



A Glimmer of Hope - With Your Help

By Jane Murphy

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Paul and I began our heather nursery in 2007. We began propagating our plants from cuttings and kept them under misters in our unheated greenhouse; we learned this method at an NEHS clinic many years ago. The results were never very good. Some years we had better success than others, but usually only a third of the cuttings rooted. It would have helped had one of us worked in the industry before we started our nursery business. We would have known the fundamentals of a difficult business. Only novices could have had the learning experience the last nine years provided.

We needed to have a better success rate to stay in the business of selling heather, so we converted an old cinderblock garage into a propagation shed by adding heat, clear panel roofing on one side to let in sunlight, and a misting system. We also found several wholesale growers on the east coast where we could purchase heather to fill in the holes in our inventory. We had better success growing cuttings in our prop shed, but we have always had to supplement our inventory by purchasing heather

from wholesale growers. Over the years we've tinkered with many of the aspects of our propagating process - modifying the cutting medium, increasing/decreasing heat, fertilizing, adding bottom heat, adjusting misting cycles,. We never really hit on the right combination to consistently produce a high percentage of rooted cuttings. What appeared to be the answer one season, failed miserably the next season.

As we were 'tinkering' with our propagation methods, we started noting that our sources for heather were disappearing. Every year, some wholesalers went out of business or stopped growing heather. Other wholesalers offered fewer and fewer cultivars every year. By 2014, there were cultivars that weren't available anywhere. We were very disturbed by this. We were also hearing from customers and NEHS members that they were having the same problem. Retail nurseries were carrying fewer and fewer cultivars. They could not find their favorite heather plants anywhere. Our major concern, reinforced by our customers and NEHS members, was that some heather cultivars might disappear as no one was propagating them.

Once again in the fall of 2015 we started our cuttings in our prop shed. Once again, we weren't having much success. Paul, being the curious person that he is, started doing a lot research. He pored over the 'The reference Manual of Woody Plant Propagation' by Dirr and Heuser, had several conversations about propagating with Bill Dowley, and spent many hours on the internet. Digesting all that he'd learned from these sources, he developed a plan for heather propagation trials. The first step was installing LED grow lights to supplement the natural light. Then we took cuttings from five different cultivars and stuck them in two different mediums. We also adjusted bottom heat and misting cycles. The results were encourag-

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**2016 NAHS Conference,Heathers in the Redwoods
Aug. 10-13, 2016**

Go to the conference website "heathersHERE.org" for registration forms, contact information and all of the details about the Conference.

Fort Tryon 2016
By Bill Dowley

Prior to Saturday, April 9th - the heather Gods did not appear to be giving us any break in the nasty weather the northeast had been having for the previous 2 weeks. Forecast - cold (41 F), wet (100% chance of rain), chance of snow. However the chances of getting such an elite group of heather enthusiast for a later weekend was dim so we took a chance the rain and snow would hold off several hours to allow us to trim the Heather Garden at Fort Tryon, just north of the George Washington Bridge overlooking the Hudson River. Lady Luck dealt us a Full House and the rain and snow held off until we had completed our task and were having lunch in the historic Head Gardeners Cottage at Fort Tryon. The group of Donald, Ellie, Paul, Jane, Pete, Mary, Suzanne, Frank, Pat, Elaine, Vicki and Bill completed the task in several hours. The Callunas looked quite good, perhaps as good as ever given the relatively mild winter and mild March weather. Many of the Ericas had completed their bloom cycle and were on the downside of looking really sharp. We noted quite a few of the Erica x darleyensis had split stems and needed quite a bit of repair work. We have recommended to the Ft. Tyron staff to consider replacing with Erica Carnea on their next order spree. Given the reduction in the number of heather offerings at Sylvan Nursery, this is getting to be quite an issue on the East Coast. Should anyone be in the area of NYC in late July / early August - this should be quite a good year to view one of the nicest and largest displays of Calluna vulgaris on the East Coast.

In addition to trimming the heather this year, we offered a seminar to the people of New York on how to propagate heather cuttings. We had 40 - 50 people show up with heather cuttings in hand to see exactly how this procedure is accomplished. With luck, many of these people should have their 4" pot of rooted cuttings started by the time you receive your Heather News.



Regional Report - Edge of Zone 5-6, Concord, MA, By Priscilla Williams

Early April

Removed boughs but left pine needle mulch on all heaths and heathers in my care this past week, just in case of prolonged cold. No trimming yet around here

Mid April

Warmer and rain expected tomorrow, the heather can rest beneath their pine needles. Snow amounted to about 5" and is melting slowly, although it was 11 degrees here this morning!

