



Second Thoughts on Pruning - A Semi-Contrarian View

by Donald Mackay

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I have just finished writing a section on pruning for the Regional Guide, but am left with the unsettling feeling that I have either not said enough or said too much. Pruning is so obviously good for a calluna heather (isn't it?) that it is disloyal even to consider that there may be a downside under certain conditions.

The patch of naturalized heather at The Fells in New Hampshire that NEHS has been pruning so assiduously since 1995 suffered a disastrous setback in 2006, almost bad enough to kill nearly all of it, a patch which had been in existence for almost 80 years, most of it presumably **without** pruning care for most of that time. Other naturalized patches at The Fells, patches that have had none or only the barest pruning attention were not or barely affected at all by the 2006 winter. True, these patches were at forest edges or in glades and tree protected, and true that my own snow-covered, annually pruned wild heathers in Vermont were only slightly damaged that year. The damaged patch at the Fells is on a knoll, and brutally exposed to winds channeled by a large cut through the forest.

Last winter Bill Dowley's own heather garden in New Hampshire was badly damaged, yet his nursery stock, admittedly under cover, was barely affected. His own garden is mature and I assume regularly pruned, as judged by the downslope surge of his heathers to escape the pruning shears. Lots of recumbent rooted stems, very similar to The Fells, and again suggestive that decumbent rooted stems cannot carry the foliage load (and its propensity for desiccation) resulting from the branching and foliage growth encouraged and caused by pruning.

We have all been told that roots and foliage of plants have to be kept in balance, especially for transplanted evergreens, and that roots can not support a heavy foliage load at times of stress, as experienced in transplanting shrubs, or perhaps just the result of open exposure to cold dry winds.

Is it possible that protracted pruning of calluna over many years gradually increases a root-foliage imbalance that one year is brought to a head by freak weather conditions? As the heather spreads its decumbent stems is there a change in the support system from its original central mass of deep-buried roots to a larger but shallow-rooted system that *in extremis* proves incapable of supplying adequate water and nutrition? Like an iceberg that is slowly losing its underwater mass in warm seas, will it one day turn turtle and reveal its inadequate foundation?

As Ella May Wulff has pointed out (HNQ 2009, 32(3) 2-7), the moors of Scotland in summer look like a solid mass of purple on post cards, but close inspection on foot shows a much less coherent picture. There are gaps, brown patches and a tangle of bare stems that have evolved over the years - mostly without pruning as we practice it. Yes, there is a random pruning of foliage by deer and sheep, and old fragile stems are easily broken by cattle, with a drastic pruning by fire every 12 years or so, especially on grouse moors. However, the moor is a mosaic of old and new plants at all stages in their life cycles, *in toto* reflecting the various stresses that had affected it.

On maritime heaths in the far north of Scotland, exposed to Siberian blasts and frozen salt spray whipped from the North Sea, I have seen large tracts of one-sided, freeze-dried callunas (the crowberry seemed less affected) with a few

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Erica melanthera



Zone 9-11, This is a S. African compact dwarf shrub, flowering in autumn and early winter with flowers that almost cover all the needle-like foliage. Likes lime-free, well drained soil and sun. Photo provided by Pat Hoffman who attended the Philadelphia Intl. Flower Show where this entry from a member of the Garden Club of Wilmington DE. took a blue ribbon.

Thank You from the Editor.....

Many Thanks to Ann Driesen and Jerry Nolte who responded with information on the featured plant, *Erica quadangularis*, from the January 2011 HN issue. It appears that this is the export of choice from South Africa to North America for the Christmas, Easter and Spring flowering heather sales. This erect shrub is very floriferous and comes in shades of white to crimson and is hardy in zones 9 - 11. It likes a light soil and moist growing environment that is frost free. Light pruning is required after flowering.

The light pruning recommendation may be true in S.Africa but the plants shipped to NA for catalog sales, big box stores or chain stores sales are in very small pots in proportion to the height of the top growth and tend to be root bound. What this means to the buyer is that the plant will dry out quickly even with adequate watering. I cut mine back until I found some green on the stems and repotted it in a large pot, moved it to a warm, well lighted area, watered it regularly and kept a water bottle handy for occasional misting. I think it is going to survive until our weather turns warm and it can go outside.

Jerry Nolte writes that the picture in the HN was helpful in identifying her Valentine's Day gift of a mystery heath. She says her mystery Erica matched the picture and it only cost \$6.98. Wow! I could have bought 6 plants for the price of my one Holiday catalog purchase.

