

# ALASKA ROCK GARDEN SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER

VOL 28  
ISSUE 3

April 2024

## MEMBERSHIP MEETING

**Saturday, April 20, 1:00 PM**

**VIA ZOOM**

**Program: LESSONS FROM  
EXPERIENCE, Practical  
Advice for Avoiding  
Problems in the Rock  
Garden—Presented by  
ARGS Board Members**

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## From the President:

Much to my surprise, the sunshine on Sunday, April 7, 2024 was enough to trigger the first flowers of this Spring in my back yard. A whole patch of Crocus are in full bloom!

Today, Monday April 8, Eclipse Day for those on the other side of the continent, I received a large package of surplus seed leftover from the NARGS Seed Exchange.

The four week long zoom class on Rock Gardening for the OLÈ Program has gone well. It finishes up on Tuesday, 4/9/24, after which we will have four additional videos to figure out how to get onto our website. I'll be presenting my program on Rock Garden Construction to the Alaska Wildflower Garden Club on Thursday, April 11 at 10:30am at Central Lutheran Church, 1420 Cordova St, Anchorage. Then, on Saturday 4/20/24 we will have a zoom meeting about the things we have learned during the past 26 years; mistakes we have made and how to correct them, important considerations about soil, moisture, & fertilizer, plants to avoid or grow with caution, etc. May is coming like a freight train, and will include the plant sale and garden clean up at the Alaska Botanical Garden in Anchorage on Saturday, May 11 from 10:00am to 4:00pm, and in the Valley on Saturday, May 25 at Snowfire Gardens, 3379 Inlet Vista Circle, Wasilla. Rock Garden clean up at the Palmer Visitor's Center is yet to be scheduled, and will depend on how the thaw proceeds there. In the meantime, may your gardens have great survival, all your seeds germinate, and I look forward to seeing you soon. Happy gardening!

**Happy Gardening.  
Jaime Rodriguez**

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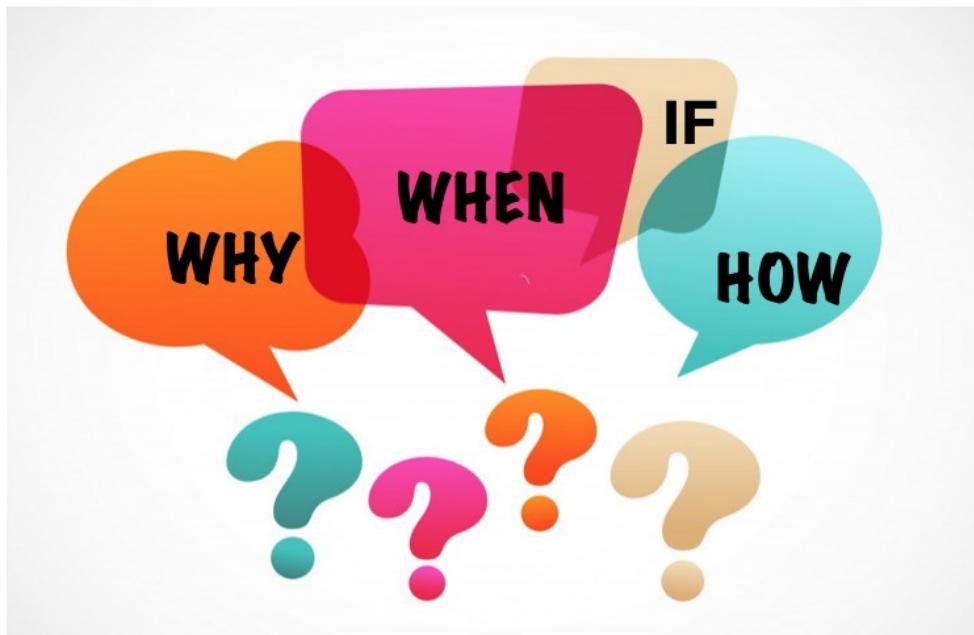
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# Join ARGS for our April Program, on ZOOM!

## LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

*PRACTICAL ADVICE for AVOIDING  
COMMON PROBLEMS IN THE ROCK GARDEN*



**Saturday, April 20, 2024, 1:00 p.m.**

**Alaska Rock Garden Society Zoom Program**

**Join the panel of experienced gardeners for a lively discussion of adaptations they've made to create beautiful rock gardens in Alaska.**

Jaime Rodriguez, Madge Oswald, Florene Carney, Kathy Swick, Bonnie Friedman



# Do you recognize this plant?



The mystery plant featured in this photo is growing in a pot. However, cultivation in Alaska of this native to the Dolomite Mountains has presented challenges that needed to be overcome. You can read about the natural history of this plant and the success ARGs Board member, Kathy Swick experienced beginning on Page 6 of this newsletter.

