



## CALENDAR

April 4 10:00 a.m.  
(April 11 Inclement weather date)  
Spring Pruning of Heather  
Fort Tryon, NYC, NY  
[www.nycgovparks.org](http://www.nycgovparks.org)

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April 25 10:00 a.m.  
(May 3 Inclement weather date)  
The Fells, Newbury, NH  
[www.thefells.org](http://www.thefells.org)

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## A Cautionary Tale

by Donald A.M. Mackay

Merrifield's is a group of very large, very good retail nurseries in the Mc Lean-Tyson's Corner area of Washington's Virginia suburbs. They carry everything for landscaping needs and are staffed in the summer with students from agricultural schools. They tend to be pricey, but the occasional end-of-season sale makes a visit worthwhile. I inspected the dwarf shrub section while dodging the intermittent sprays. It was hot – in the 90s – as it had been for much of the summer. The Mid-Atlantic area was suffering a prolonged drought while most of New England had record rains, getting 25 to 30 inches in the early summer months.

Heathers other than *Erica x mediterranea* are rare in the Washington DC area nurseries -if only because the climate doesn't suit - so I was pleased to see a few callunas (mostly past their prime) and a very small group of bell heathers in their purple glory. And, *mirabile dictu*, almost hidden among these was a trio of equally purple *daboeciae*. Not *Daboecia cantabrica*, which is rare enough, but *D.x scotica*, which I'd never seen outside a heather garden. I asked a nearby employee (a grad student from George Washington U.) what nursery had provided these gems. The label did not say, but it carried a coded tag which the nursery office decoded to mean the *Erica cinerea* came from Blue Heron Nurseries in Oregon, and the *Daboecia x azorica* came from another specialist Oregon nursery. How or why they got there was a mystery - as is much of the inter-nursery trade - but I was glad to see them. As editor, reviser and contributor to the forthcoming NEHS Regional Guide to Growing Heathers, what better chance would I have to put that wisdom to practical use in getting these gems to a safe botanical haven several hundred miles to the north of their present precarious position. So I bought all six remaining plants and very carefully took half to Westchester, New York, and half to Vermont. Mindful of Joyce Descloux's advice **never** to put heathers in the trunk of a car in summer - even a few minutes can cook them-I took excessive care in packing these treasures for their train journey north.

In both places I took elaborate precautions to ensure their good performance in their new homes. With the Guide's directions for soil preparation and planting firmly in mind, I dug deep holes at least twice the size of the gallon pots using a drain spade to break up the subsoil, to get rid of rocks and big stones (though Joyce likes little stones around her roots) and most importantly to sever and remove the tree roots that can travel far beyond the drip line to quench their thirst in well-aerated and watered flower beds.

I was also mindful of Brita Johanssen's advice on the perils of abrupt soil changes when planting potted heathers. She feels abrupt transition from the enriched soil used for planting to ordinary garden soil discourages root outgrowth and exposes the plant to risk of dehydration, especially if the first planting or lining out was done in mixtures using vermiculite or perlite. Abundant early water directly about the roots tempts the plant to keep its roots close to a good water source - which is fine until a time of drought penalizes the plant for failing to send out dependable far-reaching roots. I may have gone overboard in attributing these particular thoughts to Brita, but my Swedish was always suspect.

So the soil in the hole was carefully graded in decreasing organic content from the pure bark compost used for the pot, mainly by decreasing the peat and leaf mold content and increasing the sand and mineral soil content, which I feel is important for Bell Heather. Application of liberal water and soil compression surely avoided air pockets, and a circular mound of soil kept the water where it was needed. What else could I do? A number of old pine needles was the final touch. Surely that was enough for guaranteed success.

~Continued on Page 4

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**NEHS 2008 YEAR IN REVIEW**

NEHS volunteers helped The Fells garden staff to plant an additional 150 heathers in the heather bed overlooking Lake Sunapee, New Hampshire.

Six NEHS members attended the 3rd International Heather Conference in British Columbia.