Second Thoughts on Pruning

Continued from page 1

signs of greenery on the lee side. I doubt pruning is ever by fire or grazing, but only by severe winters. Yet, the moor survives over the years, even though recovery must be slow. No matter how bad the damage, the calluna recovers without aid from us. It tends to show that Mother Nature really does know best. That is to say best for her, however, which may not be the same best that we gardeners strive for year after year.

This is perhaps just futile speculation, but perhaps it will give an excuse not to dash out into the garden - especially in inclement weather - when some Pavlovian response brings the pruning shears to hand.

Yes, pruning is certainly good for most heathers, especially young ones, but our really old ones should perhaps be spared their regular haircut and allowed to expire with grace.

Botanical Note: Most heather gardeners will have a selection of other ericaceous shrubs to accompany the heathers. Many of these require a different kind of pruning, called dead heading. Nearly all inflorescences of rhododendrons, kalmias, pieris and azaleas are **determinate** (or centrifugal) which more or less means that their extending floral shoot ends with a fully formed flower, with subsequent flower stems branching off beneath it to form a cyme. When the flower cluster has formed seeds and died off, the next season's new growth of a branch begins with a lateral bud below the dried out cyme, allowing the whole flower cluster to be broken off or dead headed without affecting the new growth.

In contrast, the growth of calluna is **indeterminate**, the flower cluster forms a spike or raceme which in theory is ever extending. This means that the top-most flower is the last to form and expand, with the first expanded flowers to be found at the base of the raceme. When, or even before, the flowers set seed, die and fall off, it is the top of the spike or raceme that eventually extends and resumes seasonal foliage growth. However, several lateral branches will usually form at the place where the old raceme is cut off. Therefore, pruning calluna both prevents the growth of branches with bare sections and increases the number of flowering branches to come.

The whole subject is complex, full of alternate and obscure terms, but mainly concerned with the growth patterns of plant axes, a subject called phyllotaxy, and one where burgeoning terminology is better left to mathematicians to ponder than gardeners to prune.

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Swedesboro, NJ ... by Pat Hoffman

In southwestern NJ (45 minutes from Philly) we had 60 inches of snow this past winter! Less than last year when we had 79 inches (mainly 3 blizzards - 20+ inches each)!

This year we had 2 major storms and many days with just a few inches. Average snowfall used to be 21 inches! This snowfall helped my heathers by protecting them from drying winds and also from hungry deer they chose my 4' blue hollies instead).

Temperatures this past January to February were mainly in the 30's, with 3 days in the 50's, and 2 in the 60's.

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DON'T BE PRUNED! WE WOULD MISS YOU!

Check the expiration date on the address page of this newsletter.

Send your renewal to Treasurer Peter Matwey, 7 Heights Court, Binghamton, NY 13905

Thoughts from the NEHS President, Mary Matway

*"Another growing season begins, as soon as all the snow melts and we remove the winter cover from the heathers, we'll trim the **Calluna** and clean up the **Erica** and then sit back and enjoy the view."*

Seems like that is the standard pep talk for a president of the Northeast Heather Society and I know I've said it before. But I haven't been sitting all this long winter just thinking about my heathers or your heathers. On the contrary, this past winter your NEHS president joined the American Hemerocallis Society and the American Gourd Society. SHAME! SHAME! you say.

But let me explain:

Cutler Botanic Gardens, where I volunteer, became the recipient of a sizable, private collection of Hemerocallis, aka Daylilies, this past year. I was active in designing and creating the garden for these Daylilies. With that much time and energy into this garden it just made sense to buy books and join the American Hemerocallis Society (AHS) to learn more about these plants. I joined the American Gourd Society (AGS) in reciprocation to my friend who joined the Northeast Heather Society. She is very active in the American Gourd Society and is trying to start up a New York chapter (NYGS). I attended the first chapter formation meeting of the NYGS in Ithaca, NY.

I now find myself recipient of 4, ¼" thick, 50+ full color pages, magazine quality and size of the Daylily Journal, plus at least 2 issues of a Hemerocallis Region 4 newsletter of the same quality and many Daylily nursery catalogs. The American Gourd Society also publishes a quarterly newsletter of equal quality. How Do They Afford the Cost?

I know what our 8 page Heather Notes newsletter costs and the only reasonable answer is the size of their membership at \$15 each. How do you attract membership numbering in the thousands? I've read all the journals from beginning to end of both societies to find out that both have unique ways to knit their membership together: by state, by local areas within the state, by similar interests and on a big scale by computer networking (websites) and social networking (Facebook, Blogs) and big conferences. The AGS uses "patches", a pun on the gourd patch, where people within a reasonable traveling distance of each other will get together to do gourd crafting. The AHS uses "Round Robins" where a group of people of like interest communicate via email or Postal mail with the questions and opinions being accumulatively past on until all communiqués are returned to the chair person of the group and then published.