Early June

Everything has done very well. The caution in April paid off. We took off the pine needle mulch over a two week period. When it finally warmed up in mid-April, it all had been removed. It was a banner year for heath bloom! They came out of the winter mulch already blooming and continued for the next six weeks. Heathers look promising for summer color. Some minor dieback to trim out when the mulch was removed, but all have pushed out wonderful new growth.

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ing. Cuttings rooted in both mediums under the grow lights, but one medium produced a greater number of cuttings with more vigorous root growth. Finally, we felt we were on the right track.

We decided to try a large scale experiment. We stuck more cuttings in mid-April 2016, filling 14 trays with cuttings from 47 cultivars in the medium that previously produced the better results. We didn't change any of the other variables from the previous experiment. The results were beyond our expectations. In eight weeks, we saw vigorous root and foliage growth in a large majority of the cuttings. We think we've finally found the right combination of propagating variables to consistently produce rooted cuttings. We'll see how they do now that they been potted up and moved to our greenhouse.

Our glimmer of hope is that now we won't have to rely on the dwindling number of heather growers to maintain our heather inventory. We also hope that now we'll be able to grow the cultivars that are no longer available in the trade.

We have a proposal for our NEHS members:

If there is a cultivar(s) that you cannot find, contact us. If we have them, we'll propagate more of them based on demand. If you have a cultivar in your gardens that you want us to propagate, let us know. If we don't have it, we'll ask you to send sprigs when we're ready to stick cuttings. This is not going to be a quick process as it takes 1.5 to 2 years to grow a plant into a 4 inch pot. If you are willing to let us know which cultivars are dear to your heart we'll do our best to grow them for you. Our contact information is in the Directory below.

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President's Message - Spring 2016

Had I been better organized, I'd have had a calendar of the last three months to document days that were 40 degrees (F) warmer than they should have been or 40 degrees colder than expected, even for a night in January. But I wasn't, and so I have to depend on group recollections of a winter of wildly fluctuating temperatures during a remarkably short period when snow lay thick enough on the ground to provide an insulating blanket for our heathers. Even spring has played a trick by generating three new snow storms the week after a warm period convinced me that winter protection of evergreen boughs was no longer necessary.

This message also confirms your Editor's dire prognostication that the Spring issue of Heather Notes has degenerated into a catalog of winter-time disaster, so similar each year that not only could they be dispensed with, but the paper pages of Heather Notes that contain them. However, electronic publication may be possible for just the Spring Issue.

For this reason the Board Meeting at Fort Tryon on April 9 will have on its agenda a proposal to discontinue the spring issue of Heather Notes and move to a three-issue per year schedule. This move cannot be taken lightly - four issues per year are specified in our By-Laws - and there should be enough deep and heavy thinkers among you to realize that the Spring Issue does not have to be an extended weather report if enough NEHS members would turn their thoughts - and pens - to descriptions of the more cheerful parts of the heather experience.

So it's up to you.

Donald Mackay

President's Message - May 2016

As members age, retire, and alas often move away, the burden of maintaining, and especially annual pruning of the Heather Gardens we have volunteered to look after grows steadily more demanding of our time and energy. Accordingly, I make an appeal for volunteer help at those heather gardens where we have assumed some obligation to promote and benefit them from our skills and experience.

This appeal is made as strongly as the printed page will bear, or computer linkages can stand without overheating. It is not yet up to the hysterical level of impending disaster, but we as a society should look ahead and prepare for an influx of new blood and new energy. Your help will be much appreciated.

Look at the appended list and see if there is a garden within easy reach. Don't pay too much attention to the dates. Your attendance as a solitary volunteer can mean as much to the garden (but not to us) as attendance in our group pruning effort.

A list all the heather gardens and locations and the approximate yearly trimming dates follows.

Typical Yearly Trimming Dates for Heather Gardens

Pick a Heather Garden near you and keep the time Open

Check website: www.northeastheathersociety.org

Fort Tryon	Early April	Manhattan, NY
Lasdon Arboretum Heather	Early to Mid-April	Katoneh, NY
Heritage Garden.....	Late April	Sandwich ,MA
The Fells	Early May	Newbury, NH

Although the Heather trimming in the above gardens is done, there is always weeding or some cleanup that needs attention. I'm sure the garden staff at any of these NEHS supported gardens would welcome your help and would be impressed by the interest you are showing.

Pruning at The Fells

by Donald Mackay

On a beautiful day in May four members of the NEHS met at The Fells, Lake Sunapee, NH. Due probably to a scheduling mix-up, there was no local group to learn about or help with the pruning, but luckily the four of us were armed with three lithium battery-powered shears that got the job done in good time.