The chapter's summer board meeting was held at the home of Dr. Richard Norris, Florence, Massachusetts.

NEHS chapter volunteers planted 112 heathers in the newly designed bed at Lasdon Park Arboretum, Katoneh, New York.

The NEHS annual meeting was held at the home of Jane and Paul Murphy, Oxford, Pennsylvania. Election of officers and directors was held at that time.\*

\*The slate of officers and directors is unchanged from the previous term. All elected will serve a two-year term starting in October, 2008.

**FEATURED PLANT**

*Erica x darleyensis* 'Mary Helen'

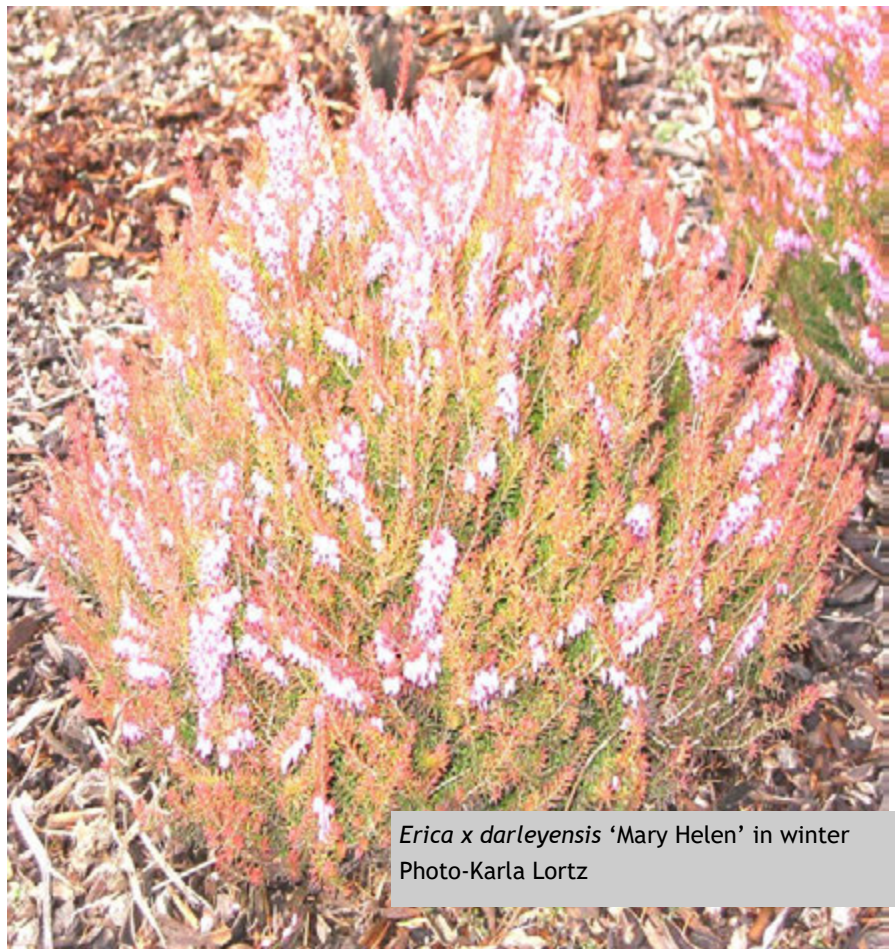
The Heather Society's *Handy Guide to Heathers* says about this plant: "Pink flowers, Feb-Apr, with yellow-gold foliage bronzing in winter"

"Recommended. Found by Peter Foley as a seedling at his nursery in Bolton-by-Bowland, Lancashire, England, and named after his daughter." "Ht. 25 cm. by Spd. 45 cm." which translates to (approximate) height of 10 inches and spread of 18 inches.

*Handy Guide to Heathers* on the heath group known as *Erica x darleyensis*:

"The original hybrid between *Erica carnea* and *Erica erigena* was found in a nursery in Darley Dale, Devonshire, England, at the turn of the century. This bushy, evergreen shrub attains 70 cm (28 in) in height and spreads to 80 cm (32 in). It is one of the easiest heathers to grow, being suitable for all soils and is particularly good at smothering weeds. Most of these hybrids are sterile, have a long flowering period in spring and exhibit coloured young foliage. It is hardy to zone 7.