Not to diminish the significance or importance of the plant/product of either society but the Daylily bloom lasts 1 to 1 ½ days from June through August and the gourd has such a long growing period that only the zone 6+ areas can grow them economically. The gourds used for crafting this year have probably been harvested 2 years ago.

I know crafting with heather is never going to happen and the ease of hybridizing heathers will never match the 30,000+ cultivars of Daylilies. You will be happy to learn that I have not been corrupted by these new influences and I remain true to the heather forever. However, we have got to become participants in the new computer social networks. With that I urge you to check out the Northeast Heather Society's Blog at www.heatherevents.wordpress.com. Currently this social network is free to whoever goes through the process (and I have to admit frustration due to inexperience on my part) of creating them. If you use the internet, add the NEHS blog address to your Favorites. I will post items of heather interest as often as I can and I would love for you to leave a comment.

NEHS Schedule of Events 2011

Fort Tryon, Heather Trimming, Manhattan, NY

April 9, Saturday, 10 am with rain date on April 16th

Lunch provided

NEHS Board Meeting after trimming

The Heritage Museum and Gardens, Heather Trimming

67 Grove Street, Sandwich, MA 02563

April 23, Saturday, 10 am, Pack a Lunch

The Fells, Heather Trimming, Newbury, NH

May 7, Sat. with rain date on the 14th of May.

NEHS Board Meeting after trimming, Pack a Lunch

NEHS Annual Meeting and Heather Conference

Binghamton, NY, August 26, 27, 28

Join Heather Enthusiasts of Binghamton NY for a Casual, Fun-Filled weekend

Friday, Aug. 26—Social Mixer and Board Meeting

Saturday, Aug. 27—Tours of Local Heather Gardens and Historic Sites

Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner with Annual Meeting and Gourd Crafting

Sunday, Aug. 28—Brunch at the Matway's

Look for Registration and Accommodations in the HN July, 2011

Baby It's Cold Outside by Donald Mackay

The bitterly cold weather currently gripping the East (I write this in mid-January) provided an opportunity to test out the long-held belief that deep snow not only protects heathers from frigid winds but acts as an insulator.

I have taken it as an article of faith that under deep snow the temperature stays close to freezing no matter the temperature of the outside air. The argument is that the earth is a heat reservoir and under an insulating layer of snow will warm the bottom of it. Since the insulation layer is snow, then the temperature obviously cannot get higher than 32°F, else it melts to water.

Large areas of New York and New England lie buried under 12" to 24" of snow, the result of a series of snow storms coming up the East coast. As of now a record-setting bitterly cold mass of Canadian air (it's always the Canadians at fault) sits over the middle of the continent and is spreading slowly to the east.

As of yesterday it was -29°F during the night in much of northern New York and Vermont and rising to a balmy -13°F during the day. In southern New England and Westchester County the temperature got down to about zero during the night and rose to about 15°F during the day, the actual temperature being much affected by sun or shade.

I took a remote temperature sensor that was showing 23°F on the sunlit porch and 13°F in the shade and buried it at the very bottom of an 18" bank of snow sitting on my heathers. The temperature rose almost at once to 17°F and within an hour had risen to 28°F. By then the air temperature had fallen to 8°F, but the ground temperature was still rising.

I wish I had a scientific chart of the temperature differential to show you but the planned series of readings had to be abandoned when the sensor started failing and giving only fragmentary readings. I'm sure the transmitted temperatures were correct. The fault lies I believe in the strength of the radio signal from the sensor buried in the snow. Deep snow may attenuate the signal (I know radio-sending avalanche beacons are affected) but the low temperature can weaken the signal by greatly decreasing the power available from the battery in the sensor.

I've done my part in burying a temperature sensor among my heathers, and I don't feel like going out again to search for where I think I buried it just to put in warm batteries. The intermittent signals I did get were enough to convince me that the temperature under the snow could be much higher than the air temperature above it. It is now 28.2°F under the snow though the night air temperature is dropping like a stone. Now it's up to you to carry the torch, burn the candle and bury the hatchet. I'm too cold to keep up with these heated metaphors, or on with this experiment.

Danielson, CT ... By Judy Doyle, report and photo

So, here is one tiny heath sprig reaching out from the driveway border. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. When I talk to people about winter protection for their heather I often jokingly recommend "6" of snow cover"-so now it remains to be seen if a ton of snow cover works as well. Something tells me it doesn't. When this melts (it will melt someday, please God?) I expect to see flattened out-lines of plants on the ground.



