



President's Thoughts:

The distances that separate the members of the Northeast Heather Society do not make it easy to hold pep rallies and motivate the membership.

Rah Rah Ree

Raise your voices for the Northeast Heather Society

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Not only are the miles a problem but my attempt at rhyme is surely lacking. So what do we have to bind us together as an organization? **TRIMMING EVENTS**. I assure you, any member who has participated in trimming heather at the gardens we support with our volunteer labor has come away with new friends, answers to their questions on heather culture, hands on experience in trimming and revival techniques of heathers. Sometimes our nurserymen members bring a few choice plants for sale (at great member prices) to add to your heather gardens.

On March 31st, my husband Pete, the NEHS Treasurer, and I met Donald Mackay, NEHS Vice-President, and Elaine Miller, NEHS Secretary, to trim the heathers at Lasdon Park Arboretum in Katoneh, NY. I hope the photo of the Lasdon heathers, see photo section, gives a hint of the brilliant colors in this garden that greeted us as we began our labor of love. I especially wanted to see this garden to update the map and verify the vigor of the plants as reported by Donald and Elaine who have taken on the job of official, local, NEHS member care takers for this garden. It was of little matter to us that the day was cold, foggy and overcast. We trimmed the Calluna, cleared out the leaf refuge and split branches of the Ericas and even planted 5 young C.v. 'Mullion' and 3 *Erica carnea* 'Golden Sprite'. Lasdon's Synoptic garden was full of trees and shrubs budding and leafing out and we finished the day by trimming the dozen or so heathers that have survived there many more years than our young heather garden. With all good intentions the Executive Committee, President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer headed out to our favorite restaurant, AT The Reef, to warm up, have lunch and conduct a short meeting. To our dismay our old haunt had changed its name and was closed for renovations. I didn't know better, I might be thinking that they knew we were coming. I recall that we were a little rowdy a few years ago when we held a January Board meeting there. Anyway, in the parking lot the Executive Committee made a unanimous decision to return to our cars, turn up the heat and head home.

2012 CALENDAR OF EVENTS *Heather Trimming*

√ **Mar 31-Lasdon Park -Done**

April 14—Fort Tryon (Board Mtg)

April 28—Heritage Museum & Gardens

May 5—The Fells (Board Mtg)

August 8—12 NAHS Conf

The next heather trimming event will be held at Fort Tryon Park, off Margaret Corbin Circle, Fort Washington Ave., New York, NY on April 14, 2012, starting approx. 10 AM. In the past we've had NEHS members from MA, VT, NH, upstate NY, NJ, PA and CT gather for this trimming event. Please make the effort to join us. The unusually warm temperatures of late winter/early spring have probably made the spring blooming Ericas perform their colorful blooming magic a good month ahead of schedule. The Calluna will need to be trimmed but the Ericas may also need trimming to spruce them up removing the spent flowers. Usually the Fort Tryon Park staff have provided a generous lunch for the work crew which is greatly appreciated. Please drop me an email or call me if you plan on helping out so that I can give the staff a head count. Dress in layers and bring sharp, light weight hedge trimmers.

Check out the Calendar of Events in this issue for the schedule of trimmings and be certain to visit the website www.northeastheathersociety.org to follow the heather trimming progress in pictures and words.

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Mary Ann Mann
Falworth, Massachusetts

FEATURED PLANT

“White Perfection”

Erica x darleyensis

Hgt. 40cm (15")

Spd. 70cm (28")

Pure white flowers, blooms December thru April with bright green foliage. Outstanding! Best of the whites.



Bartholdi Garden



Pink Darley Heath



White Darley Heath

DARLEY DALE HEATH
Erica x darleyensis
“White Perfection”
H. S. Gentry - Ericaceae

Heathers in DC

by Donald Mackay

Next time you are asked to help supervise a school bus trip to Washington, you might do so more willingly if you can get permission to duck out of your monitoring or chaperoning responsibilities in order to spend a little educational time on your own. In such an event you could advance your heather knowledge by spending a few hours at the US Botanic Garden, almost in the shadow of the US Congress at the end of Independence Avenue.

The conservatory building contains a wealth of interest, but no longer shelters the Mexican Heather (*Cuphea hyssopifolia*) which once greeted you at the entrance. Of course, it wasn't a real heather, but a compact shrub with small leaves bearing a lot of small pinkish-purple flowers.

