



The Trillium

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Piedmont Chapter
North American Rock Garden Society
Chapel Hill, Durham, Raleigh, NC

John L. Creech: A Giant in Plant Exploration

By Leah Chester-Davis

John L. Creech, a young man of 27, already had an amazing life story to tell when he picked up a copy of *The National Horticultural Magazine* (now *The American Gardener*) in the University of Massachusetts library in the spring of 1947. An article about plant explorers with the U.S. Office of Foreign Plant Exploration and Introduction drew him in and by the time he had finished reading it, he knew what he wanted to do with his life's work. The "tenor and seriousness of the magazine," John said, set the direction for his professional career and changed the course of his life. It also resulted in this country and the world being gifted with one of the greatest American plant collectors of the 20th Century, a person who made numerous contributions to the world of horticulture and beyond.

Just a few years earlier, in World War II, John had been captured in North Africa by Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps and sent to the German-run OFLAG 64 prisoner of war camp in the far reaches of Poland. The site was a former boys' school. John, a recent horticulture graduate from the University of Rhode Island, discovered an unused greenhouse that would become his salvation when it came to his spirit, sanity and physical well-being for close to two years. It would also be the salvation of his fellow POWs since the garden John raised would help feed the men. He earned the nickname "Carrots Creech."

One fellow prisoner, Clarence Ferguson, wrote that "John Creech in his quiet, unselfish, industrious way brought comfort, food and beauty under the most difficult circumstances to more than 1,500 POWs in their time of depraved imprisonment without hint of self-acclaim or public recognition." For his gardening efforts he won a Bronze Star, which, to John, trumped the Silver Star he also was awarded for gallantry in action.

Plant Hunting and Breeding

After joining the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of Foreign Plant Exploration, John completed a doctorate in botany from the University of Maryland and established himself as an authority on propagating and breeding ornamental plants. During the course of his 33-year career with USDA, he conducted 10 plant explorations (some in cooperation with Longwood Gardens and National Geographic) to Japan, Russia, Nepal, Taiwan and Yugoslavia to search for wild and cultivated ornamental trees and shrubs.

The fruits of his travels and plant breeding work were the hundreds of plants he introduced into cultivation. Among the most notable are *Lagerstroemia fauriei*, *Aucuba japonica* var. *borealis*, *Camellia lutchuensis*, *Euonymus fortunei* 'Longwood', *Euonymus* 'Greenspire', *Juniperus conferta* 'Emerald Sea', *Osmanthus heterophyllus* 'Gulf tide', *Rhododendron* 'Ben Morrison',



John Creech standing by *Lagerstroemia fauriei*
at the JC Raulston Arboretum

Photos from the JC Raulston Arboretum

Rhododendron 'Mrs. LBJ', *Loropetalum chinense* var. *rubrum* 'Burgandy' and 'Blush', *Deutzia gracilis* 'Nikko', *Cotoneaster* 'Green Cushion' and *Chrysanthemum pacificum* Though he did not collect the seeds, he named the 'Bradford' pear and, despite the plant falling in bad favor in recent years, he loved its history and the fact numerous nurserymen credited him for helping them put their children through college due to the popularity of the plant.

Rising swiftly through the USDA ranks, he became director of the USDA plant exploration office, and, eventually, he was named the third director of the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., a post he held from 1973 to 1980.



Photos from the JC Raulston Arboretum

Deutzia gracilis 'Nikko'



Deutzia gracilis 'Nikko'

Photo from Missouri Botanical Garden

A Consummate Professional

As Director of the National Arboretum, John oversaw the design and installation of the National Herb Garden. He worked with Japanese horticulturists to negotiate the gift of 53 bonsai and six viewing stones as a gift from the Japanese people in celebration of America's Bicentennial in 1976. The gift eventually resulted in the creation of National Bonsai and Penjing Museum.

According to Skip March, a former colleague of John's at the National Arboretum who accompanied John on plant explorations to Japan in 1976 and 1978, John always took a personal interest in

employees' lives and families. "He was a great inspiration and always very supportive," March says. March's wife, Marliese, recalled in a 2007 interview that John was "a man with much foresight and he always seemed to follow his dream. He always was very generous and he gave of himself. He appreciated the people around him and recognized them."

