers, liked what they saw and will join our small band of heather enthusiasts! ♦

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Officers

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

Barberie "Bunny" vanValey
vice president
108 Mossman Road
Sudbury, MA 01776-1312
(978) 443-6454
bhvv@msn.com

Alice Schaefer, secretary
27 Waverly Avenue
Newton, MA 02458-2103
(617) 965-0546

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

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

Directors

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

Vivian Branschofsky
966 Maston Hill Rd.
Granville, VT 05747
(802) 767-3391

Will Clarke
28 Longview Road
N. Falmouth, MA 02556
(508) 563-3215

Joyce Descloux
32 Longridge Rd.
Randolph, NJ 07869
(973) 539-3349

Beth Gardner
7 Garden Road
Wellesley, MA 02181
(781) 235-7707

President's Perspective

by Judy Doyle

To all members of the Northeast Heather Society:

I sincerely hope that none of you has suffered the loss of family or friends as a result of the September 11 madness.

Many thanks to all who attended the fall conference on September 14 and 15. Thanks to Judy Wiksten for encouraging me to hold the conference in spite of the chaos of that week. She felt that our coming together in camaraderie would help us cope with the horror, and she was right.

Thanks to Vivagean Merz, our hard-working treasurer, for "taking care of business." Thanks to Alice Schaefer, Nancy Passavant, Vivian Branschofsky, Will Clarke, Harry Bowen and Donglin Zhang for coming on "board."

Thanks to Joyce Descloux for chairing the nomination committee.

Thank you, Paul and Jane Murphy, for agreeing to organize the 2003 Fall Conference in your area.

Thanks to Bill Dowley for the use of your Suburban as an outdoor market for our sales of heather, books, tote bags and bookmarks, and for your fascinating account of acquiring 1000 heathers!

Thanks, Andrew Grossman of Seekonk, for welcoming us to your delightful garden.

Thank you, Ella May Wulff, for *trying* to fly across the continent from Oregon to share with us your magnificent slides. Hopefully there will be another opportunity.

Thank you, Ralph Doyle, for hauling the heather plants to the conference in your truck, and for pitching in with your infinite patience to help your wife as she was tearing out her hair.

Thank you, America. ♦

Founders Honored for Loyal Service

by Joyce Descloux and Judy Doyle

Northeast Heather Society is proud to honor three long-time members, George and Edna MacKinnon of Waquoit, Massachusetts and Marjorie Walsh of West Gardiner, Maine.

Awards were given for their years of dedication and service to the society since its founding. Noted botanic artist Phyllis Hammond of Vermont was commissioned to paint renderings of heather in watercolors. The paintings, which were matted and framed, were accompanied by certificates of appreciation.

Marjorie operated Daystar Nursery from her home for 40 years. She featured many rock garden plants and dwarf shrubs, but her abiding love was heathers. She had a large planting given no winter protection, which finally convinced gardeners that heaths and heathers were, indeed, hardy plants for

the Northeast. She lectured widely and donated generously to public plantings and gardens featuring heathers.

George MacKinnon worked many years as a nurseryman on Cape Cod before retiring to start Waquoit Heather Nursery with his wife, Edna. Specializing in heathers which did so well on the sandy soil there, they introduced many new cultivars from Britain and Europe to American gardeners, as well as their own seedlings.

The MacKinnons and Mrs. Walsh supported the idea of forming a heather society in and for the Northeast, and were among the 16 people who attended the organizational meeting at Smith College in October of 1985.

From that time on these busy nursery proprietors offered every

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Regional Report: Mid-Atlantic Group to Meet

by Paul & Jane Murphy

In July we conducted an unscientific survey of the 15 NEHS members in the mid-Atlantic area: southern New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Washington, D.C. and Virginia. We wanted to find out what cultivars members were growing, the conditions (soil type, amount of sun) and which cultivars were doing well. We also wanted to see if there was any interest in meeting occasionally, and/or attending an annual NEHS meeting here.

We are happy to report that there appears to be a high level of interest in the area. Most of the "mid-Atlantians" contend with heavy clay soil that they have amended with sand, peat, and/or compost. Several mentioned that they circumvented the clay soil by growing their plants in raised beds. A few are fortunate to have sandy soil.