If you want to see real heathers you have to go to the rock garden at one apex of the triangular Bartholdi Park just across Independence Ave. *Erica x darleyensis* is best represented but there are also cultivars of *E. tetralix* and *E. carnea* and *Calluna vulgaris* to be seen. Nearly all plants bear a label, but even an important institution like the US Government (I believe the Architect of the Capitol is actually in charge) is not immune to error. Sometimes it is simply a spelling error, but sometimes the whole label is wrong or the same label is used for two obviously different heathers. I won't spoil your fun in finding your own labeling solecisms. Perhaps tourists and leprechauns move the labels when the Architect is not looking.

You may find more unusual members of the *Ericaceae* growing in the Regional Garden section of the National Garden at the side of the Conservatory. These are mostly ericaceous shrubs of the

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All pictures on this page were taken in February of 2012. by Prof. Edward Barrows at the Bartholdi garden in Washington DC.

Heathers in DC

(continued from page 2)

southeastern US, like *Vaccinium elliotti*, the tallish Southern Blueberry, and the prostrate southern evergreen cranberry (*V. crassifolium*), beautiful but hard to keep alive in the northeast. Shrubs of the southern Alleghenies down to Florida are well represented by a variety of leucothoos and similar leg-entangling plants like the Florida Hobblebush (*Agarista populifolia*) with names bearing some variation of hobble, stagger or tether. These share a functional affinity to the witch hobble of New England (actually a *Viburnum*), and the jungles of rhododendron and mountain laurel which so impeded George Washington in his surveyor days while determining the western boundaries of the Royal Grants in Virginia.

If your charges have any botanical interest, they will find much to seize it at the Botanic Garden and its environs. If not, take them to the nearby Bartholdi Park where a famous fountain is to be found. Sculpted in 1876 by Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, it also commemorates the man who designed the Statue of Liberty, and may also offer an opportunity for you to have a little liberty of your own while thinking your own ericaceous thoughts.

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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

Prompted by a Critique

by Donald Mackay

'A Regional Heather Growing Guide', just published by NEHS, received a very favorable review in the forthcoming Year Book of the Heather Society. The reviewer was John Allen of New Brunswick, Canada, so he was supremely well situated to understand the difficulties of growing heathers in the area covered by the Guide. Mr. Allen's criticisms, were very well placed, and so well in fact that they deserve an answer in hopes of making the Guide even more useful.

He says, "some purists might take exception to encouraging the use of leaf mould or compost" in the planting stage. True enough, but a book could be written on leaf mold or compost. Leaf mold goes through the successive changes of duff, mull and mor, at least under forest canopies on its way to humic acid in the soil - the real beneficial agent of soil crumb and structure - and obviously differs according to the leaves that formed it from the forest canopy, whose trees recycle the nutrients from their own dead, discarded and decomposing leaves. If leaves are imported they might easily contain those from walnut or beech or other plants that contain allelochemicals which inhibit growth. Or they might be the duff taken from underneath the forests' ericaceous plants which is excellent for encouraging root growth in layering of shrubs like the deciduous azaleas.

If you move on to peat, the last stage of composting vegetation under waterlogged oxygen-free conditions, you will find there are many different grades of peat that are both suitable or unsuitable for various agricultural crops - at least in Ireland where most of this work has been done. The term peat covers a wide range of decomposed organic matter of different origins from fibrous dead sphagnum moss to a structureless cheese fine for burning but almost useless in the garden.

Then consider the barely composting piles of conifer bark chips - the common scrap from western logging operations that Karla Lortz of Heaths & Heathers has such easy access to - and see how her heathers, especially callunas, joyously romp through it. I will never forget seeing Karla pull a heather out of the pile, show me the luxuriant root system, then drop it back on to the pile without bothering to replant it. It will grow, I was assured. I was strongly reminded of Ken Barr pulling the same trick in Tofino on the pure sands of Ucluelet peninsula on Vancouver Island, i.e. pulling a heather out of pure sand, showing the enormous root system, then dropping it back on the surface of the sand. No need to replant, he assured me. There was a high water table there, anyway.

What both illustrations showed me was the benefit of aeration and a loose soil structure kept moist but not compacted by poor drainage - which is what clay usually leads to. A small percentage of clay can be very beneficial in an overly well-drained soil as it retains nutrients and can hold a lot of water. But in Northeast America we usually have too much of it as it serves to form hard pans and mineralized layers that keep the water from draining in boggy areas.