John was a member of many horticultural and scientific organizations. He played an active role with the American Horticultural Society (AHS) for many years, serving on the magazine's editorial committee, on the Board of Directors, and as president from 1953 to 1956. In retirement, he signed on for a second stint on the AHS magazine's editorial advisory board, which he served on until his death. He wrote many articles for a variety of publications, including *The Plantsman*, *The American Gardener* and *American Nurseryman*.

Over the course of his career, John won numerous prestigious awards. He is one of the few horticulturists to receive both the AHS's highest honor, the Liberty Hyde Bailey Medal (in 1989) and the Royal Horticultural Society's Gold Veitch Memorial Medal (in 1991). Among his other major awards were the Frank N. Meyer



Photo from PlantDelightsNursery.com

Sedum 'John Creech'



Sedum ' John Creech'

Photo from Nichegardens.com

Memorial Medal from the American Genetic Association, the Norman Jay Colman Award presented by the American Association of Nurserymen, the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta Award of Merit, the Azalea Society of America Distinguished Service Award and the Medal of Merit from the city of Kurume, Japan.



Retirement in North Carolina

After retiring to live in Hendersonville, North Carolina, in 1980, he introduced American nurserymen to the wonders of Japanese horticulture by leading them on tours to Japan. He also took great interest in supporting young horticulturists. He was instrumental in helping to establish the North Carolina Arboretum in Asheville and served as its interim part-time director. John helped select George Briggs as the arboretum's first full-time director in 1987. To Briggs, John was a "mentor, confidante and trusted advisor."

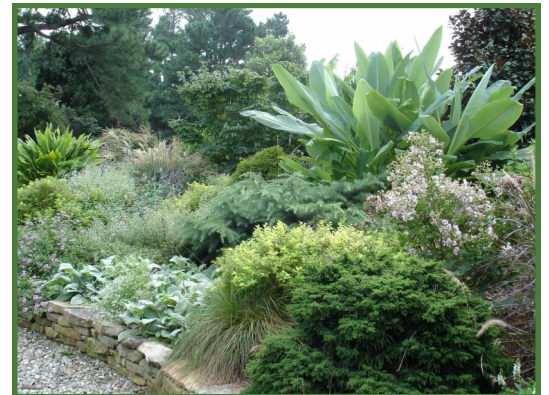
Briggs is one of many colleagues, acquaintances and friends who hold this view of John. He was a legendary figure in the world of horticulture, yet he remained a kind, gentle, unassuming soul. This "giant" who made his life's work in the plant hunting profession – which he called "the greatest game" – made contributions that continue to enhance our lives in countless ways. ♪

About the author: *Leah Chester-Davis is writing John Creech's biography and would appreciate hearing from anyone who knew John and was influenced by him. She can be reached at lchesterdavis@earthlink.net. This is an adaptation of an article, Copyright 2009, by Leah Chester-Davis that was first published in The American Gardener magazine, published by the American Horticultural Society (www.abs.org) as a tribute to Dr. Creech after his death in August 2009.*

Spring Picnic

May 17 5 pm—7:30 pm
4207 Oak Hill Road, Chapel Hill, 27514

Our annual potluck picnic will be at The Unique Plant Nursery and home of Joann Currier. You won't want to miss seeing this beautiful garden featuring stone works, a scree bed and hundreds of established plants in beds designed by Sebastian Hamilton and Joann.



Bring a dish to share and a folding chair. The chapter will provide beverages, plates, etc. As you stroll through the grounds, you will discover many unusual plants and be delighted with her remarkable collection of Japanese maples.

Directions available: theuniqueplant.com ♪



Add This Book to Your Gardening Library: *The Layered Garden, Design Lessons for Year-Round Beauty from Brandywine Cottage*

By Pam Beck

Occasionally a gardening book comes along that is attractive enough to become one of your favorite coffee table display books, yet filled with smart prose that is so inspiring, eloquent, and informative that you want to keep it conveniently handy. *The Layered Garden, Design Lessons for Year-Round Beauty from Brandywine Cottage*, by David L. Culp with Adam Levine, photographs by Rob Cardillo, Timber Press, © 2012, 312 pages, hardcover, ISBN978-1-60469-236-5, is one of those rare gems.