The number of heather plants per member ranged from zero (just moved to the area) to several hundred. The majority purchased their plants from mail order nurseries such as Rock Spray and Heaths & Heathers. A few mentioned Waquoit Nursery and one individual got his Mediterranean Whites at a Wal-Mart! Generally, it seems that heath and heathers are not available at local nurseries in the region.

One observation voiced by several members is that the golden and low growing "rug" callunas are not as tolerant of the high heat and humidity in this region. (Here in Newark, DE we have lost most of our golden callunas planted in $\frac{3}{4}$ to full sunlight. Last year we planted a bed of mostly golden callunas in an area that receives only filtered sun. So far they're faring well.)

Several others commented on the phenomenon of apparently healthy, mature (5+ years) plants suddenly dying, while surrounding plants, sometimes the same cultivars, continue to thrive.

So...where do we go from here?

First of all, we want to express our heartfelt thanks to all those who took the time to talk to us on the phone, or complete and mail back the paper survey. If anyone in the mid-Atlantic region was not contacted, it was an oversight. Please don't hesitate to get in touch with us. We are also interested in contacting NAHS members in the area.

We certainly enjoyed conducting this survey. We've spoken with many wonderful people who willingly spent their time to help us find out more about heather in our area. From this information, we've hypothesized that there appear to be differences in the mid-Atlantic vs. New England climates, which may require different approaches to successful growing. We hope to explore this through further contact with members in the area.

Secondly, we're tentatively planning to hold an informal meeting at our house in Newark DE the afternoon (1-4 p.m.) of November 10th. Any NEHS or NAHS members and friends interested in heathers are welcome to attend. There won't be much in bloom, but we have had success propagating some of our cultivars, and thought that we could include a cultivar exchange.

Bring cuttings from your favorite cultivars, and we will attempt to propagate them in our greenhouse. By next spring, the cuttings will hopefully be rooted and ready to pot up; then, they can either be exchanged for different cultivars or returned to expand an existing heather bed. Other suggestions for the meeting (i.e. discussion topics, activities) are most welcome. We ask that you call/contact us if you plan to attend, and we'll provide directions.

If you can't attend a November get together, but are interested in seeing our garden in late winter (we have quite a few heaths in bloom) or spring, we'd love to hear from you. ♦

Paul & Jane Murphy
302-731-7220
murphypa@msn.com

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

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

Nancy Passavant
32 Hickory Cliff Rd.
Newton Upper Falls, MA
02464

Judi Segebarth
RR1 Box 98
Stevensville, PA 18845
(717) 746-3807

Dr. Donglin Zhang
University of Maine
Orono, ME 04469-5722
(207) 581-2918

Executive Board

Harry Bowen,
director emeritus
30 Chase Road
Falmouth, MA 02540
(508) 548-3115

Molly Martin, past pres.
PO Box 14
Marlboro, VT 05344
(802) 254-6209

Dr. Mark C. Sturrett,
technical advisor
University of Vermont
Burlington, VT 05405-0082
(802) 656-4567

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

Judy Wiksten, editor
9 Tarpquin Street
Middleboro, MA 02346-3337
(508) 947-1109
tarpquin@msn.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.

Deadlines for each issue

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

Heathers in New York

by Jane Murphy

Yes, there are indeed heathers in New York!

On the drive home, we reached New York City about noontime on Sunday, Sept. 16, and decided we had time to follow the intriguing sign we had seen on the Henry Hudson Parkway by the George Washington Bridge indicating "The Cloisters," "Fort Tyron Park," and "Heather Garden." We had assumed (incorrectly as it turned out) that the heather garden was associated with the Cloisters. We paid our admission and allowed ourselves to be sidetracked, viewing the incredible works of art from the Middle Ages displayed in the Cloisters. The Unicorn Tapestries were even more magnificent than I remembered them.