The underline and bold font is mine, as a caution to those of us in colder zones. However, Jane Murphy reports that this cultivar and other *E. x darleyensis* do well for her in southern Pennsylvania, zone 6. -Editor



*Erica x darleyensis* 'Mary Helen' in winter  
 Photo-Karla Lortz

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**From your President**

**Everybody's Doing It**

If you are a member of the North American Heather Society you are aware of the fact that the NAHS Bulletin, Heather News Quarterly Vol. 31 No. 3 Issue #123 Summer 2008 will be your last hard copy at the current yearly dues rate. To continue receiving the hard copy version there will be an additional surcharge to cover printing and postage. We, the Northeast Heather Society chapter of NAHS, offered to our membership an electronic version of our newsletter **Heather Notes** in the January 2008 issue. We made this offer, not for financial reasons as is the situation with the NAHS, but because there are a lot of benefits to communicating electronically. An electronic version is free, it is a small but positive step toward 'Going Green, more colored photos can be included in each issue and if you are currently using your computer for emails and surfing the internet the leap to receiving the electronic version of your Heather Notes is quite painless. We recently appointed a librarian, Jane Murphy, and she and I have been working on creating an index of all the articles contained in the Heather Notes library. The index would be made available to all members as an electronic database or hardcopy and members can request copies of any article from the library. This may bring some comfort to those of you who feel that not having a hardcopy prevents you from readily finding an article on a particular subject. Although we currently break even with membership dues (income) and printing and mailing costs of Heather Notes (expenses), it might be time to start thinking of more meaningful ways to use your membership dues such as: more support for the heather gardens that your society officially supports; research; scholarships; or creating our own Northeast Heather Society website. I understand that many of you may not own a computer but for those of you who do, here is your chance to help bring your society into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**I wish health and happiness for all  
in this new year and may your heath-  
ers be snug under the boughs.**

~Mary

Send a bit of heather o'er the sea;  
A dear remembrance may it be  
To the ones now vigil keeping  
O'er our soldiers quietly sleeping;  
Send the heather-Scotland's greeting-  
O'er the sea.

-M. Carter

**DON'T BE PRUNED! WE WOULD MISS YOU!**  
**CHECK THE EXPIRATION DATE NEAR YOUR ADDRESS.**  
Send your renewal to Treasurer Peter Matwey, 7 Heights Court, Binghamton, NY 13905

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I should add that following the Guide I had planted in a bed in almost full sun, and had used spaces previously occupied by heathers. If *mycorrhizae* were to be needed they were surely there ready to cooperate in establishing the plant. You may have noted I omitted any mention of cutting or loosening peripheral roots or butterflying the bottom of the soil ball. The reason? There was no root binding to be seen, and the bark compost was rather loose and far from a coherent mass. All the more reason to be careful in handling and planting.

There would not be much point to this story if it allowed only glorification of the wisdom embodied in the Guide. The point is that in spite of (because of?) these elaborate precautions half of the plants failed to prosper, and slowly but surely they developed all the signs of severe desiccation. Tips drooped, leaves dropped, branchlets dried out, branches broke, and eventually the plant became a wooden scarecrow, barely a skeleton of its original self. Incremental pruning, watering, mulching and even shading did nothing to impede the inexorable process of decay.

**I was outraged.** I was past President of an important heather group. I had written extensively on heather care and I was currently revising and expanding the Regional Guide. This behavior was a personal affront, but so humbling. It left many questions. Why only half the plants? Why both Bell Heather and *Daboecia*? How do plants survive cross country transport in pots but die when secured in the ground? How does the nursery keep these plants alive for months through a very hot, inhospitable summer while I manage to kill them off in weeks in a far kinder climate?

More to the point is what advice do we give or change in the Regional Guide to give it credibility? When and where did I go wrong?