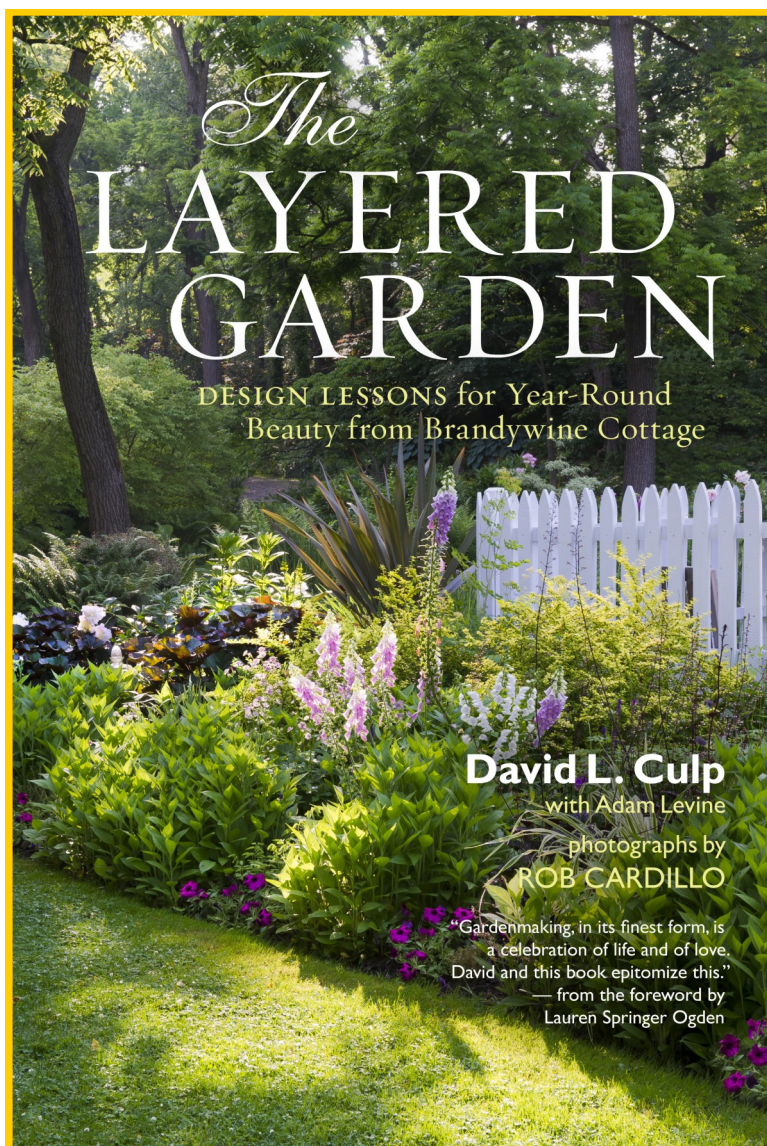
Beginning in February 1990, David Culp, with his partner, Michael Alderfer, began transforming a two-acre track of woods around a charming Pennsylvania cottage into a living lesson in patient gardening. Culp shares, “When I moved to Brandywine Cottage, I pretty much left the landscape as I found it...”, rather than clear-cutting, grading, and reshaping the land. He reasons that, “If I had made all of these alterations, chances are that the soil on the hillside would have eroded and the well, which was there and working, would have run dry. At the very least, the simple historic character of the property would have been irrevocably changed, and the wildlife the garden now harbors would have been far less diverse.”

Instead they started by cleaning up the property, allowing its rustic character to reveal itself gradually. Flat open sites became extensive perennial beds, allowing room for a small, tidy vegetable garden enclosed by a traditional white picket fence, and a gravel drive that showcases drought-tolerant plants.