Another argument for leaf mould, *per se*, is that George MacKinnon of Waquoit Nursery on sandy Cape Cod - a nurseryman of the old school who believed in field-grown heathers for best performance - used a large percentage of leaf mold with sand and peat moss in his concrete mixer (as reported by Sally Graves, HN#73, p5, 1996) when making up potting soil for heathers; and he used a two-inch layer of leaf mold alone for raking into the top of his raised beds. Organic material is a great help for both sandy and clayey soils in providing the humic acid for crumb structure, aeration, drainage and warmth. Leaf mold is just one source of it. Far cheaper than peat moss, and more ecologically conscientious, its advantages surely outweigh the risk of unknown contaminants, whether chemical, botanical, or microbiological. Some people swear by composted coffee grounds (tea leaves are useless), and some by pine needles or buckwheat hulls, or composted cow manure or sewage sludge, but here we should distinguish between material that can be incorporated directly into the soil at planting time and those that spread on the soil surface as a mulch can be expected to break down over time and get incorporated into the soil via soil disturbance from worms and rodents.

And to summon up help from the past, the White Flower Farm catalog of 1975 says that heaths and heathers grow best in a bed of 50% peat and 50% sand, "or a bed containing nothing but leaf-soil (soil from the floor of woods of deciduous trees)." And they certainly know what they are talking about.

So you see how one faint demurrer can lead to a vigorous explanation and riposte. I do it only on behalf of the many of you who contributed to The Guide. I would never do it for myself.

P.S. Just wait till we get to the major and justified criticisms that Mr. Allen makes about 'A Regional Heather Growing Guide'. Rebuttals and explanations will provide lots of text for *Heather Notes* and *Heather News*. I hope they will eventually make their way into the next edition of the Guide, so be sure to write if you wish to refine or refute any of the comments made here on compost, or on other topics as they arise.

WEBSITE - Please recommend the Northeast Heather Society website to all your friends or just people you meet who ask a question about heathers. www.northeastheathersociety.org

RHGG

NEHS members: Keep an eye out for nurseries or gift shops that might be interested in purchasing, at wholesale prices, "A Regional Heather Growing Guide" for resale to their customers. Have them contact : wdowley@ne.rr.com for information.

TRIMMING HEATHERS

Attention New England NEHS members et al: Your help is requested at the Heritage Museum and Gardens, April 28 and at The Fells, May 5, trimming heather events. Particulars appear on the website for each garden. Please make plans to participate.

BOOK REVIEW EXCERPT

Thank You to Dr. E. Charles Nelson, Editor of *Heathers 9, Year-book of The Heather Society 2012*. for allowing excerpts of the book review on "A Regional Heather Growing Guide" by D. Mackay and reviewed by John Allen (New Brunswick Canada) to be published in this Spring Issue of the Heather Notes.

Recent publications and reviews:

D. Mackay (& others), 2011, *A regional heather growing guide*, Northeast Heather Society, Binghamton, NY, ISBN 0-9786079-9-6

"This is extremely useful to anyone contemplating starting a heather garden from scratch. It is a booklet of 40 pages and the first half establishes the definitions and takes the reader through the basic aspects of cultivation and where and how to create a heather garden. Even experienced growers will benefit from the clear and direct thoughts and instructions. The text was prepared for gardeners in the northeast region of North America but the sections on siting, soil preparation and general husbandry, in particular, would benefit gardeners elsewhere. Four pages of colour plates of gardens in the region will do much to encourage would-be gardeners."

"The discussion of soil preparation of heather beds along with a chapter on chalky soils is a breath of fresh air. Both contain the only four letter word the authors claim should be used in ground preparation: "SAND". For those of us striving to grow on silty / clay coastal plains this is a really meaningful change from the almost universal suggestion of adding rough peat-moss. The use of ground up bark, along with some peat, is another suggestion not commonly made in gardening articles: I have successfully used bark with plenty of sand in a number of gardens in Atlantic Canada."

The Critic was Right

by Donald Mackay

One of the criticisms leveled against *A Regional Heather Growing Guide* - and a very valid one, too, I must add - was the unevenness of the chapter devoted to regional differences as recorded by NAHS or NEHS members in their various regional niches.

Well, I did the best I could, dredging up what germane information there was in Heather Notes and Heather News, or any comments bearing at least some partial relevance to geographical influence on heather cultivation in the very large area of Northeast America.

The answer lies firmly in your hands, whether quill pen, Parker, Biro, or the various pieces of keyboard or QWERTY apparatus (yes it is a word allowed in Scrabble) that seem to come as adornments to every teen and many pre-teens these days. The information you deliver whether by Royal, Regular or email will make all the difference in filling the gaps in this chapter due to geography or incomplete coverage, or (it can hardly be credited) to false, outdated or misleading information.