Perhaps this article should be entitled Grime and Punishment. I got lots of grime when planting and the punishment to my self-esteem and pocketbook is evident. Perhaps Pride and Premises is a better title, the Pride before the Fall, the Premises that must be somehow amiss or insufficiently defined in the Regional Guide. However, I am told that some Texan lady has already used this title, so it must go. How about Pride and Promises?

Better, perhaps, for a horror story is Bride of Nemesis, with visions of Lon Chaney or Boris Karlov in the movie version. But the Greeks had the best name for this attribute of those who tempt the fates. Thus gardening hubris ends up with debris. Meanwhile each of you can suggest your own revisions to the Heather Guide to try to prevent similar disasters in the future.

Eventually I went back to Merrifield with two dead plants in the hope they would salve my conscience with some tale that many others had returned dead plants, that the summer drought had fried them, that the dreaded Sudden Oak Death had struck their stock. But there was no such solace to be found there.

The manager took the root ball apart making muttered comments about it had been better loosened, then some wry note there was too much soil above the plant, and finally concluding the cause of death had been stem rot. But he was

generous enough to admit heathers were finicky in Virginia and that he too had lost several heathers for no obvious reason. He did say that his success with heathers went up as the clay content of the soil went down, that tops of banks were better than bottoms, and that Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*) and Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) also showed similar inconsistent behaviors in different sites in the garden.

In fact, the only reliable heather for the regional garden is *Erica x darleyensis*, a reason for its local popularity possibly being its spring blooming time, like that of azaleas, which gives it a crucial timing advantage, ahead of tree leaf-out.

Finally, I was taken behind the nursery to look for any more interesting heathers that were in their stock beds, but my only finding was that their stock in two-gallon pots was in far better shape than that in one-gallon pots, and that flowering was obviously later, or much longer lasting than that of the same variety in a one-gallon pot. A heat effect due to black plastic pots is the probable answer, and one which does not seem to be offset by even frequent watering.

Since the nursery had no wish to keep the dead plants, I took them back and carefully picked away the soil of the root balls until just the roots remained. The roots of the *D. x scotica* were surprisingly short, four inches at the max, but most were two to three inches long. The roots of the *E. cinerea* were finer, longer and tangled. I surprised a couple of worms but no other animals. What surprised me was an evident white core to each root ball, a core made largely of vermiculite for the *D. x scotica* and entirely for the *E. cinerea*. For the latter, this core fell out of the root ball quite easily, so I found no evidence for root concentration around a water-rich core, as Brita Johansson has proposed as a possible explanation for unexpected plant failure.

But there was no doubt both plants had lived in a vermiculite-rich environment for the early part of their lives. Both plants had lost much of their bark about one inch below the soil line, but when this damage had occurred it was impossible to say. It could have happened at the nursery when the manager was proposing his bark-rot theory.

You now have all the evidence. So how do you advise gardeners to plant their heathers if they are to avoid large losses when following your best advice? All comments will be incorporated into the Regional Guide.

### The Disease Vector

When a plant dies suddenly and unexpectedly, even after planting it with utmost care, the possibility of infection by fungi like *phytophthora* and *rhizoctonia* should be considered, possibly as a result of watering. *Phytophthora* has been a big problem in irrigated avocado orchards, and extensive damage to heathers at Cutler Botanic Garden that suffered severe flooding was later attributed to *phytophthora* (see following article), presumably water-borne. Sudden Oak Death, a disease severely affecting west coast nurseries, has also been ascribed to *phytophthora* species. Why it shows up in your garden and not in the nursery is, of course, a difficulty in the disease scenario. Perhaps this is why some nurseries are now advising planting container plants one to two inches above the soil level of their new home.