Limbing up the healthy trees on the hillside to allow more light into the woods, Culp and Alderfer fashioned a true four-season landscape by layering this site with bulbs, wildflowers, shade-loving perennials, interesting shrubs, and complimentary understory trees.

The Ruin Garden has become their signature site. This space was created where an old stone walled barn had collapsed next to their house. Here, layered gardening involves containers and troughs filled with seasonally colorful plants that are always in the foreground because of the soft gray stone walls that enclose the area. “For anyone driving up the road looking for my garden, this scene lets them know that they have arrived. It also sets the stage for what will be found in the rest of the garden – beautiful combinations of unusual plants, with hardly a space left unplanted,” Culp writes.

And, what beautiful combinations they are, all captured in perfect light at their peak of glory by the extraordinarily talented photographer Rob Cardillo.





Cardillo's photographs have provided numerous views of every angle of the landscape throughout the year, each picture perfectly reinforcing the layered design principles and copious plants Culp discusses in the text. You might become more intimately familiar with this garden than you are with your own after studying these gorgeous pages, and you will recognize it from HGTV and *Martha Stewart Living*.

There are also luxurious plant profiles, such as a 10-page spread of photographs dedicated to snowdrops (*Galanthus*) shown just breaking through a sparkling blanket of snow, or with various blooms laying on a mossy rock after being collected for comparison, and shots peering upward from a mouse-eye level into a single pristine white and green bloom.

The marriage of Cardillo's masterful photographs with Culp's insightful writing makes this gardening book a true gift to yourself.

As David Culp asks the universal question, "When does spring begin?" he follows with a lyrical paragraph identifying all of the natural markers for this season. Culp ends his musings with "Even though I have seen more than fifty springs in my lifetime, when spring begins it always feels like love at first sight all over again. I feel the sap rising, the excitement of a world shaking off its dormancy and roaring back to life. In spring, a grown man's fancy turns to ...well, among other things, the garden."

Culp is a well-known herbaceous perennial expert, garden writer, and lecturer traveling throughout the county as a sales consultant and new plant researcher for Sunny Border Nurseries in Connecticut. He has contributed articles to *Country Living*, *Fine Gardening*, and *Green Scene*, and is a contributing editor for *Horticulture Magazine*.

Locally, David Culp will be lecturing about this book at the upcoming Davidson Horticultural Symposium at Davidson College in Cornelius, North Carolina on Tuesday, March 4th, 2014. Be sure to purchase a copy of *The Layered Garden* in time to have him autograph it. ❧

NARGS...and the Piedmont Chapter

by Chapter President Charlie Kidder

Those of you who are new to the Piedmont Chapter and perhaps even some who have been members for a while might wonder about our relationship to the national organization, the North American Rock Garden Society (NARGS).

NARGS is the umbrella organization for the approximately three dozen local chapters across the United States and Canada. I have to say "approximately", since in a recent message from the President, the NARGS website gives the number as 38. It's quite possible that I can't count well, but also chapters do come and go; currently two are listed as inactive. One may belong either to NARGS, a local chapter, or both.

The relationship between NARGS and the chapters is somewhat informal. There are very few rules that set forth what a chapter can, or cannot, do. Members' gardens are not inspected for rock garden purity, nor are their conversations monitored.

So, what are some reasons for joining NARGS if you are already a member of the Piedmont Chapter?

In no particular order of importance, one is that the \$30 annual dues provide a subscription to the *Rock Garden Quarterly*. This excellent publication comes to you in hard copy and is also available online. I enjoy the *Quarterly* for its excellent mix of how-to articles that can be applied to most gardens, as well as exploration/travel pieces that take you to remote natural "rock gardens" that few of us will be lucky enough ever to visit in person. And even though this is the *North American* Rock Garden Society, the *Quarterly* is edited by Malcolm McGregor of East Yorkshire, UK. Many NARGS members live outside North America but share an interest in all floras.

NARGS Annual General Meetings are held in various locations across the United States and Canada and are open only to members. Meetings generally span three days, not including any visits to private gardens or pre- and post-meeting field trips. Meetings feature renowned local speakers and experts on the regional flora. This year's meeting will be held August 28-30 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a beautiful part of the country.