The shears could not help with the outer fringe of browned, dried-out heathers, mainly in the eastern side of the heather garden, since they pulled out surprisingly easily by hand alone. Sometimes the main stem broke off at ground level - gnawing marks were clearly visible - but more often the heather came out with a plate of recumbent branches that had shallowly rooted in the accumulated duff. There appeared to be no root ball corresponding to that of a normal heather plant being planted. Perhaps it broke off, or perhaps never existed as a connection to Mother Earth.



Most damage was in the eastern half of the bed, that section which had previously withstood the heavy winter destruction of a few years ago, which had resulted in the western half being almost totally replanted. At that time the shallow rooting of the remaining heathers in the somewhat better wind-sheltered section of the bed had been noted, and put down to what had appeared to be weed-preventing agricultural cloth that had got covered with a 4" layer of duff over the years, ideal for self-layering of the old recumbent branches, and perhaps effective in preventing heather roots advancing into the soil beneath. This time the agricultural cloth was not evident, but the self-layering effect was clearly obvious. Wild heathers in Scotland could always be trusted for secure handholds on steep, even rocky faces, but not these.

Probably twenty dead heathers were pulled from

the fringes, with perhaps another ten scattered throughout the garden. Obviously it was a very bad winter for the heathers, likely due to this past year's wildly variable snow cover and periods of extreme frost when the snow cover was least.

The garden looked vastly better for its pruning, and one can only hope the funds will be found for plants to fill in the gaps which are not yet unsightly, but may become so. The gaps are more noticeable in the fairly recently planted western sections. Perhaps the new cultivars cannot stand up to the cold winters the way the older standard cultivars did.



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

Dear Doctor,

Help! I trimmed my heathers in March and was satisfied that I didn't have too much damage. A month later after a freaky April cold spell I began to notice dead stems on some heather. What do you suggest as a recovery plan: remove dead stems, dig up and bury deeper or slash and burn method meaning replace with new plants?

The Crumble Test by Donald Mackay

It is not uncommon in these northern climes to find sad-looking heathers coming out of their winter doldrums. By sad I mean dull, dry-looking foliage with long-delayed signs of bright green new growth to show some life is still there. That's when the crumble test becomes important. Calluna, as we all know, does not allow new growth on the part of the stems that bore flowers. To avoid this bare area, which gets only more obvious as the years progress, we prune beneath it. But if the leaves on the stems at any point die and fall off they are very unlikely to be replaced. This means that the undesirable legginess becomes prominent on winter-damaged stems that have lost their leaves.

Sometimes the damage kills off the entire stem, but often, especially in years of poor snow cover, the branch sometimes survives as shown by a tip of new bright green growth, though the older leaves it bears become desiccated and brittle. That's when the crumble test comes in. Grasp a group of stems and clench them in your fist. Sometimes the leaves remain on the stem even when limp and dark green, but sometimes the hand fills with a mass of dry dead leaves.

If the leaves remain, just hope that the hormonal response to your normal pruning will bring fresh growth along the stem and bring new life to the limpid leaves (limpid I know does not mean limp - it means clear, or easily seen through, but I like the alliteration). If the leaves fall off you may have a dead branch which should be removed, and if still alive the beginning of showing more leg than decency permits. I think the bare branch - even with a tuft of new growth on it - should be cut back either to the ground or the place where there's still a sign of leafy life.

But be circumspect. You can't take off all or too many of the bare branches, especially if they are still alive, without risk to the plant. Better to keep the plant alive and try cuttings from the tufted growth on top if you would like to obtain some descendents.