A helpful museum guard explained that the heather garden is located in Fort Tyron Park. From a window in the Cloisters, he pointed to an American flag and told us to head toward it, as the gardens were located below. There were no signs to point the way

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Conference Notes:

On With the Show

by Judy Wiksten

A big, double-ended rainbow spanned the late afternoon sky over Rhode Island Friday when the Northeast Heather Society annual conference began September 14th, almost as if to signal, "It's going to be all right."

In the bewildering days immediately following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the nation there was the question, frankly, as to whether this meeting should take place at all. Conference guests from the west coast

Conference guests from the west coast and Europe were stranded at home when all airlines were suddenly grounded.

and Europe were stranded at home when all airlines were suddenly grounded. The North American Heather Society, whom we were to have hosted at this event, was forced to cancel its board meeting. Others in the northeast felt the need to stay close to family, hearth and home.

It was a greatly reduced group of 17 who gathered in Seekonk, MA but it was a group determined to go on with the show, however subdued.

Following a board meeting in the afternoon, members got together for an exceptional buffet dinner at the Johnson & Wales Inn, the motel and restaurant complex operated by the noted Rhode Island training college for students entering the hotel trade. The young people of the staff handed out candles and stood with us outdoors at 7 p.m. to observe the national moment of prayer and remembrance, as called for by President Bush.

NAHS president Ella May Wulff of

Oregon, who was to have been our keynote speaker, sent her regrets via NEHS president Judy Doyle.

However, Judy had provided plenty of heather, books and heather related accessories for sale, as well as some very tempting items on the raffle table. Paul Murphy of Delaware was the plucky silent auction winner of a hypertufa trough planted with heathers, donated by Harry Bowen and artfully arranged by Judy Doyle.

Conversation with old friends and warm introductions to new faces rounded off the evening.

Following a lavish breakfast Saturday, the group boarded a bus and headed into Rhode Island for our first stop at the legendary topiary garden, Green Animals, in Portsmouth. This country estate, once owned by Fall River industrialist Thomas Brayton, is home to 80 pieces of geometric topiary as well as 21 enchanting animals and birds made from living California privet and yew.

Created throughout the early 20th century, a menagerie including an

Nancy Pissavant and Alice Schaefer had a chat while some of the Green Animals looked on.



elephant, giraffe, lion, camel, horse and rider, swan, reindeer, several dogs and bears and even a Rhode Island Red rooster among others, came to life at the hands of garden superintendent Joseph Carreiro, followed by his son-in-law George Mendonca, until retirement of the last Portuguese topiary master in 1985. The Preservation Society of Newport County now maintains the green

animals, as well as the Brayton house as a museum which featured a display of antique toys when we visited.

The next stop was Blithewold, a mansion, garden and arboretum situated on Bristol Harbor with sweeping views over Narragansett Bay. Following a tour of the 45-room mansion, our group sat down to an elegant box lunch on one of the summer porches while enjoying the vista over the "great lawn" on a day of brilliant sunshine.

Walking off lunch with a guided tour of the 33-acre grounds made for a pleasant afternoon. Highlights included stops in the enclosed garden, display garden, the newly renovated summer house, the water and rock gardens. Blithewold's Victorian-era landscape design incorporates hundreds of specimen trees considered exotic in New England, including a 90-year-old giant sequoia ("only a baby," we were told) and an escape-proof grove of bamboo.



Dot Barton was our tour guide at Blithewold.

Back on the NEJS bus, we traveled into Massachusetts for a visit to a very different type of garden at the home of Seekonk landscape designer Andrew Grossman. Created only three years ago, Andrew's garden was featured in the summer issue of *Country Living Gardener* magazine.

A lavish explosion of color surrounds Andrew's white clapboard farmhouse, from the new rose garden surrounded by espaliered apples "out back," to a patio criss-crossed with five kinds of thyme, down to a lovely water feature anchoring the main garden. Overlooking the Runnins River, Andrew's garden abuts land preserved as open space by the Seekonk land trust,

ensuring good neighbors far into the future of this picturebook New England agricultural town at the eastern edge of Providence.

Returning to our motel, there was time for some heather shopping at the plant sale or a nap for the weary before the group reassembled at The Grist Mill Restaurant for farewell dinner.