Finally, NARGS members are able to participate in the Seed Exchange (SEDEX), in which participants swap seeds of many rare and unusual plants. Several thousand taxa are typically available through the exchange.

Membership in the Piedmont Chapter is certainly important, but also becoming a member of NARGS will broaden your horticultural horizons, both to plants as well as to the people who grow them. You can join online at www.nargs.org ❧



Plant Profile... By Mark Weathington

Local Grower

- Common name:** Indian Pink, Pinkroot
Botanical name: *Spigelia marilandica*
Family: Pinkroot (Spigeliaceae)
Category: Herbaceous perennial.
Primary uses: Shade gardens, hummingbird gardens, native woodlands.
Dimensions: 1 to 2 feet tall forming an upright clump.
Culture: Full sun to part shade. Pinkroot likes very rich soils and performs best when kept in a moist, well-drained spot with some protection from the afternoon sun. Spent flowers can be removed to increase the vigor of the clumps or it can be allowed to set seed which will germinate in the garden near the mother plants. Cut back flower stalks after all flowering has finished.
Bloom time: Late spring to summer.
Color: Ruby red on the outside, yellow inside
General attributes: Perhaps the most striking of any of our native perennials, pinkroot contrasts the hot colors of red and yellow on each flower. It dies to the ground in the winter but emerges early in spring with clumps of foliage topped by flowers in early summer which open from the bottom of the plant to the top for a long season of interest. This plant is beloved by both gardeners and hummingbirds which find the flowers irresistible.



Photo by Mark Weathington

Spigelia marilandica

Plant Profile... By Mark Weathington

- Common name:** Brazen Hussy Lesser Celandine
Botanical name: *Ranunculus ficaria* 'Brazen Hussy'
Family: Buttercup (Ranunculaceae)
Category: Herbaceous perennial
Primary uses: Shade gardens, stream edges, wood land rockeries, beneath deciduous shrubs.
Dimensions: 2 to 4 inches tall by 8 to 12 inches wide.
Culture: Light to full shade; lesser celandine prefers a moist, rich soil. The addition of compost on a yearly basis will keep this plant happy.
Bloom time: Spring.
Color: Gold.
General attributes: Brazen hussy lesser celandine is grown as much for its dark purplish-brown foliage as for its golden flowers. Easily grown in damp woodland conditions, this plant will usually go dormant after flowering in the spring. Brazen hussy is slow to increase even though some forms of *R. ficaria* can be invasive.



Phpto by Dave Duch

***Ranunculus ficaria* 'Brazen Hussy'**

Flowers (and more) in the Caucasus

By Kenton J. Seth



What on earth are the Caucasus? Being clueless then, they sounded to me a few years ago either a little reminiscent of historical racist agendas or of incomprehensible political processes. The real Caucasus are neither.

I'll have the massive pleasure of sharing with the widely reputed Piedmont Chapter a Crevice-Garden building demonstration and a lecture: "Lessons in Plant Hunting from the Caucasus" in March. It's been three years since I was there, but in the interim, what I've learned from rock gardening presents me new epiphanies and surprises when I revisit my notes and pictures from that year.

Of the thousands (literally) of mountain ranges in the world, (There are nearly 300 in Nevada, USA alone), there are a few reasons the Caucasus are important to us plant nerds in Temperate climes. When I was completely green to rock gardening, I threw hazard to the wind and booked a one-way flight to Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia in the middle of the real and post-USSR Cascaia. (Is it Asia? Or is it Europe?) Encouraged by an e-mail friend and authoritative tulip collector in Armenia, I set out to see the Caucasus ranges and their plants in Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey, which include both the "Great-" and the "Lesser-" Caucasus. I also had the incredible fortune in Georgia- a point--turner in my life- of running into a bus full of European gardeners who would turn out to be authors of favourite rock gardening books, articles, and distributors of plants. I was a fly on the bus-window among some of the most influential gardeners of our time! It can be intimidating to be a fly.