One of the most daunting aspects of any type of gardening, wherever you reside, are the challenges posed by Mother Nature. Cutler Botanic Garden is a small 4.5 acre botanic garden located in the city of Binghamton in Upstate New York; not the place that the mind conjures up when thinking Heaths and Heathers. The weather here is cold and often dry during the winter and the snow cover varies between multiple feet and none at all. The soil is heavy clay and drainage is, well, not the best. However, thanks to tremendous effort, love and attention, the Heath and Heather garden has thrived at Cutler since 1992. If you attended the 2004 Northeast Heather Society Conference and Annual Meeting, then you have experienced its vitality and beauty.

In June of 2005 torrential rains fell in the Binghamton area and the entire 4.5 acres was under water. It took over a week and pumps from the local fire department to finally clear all the water from the garden. All of the annual displays and the vegetable garden were completely lost and the lack of oxygen took its toll on the more permanent plantings. Being on a slope, a good portion of the Heath and Heather Garden was up out of the water and seemed to fare well.

Unfortunately, in April of 2006, Mother Nature gave a repeat performance and an even worse flood occurred. This time the water was so high that about two-thirds of the Heath and Heather Garden was under water. Overwhelmed by the amount of flooded homes and businesses, our friends at the fire department were not able to pump the garden out for almost two weeks; plenty of time to cause plenty of plant damage.

Surprisingly, the damage to the heaths and heathers did not seem as bad as we had feared, with many surviving. New varieties were planted in the empty spaces to replace the lost, with anticipation that the garden would be back to its lovely established look within several seasons. However, during the summer of 2008, plants began dying. When the dead were removed it was noticed that there were very few feeder roots remaining on the plants. I'm no plant pathologist, but I have a fair background in things pathological, based on several years working in a plant pathology laboratory as an undergraduate student, several years working in a commercial microbiology laboratory and basic mileage in the horticultural industry. I suspected *Phytophthora*, a fungal pathogen that can infect the roots and crowns of plants, especially woody plants. Plants infected with these fungi often show symptoms similar to drought and nutrient deficiencies and are susceptible when exposed to conditions that are too wet or dry to support adequate growth, or when oxygen levels, fertility and soil tilth are inappropriate. Damage from excavation, compaction and transplanting may lead to disease entry into susceptible tissues and contaminated soils may carry over the pathogen from one crop to the next.

A plant was dug up and sent for evaluation to the Plant Disease Diagnostic Clinic at Cornell University. Plant tissue was analyzed and crown rot at the soil line was noticed and oospores, reproductive bodies characteristic of a number of pathogenic fungi, were detected. A *Phytophthora*-specific ELISA test was used, which identifies the pathogen to the genus level and *Phytophthora* was indeed detected.

What to do now? A diagnosis like *Phytophthora* can be very difficult to handle if the heath and heather collection happens to be the pride and joy of a home gardener, as the chemical treatments can be rather harsh and many have to be applied by a licensed professional. Being the horticulturist at Cutler Botanic Garden and also a Cooperative Extension Educator, I have a Pesticide Applicators license, but am very conscientious about what I use in Cutler, a public garden. Therefore, extensive research was required in an effort to balance the obvious needs of the heath and heather garden with my obligation to ensure the health and safety of the many patrons of Cutler Garden.

It was decided to treat the planting bed with a registered fungicide that would kill the pathogen in the soil, not harm the surviving plants, and be the best option for the environment and the visiting public. This left us with the options of Basamid, a soil fumigant that will kill plants within 3 feet of the site of application, or a formulation of Subdue or Aliette, labeled to manage *Phytophthora*. Aliette, a systemic fungicide, was chosen, as it is readily available and can be used by the homeowner. It is moderately toxic to humans and is toxic to aquatic invertebrates, so should not be used around water or where run-off may be an issue. Aliette is most effective when applied as a foliar spray, though a soil drench can be used. Label instructions should be read and followed completely.

Two applications were made, two weeks apart. Several heathers will be planted in the spring as indicator plants to see if our eradication efforts have been successful. In addition, some of the original heather planting area will be planted with perennials such as ornamental grasses to demonstrate how the versatile heather can be incorporated into existing garden plans.