The more information you supply on the regional quirks of heath or heather growing, the better the next edition of RHGG will become, and critics will have to sharpen their quills or increase their bandwidth in order to expose the remaining rough edges in coverage.

So please get your copy of the Regional Guide and refer to page 19, titled Winter Protection. Find the region closest to your own and critique it mercilessly. Or better, write up something new for your region and give someone else the chance to add their critical insights, or perhaps shred yours.

It's your Regional Guide - so be sure your Region is covered.

Pruning in Mud Season

by Donald A.M. Mackay

This article is not so much about heather pruning as mud and deer season, and the dark thoughts of deer pruning out of hunting season when the gardening season has finally arrived to let you see what the deer were up to over the winter.

In Vermont, mud season is definitely still part of winter in spite of the arrival of Daylight Saving Time. In my area there is not a peep of green to be seen from crocuses or snowdrops, though the recently exposed fields and lawns look very green indeed. Snow, the poor man's fertilizer, has done its job.

Because of a light snow accumulation this winter, a few days of warm winds from the south melted all but the compacted banks left by the snow plows. Water squelches as you walk in the grass, and shallow pools form in depressions and at the edges of the flower beds. Not a good time for digging in the mud but possible for pruning once you tease the layered stems of callunas from the recumbency forced in them by two to three feet of snow.

As you prune, stepping on stones as far as possible, one can see the calluna as having come through the winter undamaged. In the case of *Calluna vulgaris* 'Fritz Kircher', one can say unchanged, as the flowers on this bud bloomer look about the same as last time I saw it in early December. A little less sparkly perhaps, and the white buds somewhat more faded, but still in excellent condition.

Should I prune this? It seems a shame and so unnecessary. But how long can I wait before this year's bloom needs to appear? Have I discovered a perpetual blooming heather, one that never needs pruning? My thoughts of plant patenting are diverted by sights of severe stem splitting on a so very carefully planted, and sited, and balsam branch-protected bell heather. Yet three self-rooted sections of an old bell heather which has survived Vermont winters for years have come through unscathed. Sited on the same bank to spill frost, and given the most sunlight available, the only difference I can think of is that the one that suffered was originally in a gallon pot and planted with elaborate care as befitting a future specimen, and the three that came through were small brutally spade-pruned sections of my old faithful. Those I expected to die and were planted in haste and rain late last year. Maybe that *Erica cinerea* 'Atropurpurea' from twenty or thirty years ago, the only survivor of a large batch of bell heather cultivars, I now recall, really does have a winter-survival gene as the basis for its survival. Conversely, bell heather from France

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Pruning in Mud Season (continued from page 5)

and the Channel Islands is known for tenderness.

The *Erica carnea* that is around various parts of the garden does not seem to have suffered, nor prospered for that matter. The flowering is sparse and some plants have the sodden bleached look typical of *E. carnea* that blooms under the snow. Not at all like the catalog pictures of *E. carnea* taken after a late spring sprinkle of Ivory Flake snow has descended gently overnight to gladden the photographer's heart with bright purple spikes protruding through a dusting of snow crystals. We don't get to see that in Vermont, or at least in ski country. We are glad to see any flowers at all when the snow goes.

There was also a fair amount of snow this year way to the south in Westchester County (NY), which persisted long because of many cold nights. There was no frost heaving and only a little wind burn on long calluna stems exposed above the snow and a few randomly-placed pine boughs. I should say stochastically-placed to show that in spite of popular, even statistical, usage stochastic is not the same as random, at least to the Greeks. To them random was random, a matter of chance; stochastic was chance tempered by skill in conjecture, which is what I hoped to have (by chance) in my favor when I gave up last December about a quarter-way though a really good plan for winter protection with salvaged Christmas trees. The heathers made it through, anyway, with my stochastic distribution of a very limited supply of pine branches.

When the snow and branches were gone, it became clear that the deer - which are now very tame in Westchester and very hungry - had been equally stochastic in their skilled conjectures of supplies of edible greenery. By now I expect to see the rhododendron by the back door and the Japanese yews by the front door eaten to the nubs. But I didn't expect to see the pruning of the heathers had been done for me. There was barely an old flowered stem left on any calluna - it was a neat job, I must confess, and I forgave the deers - and the darleyensis and carneas were somewhat devoid of new flowering stems, forming randomly speckled beds of greenery. *Erica carnea* 'Springwood White' was mostly green with erratic spots of white, though I cannot say the deer were behaving erratically. From their point of view, far from it. However, the carnea recovered and now looks great.