Jānis Rukšāns, author of "Buried Treasures" from Timber Press, and more recently, the monographical "Crocus: A Complete Guide to the Genus", was present, and from him I learned how to



Photo by Kenton J. Seth

The Greater Caucasus

find Crocus, in leaf and without flowers, within turf grass. (subspecies of which he was hunting at the time in thorough preparation of the book) It is less like seeking a needle in a haystack than seeking a special blade of hay in a haystack, but totally possible! The late Jim Archibald was also present, and I was a disservice of company not to have known at the time the width and length of his contributions to the whole horticulture world. (See the Chapter on him and his wife in your Mr. Ward's book "The Plant Hunter's Garden".) Also in tow were a



Moltkia caerulea

Photo by Kenton J. Seth

great Galanthophile, an Oncocylcus Iris specialist-hobbyist, a trio of Fritillaria experts, and one of the Sweden's most active and famous botanical gardeners.



Saxifrages growing on basalt near Kasbek

In the rain shadows exists the Caucasian steppes. The very word "steppe" comes from Russian. These areas harbor the cold mountain-growing (as opposed to the middle-eastern, warmer, and nearer to desert) species of Onco Iris. So many of our best garden plants also come from here- the ubiquitous catmint *Nepeta*, where poppies (various genera in *Papaveraceae*) savor the thin and disturbed soils like they are Penstemons in America. I began to write a list of just genera common and diverse to the steppe, and stopped when I realised it would take a whole paragraph- just genera alone! The Caucasian Steppe is just ridiculous with biodiversity important to us gardeners.

Mountain slopes are the original homeland of gardener's long-loved *Scabiosa*, *Dianthus*, and *Campanula*. This is where those classics come from, and I could not help but genuflect when I would first run into such a com-

Photo by Kenton J. Seth

Many of us recognise the word "Caucasus" from seed lists and plant descriptions— many important rock-garden (most fun "*Campanula*" spp.) and traditional garden plants (*Scabiosa caucasica*) originate there. So many are well-suited, and some are deeply challenging to grow. Some are downright rare, some are downright weeds. What exists in the Caucasus is an accessible region (mostly...) of rich and breath-taking nature: a temperate ecology which offers all sorts of mind-blowing natural illustrations of plants interacting with their environments, providing intellectual lessons and spiritual inspiration for gardening.

As with any mountain range, the geology splits the sky and her elemental forces to puddle resources and weather into different climates, and the Caucasus presents semi-desert and steppe all the way to wet forests and alpine. The highest peak in Europe (not a terribly strong geological noun) is Mt. Elbrus in the middle of the Great Caucasus, clothed in permanent snow just as is the well-known Mt. Ararat, which is loosely part of the Lesser Caucasus. The main range is like a noble intermediary pinched between the moist forces of the Black and Caspian Seas, deflecting and trapping their influences in folds of its coats.



Fritillera callena

Photo by Kenton J. Seth



Photo by Kenton J. Seth

Gentian verna angulosa

sands of years of traditional farming and cattle herding has changed but not obliterated biodiversity that "modern" farming and ranching do. Wildly enough, it has "helped" it, if we can allow a anthropogenically-imposed value on biological change. Essentially, folks cut down most of the trees and let cattle to graze the herbaceous flora, which increased the sunny acreage for these forbs, (including bulbs) as well as favoured the success and development of spiny browser-proof plants like our beloved Acantholimons, even forming a whole new ecology called the Tragacath community, named for its spiny milkvetch shrubs (akin to the Western USA sagebrush communities). We should also be thankful to the soils of the Caucasus for harbouring some of the few remaining natural stands of the original source of wild grains (i.e., Wheat!) which are a survival staple of most occidental dwellers of this planet.

I hope to offer to the Piedmont Chapter some insight into the habitat and the plants of the Caucasus as encouragement to grow more of them in our gardens and fill in some details behind that word on plant-labels as to justify what makes this place special in the plant world, and what it looks like to be a human there. ☞

Kenton J. Seth is a landscaper/gardener/wild-plant-fiend in Colorado, USA, who specialises in desert natives and builds crevice gardens professionally. Bulbs were his "gateway drug" to rock gardening, and expecting to be permanently tied down soon to the green industry, he went traveling to see botanic gardens (including and especially British Columbia) and his favourite foreign wild plants, which only made the plant-sickness worse; he has contributed a few novice articles to the NARGS Quarterly. Presently, he is working hard on his quality of growing-on and success with rarities to try to catch up to his horticulture heroes who have been making gardens more colourful, useful places and have been so generous to us all.

mon garden plant- but here- a wild and colorful king, on a tussle-throne, of a grassy slope of literally 45 degrees overlooking miles of wild mountains.