Of course, the ideal is to never have an infestation of *Phytophthora* in your heathers. Emphasis should always be on having the very best drainage and water management. Plants should never be allowed to become excessively dry and certainly should not be under waterlogged conditions. In addition, good hygiene is essential. Never work in the garden after a rain until plants dry off. Disinfect pruning tools with rubbing alcohol when you move between plants or when propagating. When pruning, dispose of cuttings away from the garden. When introducing new plants into the garden, they should be purchased from reputable sources and quarantined for a period of time to insure their health. Some sources recommend that they be immersed in a systemic fungicide such as Aliette before planting. When planting, avoid planting too deeply or mounding mulch around the base of the plant. Deep planting, where soil covers the base of the stem, encourages infection of *Phytophthora* and *Rhizoctonia* diseases. Instances of *Phytophthora* infection have been documented when overhead irrigation water has come from streams or re-circulated from untreated sources, so make sure that your irrigation water is clean. I do not advocate a preventative spray program, as with only several available fungicides labeled for *phytophthora*, there is the possibility that resistance will eventually develop, even if the spray program is varied. I do advocate maintaining a plant's vigor through proper fertilization, watering, air flow and cultural practices for the obvious environmental and human health benefits. If, however, your heathers are exposed to a period of extreme wet, a protective spray of a copper-containing fungicide may be an appropriate precaution. Floods aside, a little prevention can prevent these devastating fungi from attacking the heathers in your garden.

## NEHS ANNUAL MEETING

October 18-19, 2008

There is definitely something to be said for a low key event; one without long bus trips, time schedules, catered dinners, hotel beds and cash bars. Although we came from as far away as Vermont, New Jersey and upstate New York, once we arrived in Oxford, Pennsylvania, the quaintness of the country side and the warmth of Jane and Paul Murphy's hospitality was as though we had never left home. The Binghamton contingency opted to go to the Murphys' first to drop off the hors d'oeuvres and dessert for the evening's dinner event and then we headed off to Longwood Gardens, a half hour trip, to meet up with the rest of the NEHS group. The early arrivals had reserved a long table so we could all sit together and enjoy our lunch. Longwood's Terrace Restaurant's famous mushroom soup was outstanding. After lunch we were treated to a guided tour of Longwood gardens by Pennsylvania Master Gardener and Longwood volunteer Jerry Nolte, and another Longwood supporter and Delaware Master Gardener, Hetty Francke. Although we were truly impressed and in awe of the Longwood gardens we all waited with eager anticipation for the special viewing of the trial gardens, in particular, the heather trial bed.

Located off the main garden grounds, the trialing area is surrounded by fencing with secure access. We were greeted by Barrett Wilson, Research Assistant, who gave us the guided tour. One look at the mature trees and shrubs that were being trialed convinced you that time is of no importance during the evaluation of a plant. Yes, we are anxious for a favorable decision on the worthiness of the trialed *Erica* and *Calluna* but as Barrett emphasized to us, even if they are happy with the trialing results, it is only the first step in what could be a long process. We can only be patient and hope for the best.

Back at the Murphys' we dined in a relaxed atmosphere and then conducted the annual meeting, where the slate of officers and directors was unanimously approved by all members present. We finished up the evening with a Power-Point presentation of The Fells Heather Bed renewal, the development of the Heather Bed at Lasdon Park Arboretum and highlights of the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Heather Conference held in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

-Mary Matwey

## THE LONGWOOD GARDENS HEATHER TRIAL BEDS

Eleven members of NEHS met with Longwood Gardens' Research Assistant Barrett Wilson to visit their heather trial beds.

In the spring, Longwood purchased 40 heathers and heaths, chosen from a list of heathers recommended for their climate provided by NEHS members living in the mid-Atlantic area. After some substitutions due to availability, eight of each of the following five cultivars were received:

*Calluna vulgaris* 'Beoley Gold' and 'Green Cardinal'

*Erica x darleyensis* 'Furzey' and 'Mary Helen'

*Erica vagans* 'St. Keverne'

Barrett and his staff set up two separate plots with 4 plants of each of the 5 cultivars. One plot is directly in the ground and the other is in a raised bed. Half of each of the plots have been pH adjusted with sulfur.

