

## PREPARING FOR THE SHOW: EXHIBITORS

### “The Day Before the Show” by Ian McTaggart-Cowan

There is a lot of fun to be had in presenting some of your special alpine, rock, or dwarf woodland plants in our annual spring show. Here are a few ideas on preparing your treasures so that they will look their best. While it is the plant you are presenting, and you will certainly select the best specimen to represent your efforts, setting and presentation are important. Clean faces and hands, party clothes and shiny shoes are all part of going to the party.

There are three elements to readying your plants for the show: the container, the plant, and the dressing.

#### CONTAINERS:

You will have seen many types of pots and other plant containers in use at alpine shows. There are elegant hand made containers of false tufa, pots of cement, tubs of tree sections, clay pots of an array of sizes and styles but today black plastic pots outnumber all others.

With a few exceptions black plastic pots in which your plants may have come from the nursery garden are not considered appropriate for the show bench, but if you have a fine plant growing comfortably in a half gallon black plastic, no problem. The shunned half gallon will nest neatly into a 7 inch green plastic azalea pot. A scruffy one gallon black pot will be unrecognizable inside a nine inch standard clay pot with ground bark or moist peat filling the space between them. A suitable top dressing will complete the disguise and provide you with an elegantly presented specimen.

All pots must be scrupulously clean. I start with brushing off the soil or sand and complete the job with a quick wash. Some judges are fussy and even look at the bottom of the pot!

One of the problems with our standard plastic pots is that they deteriorate in the sun and go brittle. Then when you pick them up by the top edge they break or a piece comes away. Show time is no time to be repotting a beautiful plant in abundant bloom. The solution is to take a pair of pliers, or I use a pair of sturdy tin snips, and break away the top inch or so of the broken pot until the broken edge is about at the soil line. Slip your pot into a new one of the same size, top dress to cover the broken edge and all is well.

Clay pots have a snob appeal as well as real advantages for growing some alpines

but they can be troublesome to prepare for the show. They grow algae and embryo mosses on their damp outer surfaces and inside the rim. Often too, salts from the soil or from fertilizers fed to the plant will crystallize out on the surface of your pot. Some 10% hydrochloric acid, a pad of steel wool and rubber gloves will help you solve the problem. Wearing the gloves, use the steel wool to apply the acid to the area. In most cases the white crust comes off easily. The green algal scum can also be removed with the steel wool but no acid is needed.

#### NEXT THE PLANT:

The objective of grooming your plant is to remove all dead leaves, flowers, seed heads, twigs and debris. Victoria gardens are blessed with lots of the last, shed flowers from oaks, maples and arbutus: flowers and needles from firs, and what have you, that have burrowed into the recesses of your plant.

Cleaning your plants can be tedious if you are impatient but it gives you a face to face close up look at your plants from which you can learn many details. Place your subject at a convenient height, a small turntable or lazy susan can be useful, and go to work with a pair of medium 6 inch forceps and sharp pointed scissors. If you enjoy counting things, try it on the needles as you extract them one by one.

There are a few shortcuts: tip off the old top dressing and with it much of the loose debris. If the needles are dry, try floating them off.

Getting the fine needles out of the tight buns of some of the pygmy conifers is beyond my patience and I keep all these coniferous treasures in a cold frame covered with metal fly netting whenever the fibreglass top is off, as it is all summer.

I must admit that there are some grooming tasks that are not pure fun. Snipping last year's flowers one at a time from a large Cassiope or removing the clinging dead leaves of a sturdy *Primula marginata* is a bit of a chore but the plants look so much better after the tidying that it is worth the effort. If you have tried to groom your Primulas the night before the show you will develop a firm resolve that henceforth you will do it in January, before the new leaves are in the way.

#### TOP DRESSING:

can be the creative part of preparing a plant for the show bench. If you are in a hurry, forestry sand or fine water-washed gravel of 1/4 inch or less makes a tidy and attractive topping for many alpiners, as will ground bark mulch or peat for plants of woodland and fen.

However, it is interesting to use a top dressing that suggests the natural habitat of the plant. You can collect shale, limestone chips and crushed slate of a variety

of colours as you explore the backroads of the Island as well as rock chippings of different sizes and colours, small bark chips and so on. Then read up on the habitat of your plant and topdress accordingly.

Most alpine and rock plants occur in a variety of local settings and you can choose one that suits you. In [one] parlour show was a charming *Pinus pumila* dressed with its own needles - what could be more appropriate? Mate your knowledge with your imagination but avoid a contrived appearance. You will be surprised how much more delight you will get from your plants as an outcome of the detailed concern you have given them in those days before the show.