The Caucasian alpine, like most above treeline, share species with many of the ranges of the world, but this has not excluded the surprising amount of endemics which appear at this elevated meeting-place of the world's major continents. Here, more Campanulas squeeze through cracks in rocks with a range of species that has kept taxonomists busy and arguing for centuries, and *Galanthus alpinus* bloom to the melting snow between Caucasian variants of the classic European Gentians (i.e., *Gentiana verna ssp. angulosa*), and the Saxifrages claim their crevice-territory like dukes of unapproachably-placed cliff-castles.

To complicate everything (isn't it delicious?) already so naturally convoluted, mankind has left a long-term and ecologically fascinating impression on the place- (some of the oldest churches on the planet are in Armenia) that literally thou-

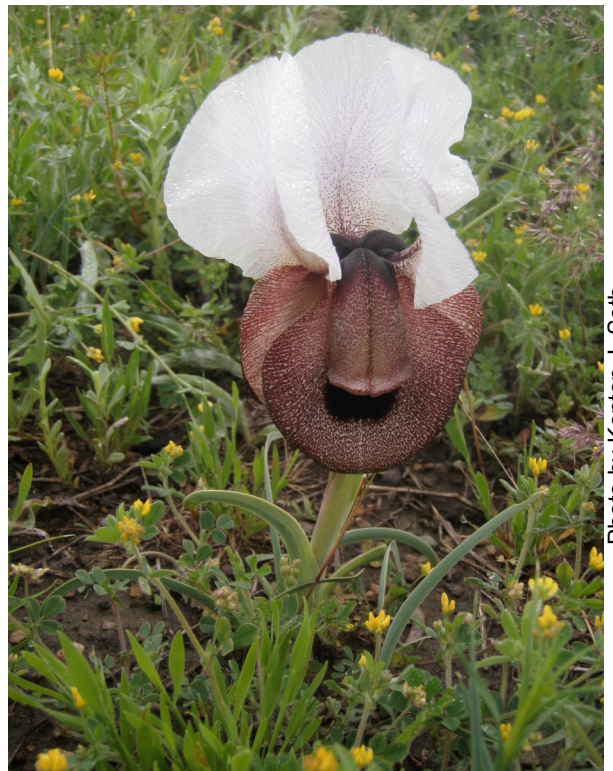


Photo by Kenton J. Seth

Iberica elegantissima



NARGS Piedmont Chapter Meeting

JC Raulston Arboretum
Ruby McSwain Education Building

Mar. 15, 2014—Kenton J. Seth
Grand Junction, CO

"Lessons in Plant Hunting
from the Caucasus"

& "Crevice Garden Demonstration"
Free to Piedmont Chapter members

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Sept. Plant Sale Manager: Kirtley Cox

Refreshments: Gwen and Maurice Farrier

The Trillium, Newsletter of the Piedmont Chapter
The North American Rock Garden Society
1422 Lake Pine Drive, Cary, NC 27511

Place
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First Class Mail

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Food Goodies to Share

If your last name begins with the letter below,
please consider bringing something to share.

March: U-W April: Any and all

Upcoming Attractions

April 19, 2014—Leah Chester-Davis
Davidson, NC.

"The Horticultural Legacy of John L. Creech"
NCSU Extension Communication Specialist

Lasting Impressions' 8th Annual Open Garden, Art & Plant Sale

Saturday, April 19, 2014, 9am-4pm
4904 Hermitage Dr., Raleigh, NC 27612

Returning and new local artists showing jewelry, pottery,
botanical drawing, metal art, and more.

There will be lots of plants, native wildflowers, perennials,
groundcovers and conifers.

Join us and welcome spring!!