

1st June 2006

I can't believe my last Journal entry was the middle of October last year!

The summer saw some remarkable successes in the garden – also some dismal failures. The first success was the Astilbe bed at the edge of the large pond. Around Christmas time the plumes rose to around one metre in different shades of pink and the display was spectacular, particularly when the mid-afternoon sun shone through the spikes, creating a silvery glow.

The Magnolia 'Little Gem' hedge that flanks the path to the back gate has doubled in size from last year. The hedge is thickening up nicely, forming a soft 'wall' to block the full view of the rear garden to the casual passerby, and concentrating a 'doorway' opening that frames the large stoneware pot planted with Cornus florida 'Cherokee Chief'. Dwarf Agapanthus 'Snow ball' has been planted at the base of the Magnolia hedge, and it too has performed very well. It is ironic that I seem to be constantly removing Agapanthus plants from the garden, meanwhile hoping the dwarf Agapanthus multiply like mad. They certainly flowered like mad this year! Each plant probably held about a dozen short, stout, umbrels of white flowers, creating quite a display.

To add balance to this entry I must mention the failures. The most notable of these has been my species Rhododendron border, which is perhaps the most difficult bed in the entire garden to work. The bed itself is sloping, it has one of the largest, oldest Rhododendrons in the garden as its centrepiece and it is surrounded by mature trees such as Cedar, Liquidambar, Cupressus and not to forget a thirty metre tall adolescent Sequoiadendron. Shading makes this area rather dark, which along with the root mat makes any cultivation of the area difficult and it becomes a trial for any young plants trying to establish themselves. I have lost three of my species Rhododendrons and the balance of them are just surviving. I am not sure what I will do with this space ultimately - for now I can only keep the area well mulched, watered when I am allowed and fertilised as best I can with two dogs. Like most dogs, they go into an absolute frenzy at the first whiff of cow manure or blood & bone - I swear they would even eat Osmocote if it smelt better!

Before I talk about autumn, I must mention the bulb order – no Tulips this year. I have kept the order rather traditional, and concentrated on Daffodils for the front lawn and Dutch Iris for accent planting in the flower beds. I also ordered 'Refracta Alba' Freesias for under the trees near the front steps, and some Dog-tooth violets to extend the display in the Winter Border. Daffodils are always exciting purchases, with so many variations and colour ways available - I am really looking forward to the front garden lighting up this spring.

Lighting up would be a fitting description for the autumn livery of Leura this year. Peak time was later than it had been in the previous two years, when the autumn foliage peaked around Easter. The changes in the trees seemed to stretch over a much longer period this year, with the vibrant colour of the trees in Leura seeming to spread over the entire month of May. The trees in my garden finally dropped the last of their leaves last week, after a windy, rainy night, putting a rather unceremonious end to the vibrant colour of the previous weeks. As I write this, I am feeling the winter chill in the air, and the garden has been mulched and put to bed (so to speak).

For the next couple of months I will look to the Winter Border outside my **office window for joy and inspiration. The winter Iris has started flowering, the Cyclamen are adding some well-needed colour, the buds of the Witch hazel are plumping up nicely and the yellow stems of the Cornus are becoming brighter by the day. The Daphne is budded and will soon break forth with its heady sweet perfume and the Chieranthus and Hellebores will soon be coming into their own.**

There is something rather vital about winter in the mountains – it really makes you feel like you're alive!