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### From the President, Mary Matwey

I apologize to all members of the NEHS for the tardiness of this newsletter. As they say, "Life happens." However, because of the delay I am able to report on a current event; and that is the heather presentation given to Friends of Lasdon Park Arboretum in Katonah, NY on July 24. But first we should address the scattered pockets of severely, winter-damaged heathers in the Northeast.

For the most part, all the gardens the NEHS supports faired pretty well; Lasdon, Fort Tryon, Heritage Museum and Gardens. The one exception was the Fells which displayed severe winter burn and wind desiccation. At this site we trimmed hard and even buried a few of the more stressed plants and a report on their survival from our heather scout, Bill Dowley, is forth coming. Donald Mackay's report "The Time Has Come", discusses the unusual heather plant reaction to a more or less mild winter in the Northeast. I for one used the drop layering method (bury the whole plant up to the living stems) in hopes of reinvigorating my plants (see pictures on page 7).

Continuing the Lasdon heather presentation report; it was a beautiful day, sunny with temperatures in the mid 80°s and the heather garden was full and beginning to show a hint of the flower colors. The heather presentation was the last in a series of educational programs that the Lasdon administration was offering their patrons. The PowerPoint program followed the standard format I like to use, historical information, botanical and common nomenclature, picture slides of Erica and Calluna foliage and flowers that was reinforced with plant samples that were passed around. This was a group of gardeners who wanted to know how to grow heathers so the remainder of the program knocked their socks off with great pictures of heather beds in full bloom from around the Northeast showing them that the Lasdon heather garden was not a fluke. The portion of the program addressing heather growing culture prompted many questions from the audience ranging from how to make soil changes to existing heather gardens to site selection and soil amendments for new beds. The program ended with a visit to heather garden and from the additional questioning and the smiling faces in the photo I headed back to Binghamton feeling that we added a few more heather enthusiasts to the roll call. The Lasdon Park administration and garden staff is to be commended for their outstanding work they do to maintain Lasdon Park Arboretum of which the Heather Collection is a small part.

Experimental Erica Garden



*E. cinerea* 'Rosabella'



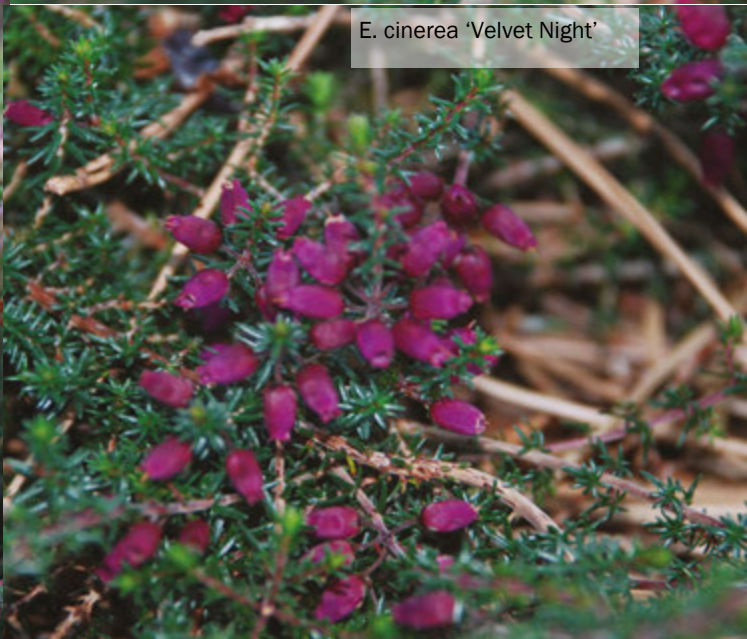
*E. x williamsii* 'Ken Wilson'



*E. x watsonii* 'Pearly Pink'



*E. cinerea* 'Velvet Night'



## Spring and Summer Blooming Ericas      by Jane Murphy

In my previous life, living in Newark, Delaware, I'd tried growing the Spring/Summer blooming Ericas with little success. In fact, the only cultivar that did well was *Erica vagans*, 'St Keverne'. Ever the optimist, I decided to try them again when Paul and I moved to Oxford, Pennsylvania. I tried three locations and have been happily surprised with the results. First, I interspersed several species (*E. cinerea*, *E. williamsii*, *E. spiculifolia* and *E. vangans*) among our two established winter-blooming Erica gardens. A few didn't make it, but most are doing well, and providing spots of color in the gardens through spring and summer.