Most of the plants looked good to the visitors, even after the mid-Atlantic's hot and humid summer. The only cultivar that seemed to be struggling was *C.v.* 'Green Cardinal', with most of them showing a lot of brown and some near death. Barrett will monitor the overall health and growth rates of the plants as well as any pH or drainage issues which may arise.

This is the first step in trialing plants at Longwood. The next big hurdle will be surviving the mid-Atlantic's winter, which can include frigid temperatures, harsh winds, and lack of snow cover. Our recommended methods of protecting heathers over winter were shared with Barrett.

He will keep me informed over winter of any changes in the trial beds. In early spring I will volunteer NEHS's help and guidance in trimming the plants as necessary. -Pat Hoffman

## YOUR GRATEFUL EDITOR

I have a lot to be grateful for in just about all aspects of my life.

In my life as editor of this newsletter, I am continually grateful to the people who contribute material for our publication.

Donald Mackay's resume as contributing writer to *Heather Notes* (and to NAHS's *Heather News* as well) certainly exceeds in length by a country mile that of any other when it comes to the subject of heather. He not only writes for us often, he writes exceedingly well, and it is always a treat to read his witty commentaries on whatever has lately piqued his curiosity. Donald, a retired chemist, has been an editor for *Heather News*, is a Director of this chapter, and lives and gardens in New York and Vermont.

Pat Hoffman is also generous with her contributions. She has been following and writing about the development of the heather gardens in the famed Longwood Gardens for several years and has more recently been involved with their staff in the development of their heather trial beds. Read her latest report, center column this page. Pat works and lives in New Jersey.

Renee Schloupt is Horticulture Educator for the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Broome County, New York. She writes of the effects of two major floods on the Cutler Botanic Gardens, page 5. We do hope to hear better news about the Cutler heathers in the future.

Mary Matwey is, of course, our indefatigable president and she shares her thoughts with us in every issue. Mary has been thinking a lot about going electronic with this newsletter and she needs to know what you think. She would be ever so grateful if you would get in touch. Here's how:

Call: 607 723 1418

Write: 7 Heights Court, Binghamton, NY 13905

E-mail: mmatwey@stny.rr.com

Your editor would also be grateful to hear from you. What do you think of this newsletter? What do you like? What do you not like? What's happening with your heather?

I'm lonely so please:

Call: 860 774 4250

Write: 19 Beckwith Street, Danielson, CT 06239

E-mail: perennialherb@sbcglobal.net

Gratefully,  
Judy Doyle



Heather Trial Bed at Longwood Gardens



Above-  
A nice specimen of *Calluna vulgaris* 'Firefly' in the Norris garden, Florence, Massachusetts.

Right-  
The Heather Garden at Cutler Botanic Garden, Binghamton, New York, before the floods.



Below-  
Molly Martin's Marlboro, Vermont garden one January.



**HEATHER NOTES**, all rights reserved, is published quarterly by the Northeast Heather Society (NEHS), a tax-exempt organization and a chapter of the North American Heather Society (NAHS).

The purpose of the Northeast Heather Society is to foster interest in growing heathers (*Calluna*, *Erica*, *Daboecia*, *Cassiope*, *Phyllodoce* and *Andromeda*) in northeastern North America, by serving as a conduit of educational information for both the experienced and the novice gardener.

**MEMBERSHIP** in the Northeast Heather Society is open to anyone who pays dues to this chapter. Membership benefits include: a subscription to this quarterly newsletter, participation in chapter meetings and elections, borrowing privileges for slide/power point presentations, and, most valuable of all, contact with fellow heather gardeners who mostly live in or near your growing zone, all willing to share helpful advice and their experiences.

Dues: \$15 a year. \$28 for a two year membership; \$40 for a three-year membership. Remit payment to:  
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All material may be edited for clarity and length.

**DEADLINES FOR EACH ISSUE:**

March 20—June 20—September 20—December 20