Who's on First, What's on Second, I Don't Know's on Third...Abbott & Costello, 1945

Excerpt from Donald Mackay's "Lasdon Park Update", August 2010

"The loss of a few heathers over the winter and the insertion of new plants has exacerbated the identity problem, which becomes obvious when a plant labeled 'J.H. Hamilton' - lovely as it is right now - develops long spires of single dark lavender flowers adorning the wrong colored foliage. A map was made at the time of planting but now needs careful checking since large paving stones had to be moved to get at weeds, or provide more room for heather growth. The best example of growth - a replacement heather now over two feet tall and wide and magnificent in its heavy bloom - is sited where the map shows a large rock; it awaits certain identification for now but is probably 'Waquoit Wild'.

The plants that were lost were more certainly known. All three plantings of the bud bloomer 'Alexandra' were lost, two of three 'Glenfiddich', and surprisingly all the 'Kramer's Rote' - usually a very winter-resistant *Erica x darleyensis*. A plant labeled 'Martha Hermann' looked very good, causing me some grief as I had to admit it was doing far better than my own - which are loath to flower. However, the profuse flowering of the Lasdon plant, which now seems to be the wrong color on the wrong foliage, makes me feel a lot better."

An Amendment Experiment By Bill Dowley and Mary Matwey

For the past few years a Binghamton group of NEHS members have been guests at the “Dowley B&B” in Keene, NH on their way to trim the heathers at The Fells in Newbury. The lodgings are great (free), the food is excellent, wine flows freely and the atmosphere very congenial. For a heather enthusiast it doesn’t get any better than to peek in Bill’s green house or basement and see all the newly rooted heather cuttings or to stroll through the rows of potted heather in the nursery beds. Being a man of endless energy and boundless curiosity that he is, Bill asked if I would help him with an experiment on heather amendments last year. So I met him in the nursery area about 6:30 am and we proceeded to gather up 6 plants each of 7 different varieties of *Calluna vulgaris*.

The following is a table of plants used, the amendments used, and a rating of plant vigor (size and flower) using a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the best. The average score for each amendment is shown at bottom of table. Note: 18-5-13 is a fertilizer and Kansel+ is a weed suppressant which the manufacturer states contains 20% total nitrogen. This product is available only for wholesale.

Bill Dowley Test Results and observations.

Amendment	Control (none)	Coffee Only	Kansel+ Only	18-5-13 Only	Coffee + Kansel+	18-5-13 + Kansel+
4" Kinlochruel	1	3	7	7	9	8
4" Anette	3	3	4	8	8	8
4" Gold Haze	4	2	8	4	6	5
4" Bronze Beauty	1	3	9	7	9	9
6" Tomentosa	2	3	9	7	10	8
6" Con Brio	3	4	9	8	7	9
6" Dark Star	3	5	9	7	8	9
Average Rating	2.4	3.3	7.9	6.9	8.1	8.0

Results are in. Keep in mind this was a test of plants in pots. Plants were as close to identical as possible when the test was started (picture #1). Amendments were added to surface of soil in each pot, plants were watered daily and a light mix of liquid acidic fertilizer had been injected into the watering system. Clearly the control group and the group which had only coffee grounds faired the worst (picture #2 & #3). If you were to pull the Anette results out of the final results, Kansel + only would have won. Anette is a very active grower in the summer and it is possible it needed additional nutrients to handle the rapid growth. Kansel + does a good job in keeping weeds out of the pots and does appear to effect the summer growth.

Editor comments:

I could not get Bill to make a recommendation to the home gardener that we should fertilize our

An Amendment Experiment—Pictures

Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4



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. A family membership permits more than one family member to vote and participate in all NEHS activities for an additional \$5 per year fee above the annual dues. The family membership includes all household members residing at the same address and each member has one vote. Each household will receive only one copy of Heather Notes.

Dues for an Individual: \$15 a year; \$28 for a two year membership; \$40 for a three year membership

Dues for a Family \$20 a year; \$33 for a two year membership; \$45 for a three year membership

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For digital presentations, contact Bill Dowley, Keene, NH. Tel. (603) 355-8801; wdowley@ne.rr.com

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Click on 'Chapters' to find the Northeast Heather Society (NEHS) chapter page.

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Contact: Pat Hoffman (856) 467-4711; njgardener15@hotmail.com

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Do you have a suggestion, a question, a story, an anecdote, a poem, or a photo to share? Contact the Content editor:

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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