How do I know it was deer? I can't meet Hume's standards of induction, but a few miles to the south in densely suburban White Plains the spring blooming heather gardens I know there were in great shape. 'Springwood Pink' and White were a little late in flowering, but eventually (now) are a gorgeous mass of coherent color.

In Lasdon Park, where our new heather garden is planted, deer are excluded by fencing. The spring bloomers looked good, and the few old plants of darleyensis they already had there were very badly stem-split, but heavily clothed with flowers on the branches that had not died. It's always amazing to me how an old stem of *Erica x darleyensis* can be split eight-fold and yet bear flowers on split stems that have only a ribbon of bark on them - and then recover after severe pruning in time for next year.

So how do I know for sure it was the deer that (not metaphorically) deflowered my carneas? The answer was obvious in their random dispersal of their calling cards, what polite diphthong-using scientists call faecal pellets. Lots of them, more often on the lawn than the flower bed. Those on the lawn can be brushed into a slit in the grass that a sharp spade can make. Those in the bed can be left to complete nature's obvious intent of recycling nutrients. What was once heather should surely be used to make heather again. Who am I to argue with Mother Nature?

Finally, I get to think about Mud, a welcome change from faecal pellets. I think about Agincourt (Battle of 1415) and the role that mud played in Henry's surprising victory. The battle was fought on some poor peasant's field that had been plowed for winter wheat, which means deep plowing late in the year. The battle was fought on October 25th after heavy rain - which turned the field to mud which impeded French cavalry charges more than English and Welsh archers. What neither side knew but which readers of "Soil Profiles and Soil Pans" (HN#124, p.20) may suspect, is that continuous deep plowing of water-soaked agricultural soils forms a "plow pan" where clay particles formed by frost are washed down by rain to form water-resistant pans of agglomerated clay just below the plow level.

Which brings me back to mud season in Vermont where ice layers due to winter frosts - just out of reach of spinning tires, stop the rain and melt water from draining away. It makes detours of several miles worthwhile to avoid west-facing sunny sections of gravel roads, of which there are many. It also makes gardening messy. Great gobs of mud form on boots, making you walk like a freshly returned sailor from months at sea, so pruning is best done from the flat stones you (at least in imagination) with great foresight placed there last fall. There are a few, but not lots of faecal pellets showing that Vermont deer have a French sense of *delicatessen*.

Another thing you notice as you squelch through waterlogged turf is that the long bare-stemmed heathers planted last fall that you had rescued from a nursery are doing very well in spite of having had to bury them very deep or sideways in order to hide the 6" to 8" of completely bare stems they had been showing. No sign of damage, though the top of the root ball is 6" down instead of at ground level or 2" above as some nurseries now advise. Planted in too shady an area, there was not much flower, so pruning was quick and easy on surprisingly lush foliage. At least there was no deer damage or the need to recycle their calling cards.

Mud season in New England tends to get exaggerated. Tales of cars being lost in the mud as tractors and 4-wheel drive SUV's drive over them (anything for traction) are sensational with little hard evidence to support them. You might lose a small garden tractor once in a while that way, but never a car.



HELP

How often does the Northeast United States get served a winter/spring such as this? Before the last week in March my Erica carnea 'Golden Sprite had bloomed its head off and the flowers were browning. I've actually seen Erica x darleyensis 'Furzey', 'Mary Helen', Kramer's Rote' and 'Silberschmelze with no snow cover in full bloom by lightly brushing away a few leaves. Even the expected splitting of branches was minimal. The next surprise was the blooms of the Erica carnea 'Westwood Yellow', 'Rosalie', 'Ann Sparkes', 'Beoley Pink', Golden Starlet, 'Springwood Pink and White'. These are not very unique Ericas but when you are used to not seeing them in full bloom as we did this year, they are a real treat. I'm sure there are many Erica growers out there who have marveled at these early blooms brought on by this years special weather conditions and I would ask you to share your photos (digital please) with your society's library. You will be credited for your contribution.

YOUR
PHOTO
HERE



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, Phylloce* 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

Remit payment to: Peter Matwey, Treasurer, 7 Heights Court, Binghamton, NY 13905

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

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NORTHEAST HEATHER SOCIETY website: www.northeastheathersociety.org

ADVERTISING: Quarter page ad: \$35 per issue; \$25 per issue if advertising in two or more consecutive issues.

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

BE A CONTRIBUTOR TO HEATHER NOTES:

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

Mary Matwey, 7 Heights Court, Binghamton, NY 13905 (607) 723 1418 mmatwey@stny.rr.com

All material may be edited for clarity and length.

DEADLINES FOR EACH ISSUE:

March 20–June 20–September 20–December 20