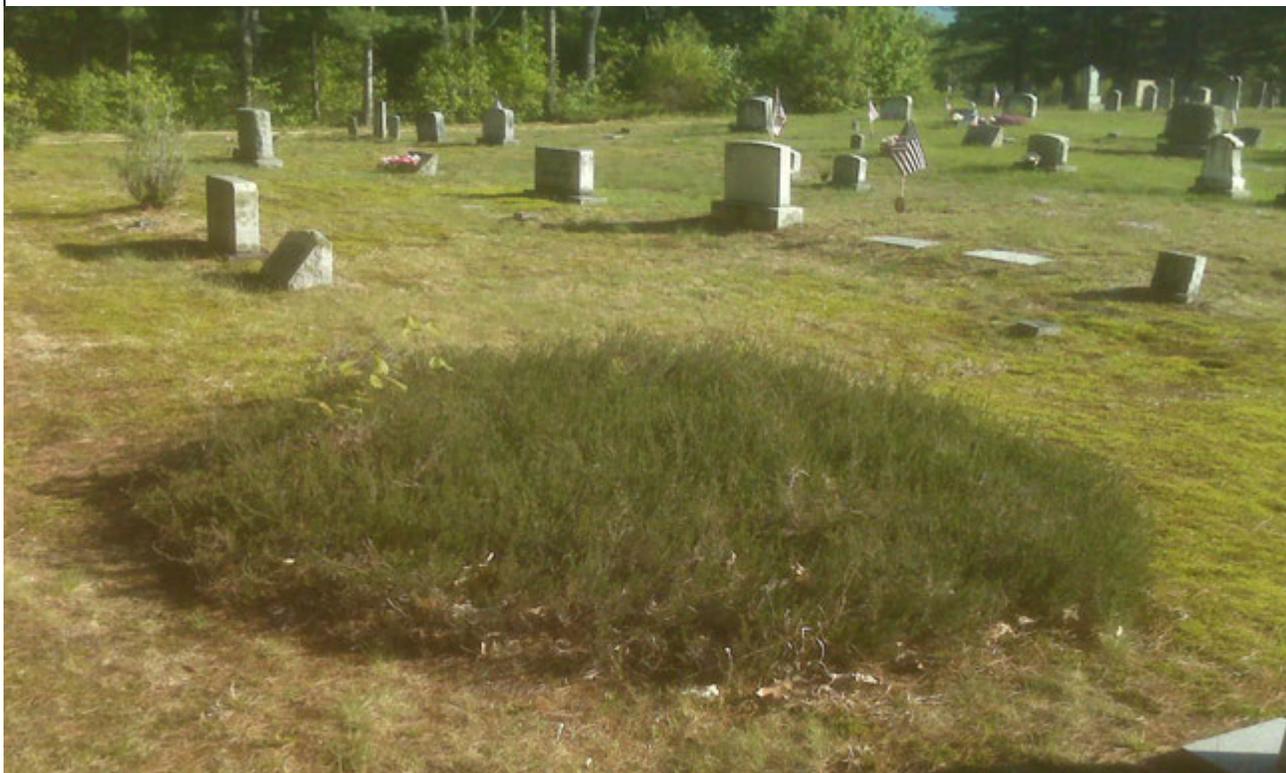
To finish on a cheerful note, I have two stories. One is that two of *Calluna vulgaris* 'Alba Elegans' on the outside of a south-facing bed in Vermont emerged in spring with more dead foliage than living, and large areas failed the crumble test. With unrealistic obsessive zeal I cut out suspect stems until I was left with a close resemblance to a very old brush or broom with half its bristles missing. It took a second year to give real encouragement, but today both heathers look fully recovered with no leggy stems. (See the Before and After photos on page 7.)

The second story involves wild heather in a maritime heath jutting out into the North Sea towards Norway. The heath is on a rocky promontory called Tarbert Ness with a lighthouse showing the way into Dornoch Firth, which separates Ross and Cromarty from Sutherland in the far north of Scotland. The heath is shared with *Armeria* thrift, prickly whins (gorse), lots of calluna and bell heather and crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*). I was there in January after a bitterly cold wind that must have started in Siberia and sprayed vast quantities of the North Sea over the heath which is just a few yards from the rocky shore.

On arriving I saw the most striking two-sided effect I have ever seen. The landward side of the calluna clumps was the usual green, the seaward side was jet black. The clumps of *Empetrum* were unaffected, the bell heather looked unhappy. I doubt whether a blow torch could have done a better job in scorching exactly half the calluna. There was no snow to hide the heather, nor ice present to cover the foliage. No gardener would tolerate such a plant in his garden. Yet a year and a half later the calluna (and the bell heather, too) looked as serenely happy as any plant could be with the sea lapping at its feet a few yards away.

So Mother Nature, given time, does look after its own. But a little help from you in getting rid of dead stems and crumbly foliage would doubtless be appreciated.

Oldest Continuous Patch of Heather ?



This photo may be of the oldest continuous patch of heather in New England. Used for packing material around the turn of the century and dumped in back corner of the Tuftonboro Town Cemetery. Need to speak with Uncle Bill at Spider Web Nursery for details. He told me about this patch of heather last year when I delivered to him. He was not at the nursery there today to speak to. As I recall, he is about 70 years old and the heather was dumped there by his grandfather. *Picture and Comments by Bill Dowley*

The Crumble Test

(article on page 6)

BEFORE



AFTER



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, Milton, DE. Tel. (603) 903-3017; wdowley@ne.rr.com

WEB INFORMATION: North American Heather Society website: www.northamericanheathersoc.org

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:

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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