The third location was truly intended as an experiment. I chose a sheltered location under some tall pines. Here I planted *E. tetralix*, *E. vagans*, *E. x watsonii*, *E. x williamsii*, and *E. cinerea* with cultivars that were new to me. After three years, the results are in, and they are wonderful. Not only have these spring/summer bloomers survived, they have prospered. There has been vigorous growth and profuse flowers on almost all of the species. I love the bright, neon colored flowers of some of the cinereas. The tetralix flower colors are subtler, but still beautiful. Photos are on page 2

I would enjoy hearing about other members' experiences with spring/summer blooming Ericas.

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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

## Latest and Greatest BLACK & DECKER - 36V Lithium Hedge Trimmer

No, I do not own shares in the BLACK & DECKER Company. I wish I did or at least own shares in the Battery Company that makes the Lithium rechargeable batteries. The cost of \$90 per battery was over half the cost of the Trimmer. The Trimmer comes with a 36V Lithium battery plus a charger but to be on the safe side I opted for a backup. At the time I didn't know how long the charged battery would last but I can say that I wore out sooner than the 2 hours that it took to wear down the battery. From my point of view it was money well spent. This trimmer, light enough that I, a 140lb woman, could actually trim heathers 4' in front of me by one handedly, extending the trimmer without much stress on the back. I gladly loaned it to other members of the heather trimming party for a hands on demo and its light weight and ease of use prompted two of them to purchase their own before the next trimming party. With power for electric trimmers always a problem at the heather gardens we help to maintain, this trimmer is a must. Once the heathers are done it works just great on hedge trimming as well. Maybe someday they will go on sale.

### The Time Has Come - - -

- - - the Walrus said, "To talk of many things: Of winter kill—and blackened stems-- and sad, misshapen lings."

There is now little doubt that the winter, 2012, was a bad one for calluna heathers in many of our gardens, especially in the north. Plants that had made it through decades of harsh winters either didn't make it through this winter, or what is new to me, have decided to succumb in late spring after appearing to make it through. Ericas, however, have shown only their normal winter damage, and blueberries, their cousins, will have their best year ever as judged by their prodigious flowering.

A group of heathers that I had carefully covered with balsam fir branches late last November and had as carefully uncovered when the warm spell in March threatened an early spring, have suddenly turned black with just a few fringes of green on outside stems to show not all life has gone.

When first uncovered the heathers (nearly all *Calluna vulgaris* 'H.E. Beale' and 'Tib') looked a little peaky, or peelie-wally - a Scottish term usually reserved for weak off-color tea. When I trimmed them in late March they look pretty contented once all the dried flower stems had been removed. In April I pruned out a few interior blackened stems and noticed the foliage had a grayish tinge to it. On Mother's Day (May 13) they looked a little grayer and I was beginning to be concerned with the lack of lush green growth response to pruning, but on Memorial Day (May 28) things took a sudden and severe turn for the worse. Over 80% of the foliage had gone from gray to a sodden black, with a few sprigs of green scattered on the outside of the heathers.

I was speechless. Heather that I had planted in 1980, that had flowered magnificently year after year, that I had carefully covered every year, that enjoyed day-long sun, that most winters were covered with three to four feet of snow, looked as bad as those last year at the Fells, and even worse than Bill Dowley's own heathers at his New Hampshire home. These heathers are in a cemetery that had been closed for years, but suddenly the recipient of attention from the local town cemetery commission. The grass is now mowed, gaps in the hedges repaired, wet spots filled in, and week whackers set to work.

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## The Time Has Come...continued from page 4

Can I blame human intervention, a cost-saving weed killing spray? The sudden blackening made me wonder, but I doubt it. I think we have to look for natural causes, unnatural though they seem, for what must be a delayed response to winter stress. You will remember we had a very mild winter, with exceptionally poor snow cover at those times when arctic blasts of below-zero winds came down from Canada. Not nearly as ferocious or consistent as those that ruined David Wilson's unprotected callunas in Chilliwack, BC, but much colder.

In my own Vermont garden a few miles away I had a mixed response to winter, with a skimpy crop of rhubarb and an enormous crop of weeds. Many heathers, even some ericas, were mostly unaffected, but an unpleasantly large number of callunas on exposed knolls showed plenty of damage after the snow had gone. However, it looks as if it can be cut out to let new growth in.