## Welcome new members:

### Joann Pfisterer

Please let us know your updated email address so we can stay in touch! Membership for the Alaska Rock Garden Society is for the calendar year. Renewal information can be obtained on the ARGs website at:

<https://www.akrockgardensociety.org/membership.html>

Annual memberships are just \$15 for individuals and \$20 for families. ARGs strongly encourages use of on-line renewals by eliminating surcharges for using your credit card.

### Thanks to all members who have renewed their membership for 2024!

If you know someone who may enjoy our club, please share sign up information or invite them as your guest to a club event.





# Alaska Rock Garden Society

## Spring Plant Sales May 11 & 25



**Saturday, May 11, 10am-4pm**  
at the Alaska Botanical Garden

**Saturday, May 25, 9am-4pm**  
at Snowfire Garden, Wasilla

**3379 S.Inlet Vista Circle (off Fairview Loop Rd )**

**Plants for rock gardens, troughs, and perennial borders, herbs, exotic plants, and tools.**



## ARGS Calendar of Activities and Meeting Dates for 2024

\*Society meetings are the third Saturday of the month. Dates for events and field trips are approximate and additional information will be sent to members.

**Saturday, January 20—General Membership Meeting, Jay Akerley, Rock Garden Microclimates — Sea to Sky**

**Saturday, February 17—General Membership Meeting, Marilyn Barker, Plants of the Bering Glacier region**

**Saturday, March 16 – General Membership Meeting, Jaime Rodriguez, Report on 2023 Seed Collecting Expedition to Mt. Healy, and Rob Staniland, Light Weight Trough Planters**

**Saturday, April 20 –General Membership Meeting, Panel Discussion “Coping With Challenges in the Rock Garden” - Presented by ARGS Board Members**

**Saturday, May 11**                    - Clean-up at ABG Rock Garden in Anchorage  
**May TBD**                    - Clean-up at Palmer Visitor Center Rock Garden  
**May 11**                    - ARGS Plant Sale at Alaska Botanical Garden  
**May 25**                    - ARGS Valley Plant Sale at Snowfire Gardens

**June Field Trip: Bird Creek, Turnagain Arm, Bog Plants**

**July Field Trip: April Bowl, Hatcher Pass, Bog Plants**

**July TBD Rock Garden Pop Up Visits**

**August Garden Art Fair in Palmer**

**Saturday, September 21 - General Membership Meeting - Plant Exchange and Social, Elks Hall, Eagle River**

**Saturday October 19 - General Membership Meeting - Nominations of Board Members**

**Saturday November 16 - General Membership Meeting - Elections of Board Members**

**No General Membership Meetings are held in December**



Both photos by Cliff Booker  
Falzarego Pass at Lagazuoi.

## Physoplexus Comosa, **Elusive Gem of the Dolomites**

### **Habitat, Oddities, Culture**

by Kathy Swick

In the garden this plant is a head-turning magnet because of its dramatic flowers. It is described as rare in its native habitat in the Dolomite Mts., which are also called the Dolomitic Alps, located in northeastern Italy on the border with Austria. This range has 18 peaks taller than 3000 meters (10,000+ ft), sheer cliffs and many narrow, deep, long valleys. Landslides, floods, and avalanches are common. *Physoplexus comosa* grows in crevices on vertical limestone cliffs from the subalpine up to 2000 meters (-6500 ft).

Its leaves are dark green, long, petiolate, strongly toothed, and form a loose basal rosette. Its overall height is 5-15 cm (2-6 inches) depending on whether it is in flower.

It has an extensive fleshy root system winding its way through the cracks in the cliff. Even though the soil is limestone crumbles and sand with very little humus, *Physoplexus comosa* prefers the shady, humid, moist environment that a tight crevice provides for its roots. It will not tolerate hot summers or low winter temperatures. It is rated as suitable from USDA zone 5 to zone 8. More on that when we discuss garden adaptations.



Its most unusual flowers deserve a closer look. Formally, they are called a clustered umbel, which means each part is an individual flower of its own.