During a brief business meeting, members elected a mid-term slate of officers consisting of Alice Schaefer as secretary, and Vivian Branschofsky, Will Clarke, Nancy Passavant and Donglin Zhang to the board of directors.

Paul and Jane Murphy of Delaware announced they will be making arrangements for the 2003 annual conference (when we hope to host the NEJS again) in the Philadelphia-Washington, D.C. region.

While some headed for home first thing Sunday morning, others lingered in the area for some self-guided tours suggested in the literature handouts.

Certainly the 2001 conference will remain long in the memories of those who attended, just a few days after life in the United States underwent a terrible change. ♦

Conference Crew:



Members who attended were Elizabeth & George Bernard, Bill & Vicky Dowley, Judy & Ralph Doyle, David and Nancy Leyland, George McQueen, Bunny vanValey, Vivagean Merz, Jane & Paul Murphy, Nancy Passavant, Alice Schaefer, Priscilla Sperry and Judy Wiksten, seen here during the bus tour Saturday.

STOP THE PRESS! George and Bunny neglected to tell us that they are newlyweds. Congratulations to the happy couple, married in August.

to the gardens, but several helpful New Yorkers kept us moving in the right direction. The park, which extends along the Hudson River, is a series of paved and bricked paths that meander along the river. There were several places that provided magnificent views of the Hudson and the Palisades beyond.

The gardens, about two acres, consist of three tiers of perennials interspersed with heath and heather. Many of them looked rather old, and some could have used a bit of trimming. We did see several plantings of a heather cultivar that was in full bloom with medium pink flowers—absolutely gorgeous. The overall effect of the heathers intermingled with perennials (many still in bloom) as well as shrubs and small conifers was lovely.

It was especially nice to see New Yorkers taking advantage of the beautiful weather and enjoying themselves. The two hours we spent in New York was a nice break in our trip home. We recommend the gardens and the Cloisters as a fine place to spend a few hours.

♦

Coming Events:
**Meeting Dates
for 2002 Listed**

The board has already scheduled meeting dates and locations for next year. Please mark them on your calendar:

Saturday, Jan. 12, 2002—Winter meeting at Tower Hill Botanic Garden in Boylston, MA. A program arranged by board member Nancy Passavant will be announced in the next newsletter.

Saturday, April 27, 2002—The annual pruning party at The Fells in Newbury, NH is always a lot of fun as well as a learning experience for new members.

Wednesday, July 17, 2002—Summer picnic hostess Vivagean

Merz has invited members to her home and garden in Falmouth, MA.

Weekend of Sept. 13-15, 2002—The annual conference promises to be a real getaway to "The Quiet Corner" of northeast Connecticut. NEHS president Judy Doyle is making arrangements to show us around the area she knows so well. The weekend promises to acquaint us with some little-known garden and nursery gems in a part of rural New England off the beaten track.

Hope to see you next year! ❖

Welcome, New Members:

Deidre J. Byrne of Sayville, NY
Alice Greenspan of Wilmington, VT
Terri Messa of Brooklyn, CT
Roy A. Smith of Waquoit, MA
Priscilla Williams of Townsend, MA

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



(photo by Joyce Desoloni)

Erica carnea 'March Seedling'

One of the truly hardy heaths, this cultivar produces masses of pale heliotrope flowers that laugh at the snow. Dark foliage enhances its blossoms, which come late for a carnea.

- Hardiness: USDA zone 4 (-20° to -30° F), in colder zones with protection
- Flower color: described as pale heliotrope to purple
- Time of bloom: March-April
- Habit: low, spreading— 6" high by 20" wide
- Foliage: mid- to dark green
- Pruning: lightly, if ever, after blooming in spring

- Sources: Rock Spray Nursery, Box 693, Truro, MA 02666
(orders online at www.rockspray.com)
Wagnot Heather Nursery, Box 3214, Wagnot, MA 02536
Heaths & Heathers, 502 F. Haskell Hill Rd. Shelton, WA 98584-8429
(orders online at www.heathsandheathers.com)
The Heather Farm, Box 2206, Sardis, BC V2R 1A6, Canada
(shipments within Canada only)