I hope so, anyway. With a lot of attention even the worst damaged callunas can be pruned to allow a belated recovery as the green fringes expand. It's a slow process but so would be replacing so many plants.

If there is a lesson here I think it is that covering heathers with evergreen boughs will not be sufficient in poor snow years when high winds and low temperatures abound. The main function of the boughs is to act as a snow fence or trap, and secondarily to prevent sun-induced desiccation of frozen foliage. If there's no snow below-zero temperatures can be fatal. It's the snow that insulates, not the layer of foliage.

The carpenter, of a more practical bent, will start to cut out as much of the blackened stems as possible in the hope, however faint, of eventual recovery, but will undoubtedly reach the practical conclusion one can not wait too long without prejudicing the success of needed replacements. From previous years, he will note that while these heavily pruned plants survive, they look ungainly and have lost vigor.

As noted, gardens in the far north, like The Fells in New Hampshire and mine in Vermont had varying damage, but what there was was severe, especially to the crown of the plant. If it showed any greenery, it was like a monk's tonsure. Four plants overgrown with tall grasses came through unscathed, while their sibling exposed on a little hillock was badly burnt. In beds the outside plants did best, especially if on the north side, suggesting frost and sun had done the damage.

The most exposed plants on The Fells' knoll suffered worst this past year. None of the heathers were covered. A group of three became doughnuts after the blackened interiors were cut out. Bill Dowley suggested digging out the heathers, deepening the holes and dropping the heathers back in so only the foliage tips showed. This is an old standard technique used in UK nurseries to propagate stock. We dug out a heather, deepened the hole (which took much more effort than expected) and replanted the heather 6" to 9" deeper than before. The edges of the hole compressed the branches so that the end result was a vanished doughnut, and a vast improvement in appearance.

With so much dirt left over it was a fairly easy decision to add the dirt to the center of heather No.2 to cover up the black stems. It was still a doughnut, but a large flat rock on top of the dirt added an aesthetic touch and should stop the dirt washing away before the stems have a chance to root.

The real genius came in deciding the fate of heather No.3. With a dazzling

Continued on page 6

## The Time Has Come...continued from page 5

flash came the idea to leave it untouched and use it as a control. So much easier than digging another hole.

As for the other damaged heathers, they will have to await their fate, to see if a response to severe pruning will regenerate the foliage that all plants need if they are to survive.

Bill Dowley suggests extra heavy watering. I plump for fertilizing as a measure of desperation, even though both Bill and I think that fertilizing the new Fells heathers when they were planted a few years ago may have contributed to their susceptibility to this last year's snowless winter.

Another good reason for a large turnout at next year's pruning session at The Fells. What worked best with the doughnuts? Dropping them? Covering with dirt? Or just letting nature take its course?

And yet in spite of all the speculation I have made about possible causes of blackened foliage I feel I am missing something obvious. Something like old age or brittle bones or tired blood. The cemetery heathers, the biggest puzzle, are 33 years old and are senescent but not decadent. What they do show is the result of incessant pruning to keep them in bounds, like the old Fells' heathers that were killed off so suddenly in the cold snowless winter of 2006. The annual pruning we started in 1995 may have increased the susceptibility to below-zero cold, bright sun and biting winds. A disturbing thought.

What I found in pruning of the cemetery heathers was that their interior was a tangle mass of gnarled, twisted and deformed stems mostly bare of old foliage. Which indicates the lush green of the new growth that pruning causes was just a dense cap or canopy - only an inch or so thick - spread evenly over the densely wooden interior. It is, in a sense, the result of topiary.

These suggestions, served up like courses at a Barmecide feast, I fear are likely to have as little substance to them, but perhaps a few crumbs of truth may have fallen from the table. Your comments are invited.

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### **NEHS 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](http://www.northeastheathersociety.org)

### **Regional Heather Growing Guide**

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](mailto:wdowley@ne.rr.com) for information.



The Fells winter damage

2013/05/05



Drop layering at The Fells

2013/05/05



Calluna H.E. Beale prior to 2012 winter—The Fells



Winter Devastation

Calluna H.E. Beale winter devastation before trimming—The Fells



Drop layering Matwey isle bed of heathers. Lots more room for new heathers



Lasdon Heather presentation attendees

07/23/2012



Lasdon Heather Collection

07/23/2012

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*The purpose* of the Northeast Heather Society is to foster interest in growing heathers (*Calluna, Erica, Daboecia, Cassiope, Phyllocladus* 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.

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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