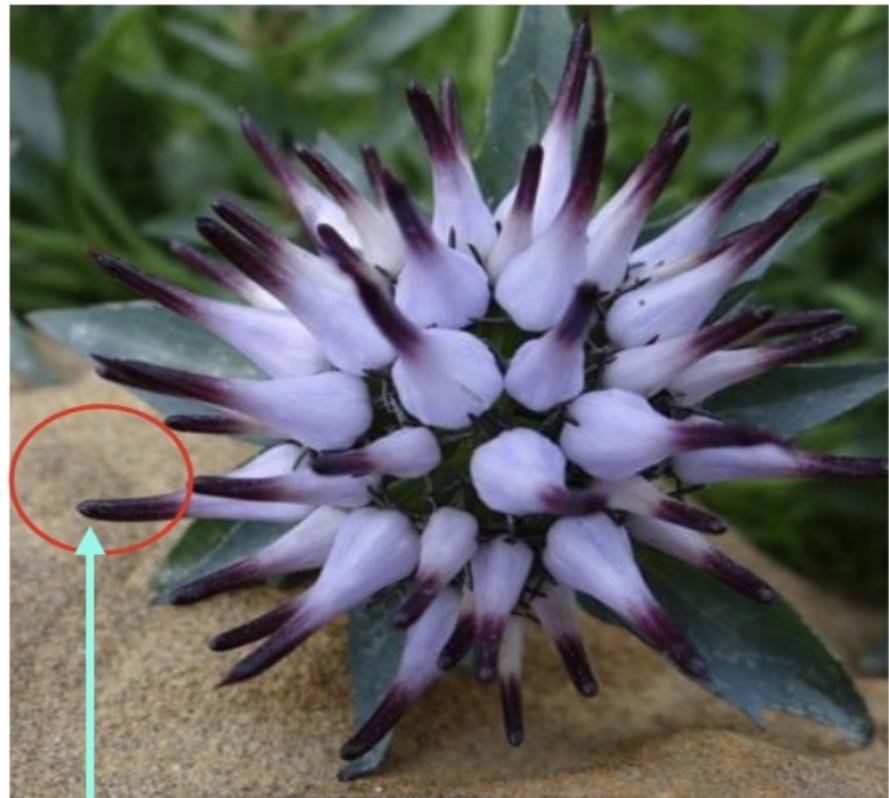
The petals of each flower are FUSED, creating the club-like or flask shape that you see in this photo of an immature flower. The base is usually lilac with an almost black-purple tip. Slightly lighter colored forms and a rare white form have been seen.

Here's where it gets strange—the reproductive parts of the plant are sealed inside this flask-shaped structure. All the male parts, the stamen and the pollen-bearing anthers remain that way.

But as the flower matures, the female parts of the flower start to push upward. The style, or tube, elongates first. Then a forked and twisted stigma, the pollen-receiving part, starts to spread upward and open. There is no way for the encased pollen at the base of the plant to come in contact with the stigma at the top, nor can a flying insect manage to get at the pollen either.

OHHHH, no wonder my plant has not produced a single seed in the twenty years I've had it! Yet, growers who live in other locales manage to get seed set, so what exactly is going on here?

I consulted a grower, Gene Mirro, by reading his article in the NARGS Quarterly Bulletin (Spring, 2009, 67:2) pp. 88-90. Mr. Mirro consulted two botanists from Italy, near the native habitat of this plant, when he encountered the same problem.





To quote him: "As the style elongates it also pushes outward against the anthers and the corolla (fused petals), and at this point some pollen can become 'pasted' onto the style and is transported out of the corolla with the developing and elongating style." Since the pollen is not mature when the style starts elongating, even if the stigma was open (which it is not at that point) it wouldn't get pollinated. He goes on to say "I suspect this plant shares its habitat with a highly specialized pollinating insect. I wouldn't be surprised if that insect is not found in North America. If you are serious about collecting seed, hand pollination is probably in order."

He further recommends using different clones to get healthier plants from seed and to avoid self-pollinating. He uses a small brush or rubs one potted plant's style against another's stigma. This must be done for several days in a row since there is no way to tell exactly when the pollen is ripe.



### **CULTIVATION IN ALASKA**

I acquired a plant in 2004 from the former Beaver Creek Nursery in British Columbia run by Roger Barlow, an incredible plantsman on whom many ARGS members relied. I was not very experienced at rock gardening then, but Roger always gave detailed information about plant origins and needs in his catalog descriptions. I must have paid attention because my plant ended up that summer at the base of a vertical crevice between two large rocks in soil that was similar to road shoulder—sandy, gritty, gravelly with decades of spruce needle decomposition to lighten and aerate it just a little. The rocks were not limestone however, having come from the usual Alaskan roadside salvage forays.

The plant slowly grew, thrived, and multiplied by offset. But it would only bloom every other year, like clockwork, which totally mystified me. Finally I re-read Roger Barlow's description and looked online to find that lime was a very big issue. I drizzled some powdered oyster shell between the rocks from the top of the crevice and washed it in, crossing my fingers. Around the same time my spruce trees were destroyed by beetles so the area got more sunlight and air circulation. Voila! It started blooming every year after that. I have read that lime for some plants has a very strong influence on the ability to take up nutrients. (I would recommend that you do NOT use the oyster shell that is sold at feed stores for chickens, as I did early in my gardening efforts. It is sourced from Katchemak Bay and is not washed before it is ground up. It has a high sodium content that could harm your soil and your sensitive plants.)



In the beginning I had heard about the difficulty growing *Physoplexus* and wasn't sure if it was hardy. The site I chose was quite protected—in addition to the crevice for it to hide its roots deep, spruce tips overhung it up high, as did a sprawling Gentian at the top of the rock crevice. Somewhat woody bushy plants of Dryas and Penstemon grew on either side offering more protection. In addition I make a real effort to shovel snow over the street-side rock garden as soon as it first falls. So, harsh winter or mild, it continued to thrive. I think the secret to success with *Physoplexus* is indeed soil and siting well. Also to be considered in your siting decision is that it is ice cream to slugs, and they can destroy it very quickly,

according to the literature. I'm not aware of anyone else who has grown *Physoplexus comosus* for a long time in Alaska, so let's hear about the experience of others—sharing can make us all more successful.



In my Anchorage lowland garden

Sources: NARGS forum archives, NARGS Bulletin, [botany.cz](http://botany.cz), Alpine Garden Society (AGS) Plant Encyclopedia, *Physoplexus* CTR of the [Webbt](http://Webbt), & other web sites.. Both photos on first page compliments of Cliff Booker, taken high above the [Falzarego](http://Falzarego) Pass at [Lagazuoi](http://Lagazuoi).



## POSITIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY

**President: Jaime Rodriguez**

**Vice-President: Vacant**

**Secretary : Dorte Mobley**

**Treasurer: Madge Oswald**

**Past President: Florene Carney**

**Membership: Charles Utermohle**

**Programs: Kathy Swick**

**Newsletter Editor: Bonnie Friedman**

**Palmer Visitors Center Garden: Jaime Rodriguez**

**Librarian/ABG Rock Garden: Kathy Swick**

**Technology Upgrader: Charles Utermohle**

**Sunshine Committee: Dorte Mobley**

ENJOY OUR FACEBOOK PAGE ?  
ENJOYED A WORKSHOP OR FIELD TRIP?

### Then Become an ARGS Member!

We have about six meetings per year, plus plant sales, field trips and workshops. Our meetings are generally on the third Saturday of the month, Fall, Winter, and Spring, and may be via ZOOM or a Hybrid format with an in person at the Elk's Club in Eagle River and ZOOM. To join, please send your name, address, phone number, e-mail address and a check payable to ARGS at 12001 Audubon Dr., Anchorage, AK 97516 or join on the web at <https://www.akrockgardensociety.org/membership.html>

Individual Membership \$15.00

Family Membership \$20.00

Canada Membership: \$20.00 US

Overseas Membership \$25.00 US

Membership is for the calendar year and includes all issues of the newsletter and Crevice Bulletins for that year. The ARGS Newsletter is published 4-6 times per year and our bulletin, CREVICE is published to announce special news or events. We invite your suggestions and contributions to the newsletter. Please contact Bonnie Friedman, email [Bonnief@gci.net](mailto:Bonnief@gci.net)



### NORTH AMERICAN ROCK GARDEN SOCIETY

If you are not already a member, considering joining the North American Rock Garden Society (NARGS). You can enjoy the Rock Garden Quarterly, featured plants and books of the month, photo galleries, blogs of interest to rock gardeners, and information about upcoming events. Go to [www.args.org/join](http://www.args.org/join) and give yourself the gift of national membership.

**Seeking your input: If there are any program topics or activities you would like to see in the next year, please contact Kathy Swick, our program coordinator.**

[WWW.AKROCKGARDENSOCIETY.ORG](http://WWW.AKROCKGARDENSOCIETY.ORG)

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