

# "THE CREVICE"

In memory of Eswyn

Newsletter of  
The Alpine & Rock Garden Special Interest Group  
of the  
Qualicum Beach Garden Club

Issue # 7

May 2012

## PART 2

### **The Luxurious Simplicity of *Lewisia* 'Norma Jean'**

a photo essay by Grahame Ware

This is one of my first delights of Spring 2012. *Lewisia* 'Norma Jean' was hybridized by Rick Lupp of Mt. Tahoma Nursery in Washington state. The parents are *Lewisia columbiana forma alba* and *Lewisia cotyledon* var. *heckneri*. Lupp relates that he tried many crosses between the two plants and this was the only one that really stood out for its overall merit. He started to sell 'Norma Jean' about 1995. 'Norma Jean' does not set seed easily but the offspring seem true, he adds. It has all the delicate toughness of *columbiana* (with its floriferousness and branching) but with the *oomph* of the *cotyledon*. (See "Notes" below for more info). Unlike so many *Lewisia* that are popping up at garden centres, etc., 'Norma Jean' has an airiness and delicacy about it that really appeals. Then, there is its great axillary flowering. On 'Norma Jean' each stem bears many, many soft-hued flowers. There is none of the usual serrate leaves of *heckneri* here. Rather these thick/thin leaves within the rosette have a vertical habit that seem to launch the stems into a graceful display held well above the foliage. Note from the picture below the plant that has been moved up in pot size slightly from an early March 2012 purchase from Lupp himself. Read more comments further on in this photo essay.



This picture shows just how many flowers are produced on an individual pedicel. 5-6 flowers per pedicel make for a sustained and impressive display of flower clusters when the panicle density is taken into account (see above). The flower petals also tend to flare back somewhat. This aspect is seen again in the next photo. A core element of the attraction for this cultivar is that unassuming species aspect. As with many other alpine gardeners, I really appreciate this subtlety but 'Norma Jean' has that little extra something- more substance without being 'over the top'. Combine all of this

with added hybrid vigor and the longer flowering and it should come as no surprise that it is remontant as well.

There have been other crosses of the same species before that have been successful. Twenty years ago I received *Lewisia* 'George Henley' in a small box from England labelled "woolen socks" and it increased well enough for me that I had enough to sell and to use for landscaping purposes. One plant is at home on the top of Silver Star Mtn (near Vernon, BC) at the Timber Lodge gardens. George Henley was a propagator at Ingweresens in England. 'Norma Jean' has many of the finest qualities of that old chestnut but has better flowers and foliage. Another good *Lewisia* cultivar hybridized from the same cross is 'Trevosia' but the *columbiana* part was the subspecies *howellii*. It is an excellent plant. However, I consider 'Norma Jean' to be the best. I realize that his is saying a lot. Ingweresen's Nursery also raised my first *Lewisia* favourite and that was 'Pinkie', a *cotyledon* cross with *L. longipetala*. I went gaga for that plant too. I still am.



Looking face on to a more advanced cluster shows the tendency for a flaring back of the petals. Check out the greenish eyezone. To me this adds a demure trait as well as adding subtle contrast. This element of a *luxurious simplicity* in the flowers of 'Norma Jean' is a big attraction for me. I don't want always want my head zapped with colours that scream "MAGENTA !" like so many of the gross *cotyledon* hybrids (such as the 'Sunset' forms) that nursery people think we want. These plants have their place to be sure but must be used in the right context or in moderation. By comparison, the classy serenity of 'Norma Jean' is a visual oasis. She is just so harmonious.



Another view of the flowers of 'Norma Jean'. Unlike many *Lewisia*, the flowering sequence has a discerning tempo. There is a balance in the quantity of flowers that are presented at first as well as above and beyond the first flush. Its not all- WHAM! followed by a shrivelling *dénouement*. Rather, 'Norma Jean' unfolds tastefully with the subsequent flowering strong and steady.



'NJ' on left and its parent *L. columbiana* on right. *L. columbiana* has stronger striping but the *forma alba* certainly wasn't dominant. *LC* is markedly smaller in every way.



Small bracts or leaflets along the stem provide a launching pad for axillary flowering. They are quite lovely unto themselves.



As mentioned above, note the leaves in the rosette have a thin yet thick aspect (from *L. cotyledon* var. *heckneri*) and a tendency to an upright habit.

The small bracts or leaflets and their axillary flowering are a real bonus adding even more charm to 'Norma Jean'.

### Summary

As if the heavy Spring flowering wasn't enough, Rick Lupp has stated that this plant is a "reliable Fall bloomer"!

I found out as I was writing this summary that noted UK plantsman and western alpine specialist, Graham Nicholls, calls *Lewisa* 'Norma Jean' "fantastic".

### Culture

I would think that it would be an easy doer in the open garden given the usual caveats of drainage and exposure. Excessive winter moisture could be circumvented by trees or dwarf conifers or little coroplast "hats". Granitic sand of the coarser type should be used and the crown (where the root stem meets the leaves) should have soft, round pebbles packed around it to prevent rotting. When doing this, I repeat: do not use sharp stones that might cut into the skin (epiderm) of the root thus exposing it to more rot.

Everyone should seek out this hardy succulent hybrid that hails from western North America and the Mt. Tahoma Nursery in Washington state.

Thanks Rick for a great plant!

### NOTES:

*Lewisia cotyledon* var. *heckneri* is found in the Klamath Ranges in N. California at elevations of 1000' - 6000'. Chromosome count  $n=14$ .

*Lewisia columbiana* is the most widespread member of the genus and its chromosome count varies from 13 to 14 and 15. It can be found from the Pacific Northwest to California and inland somewhat. I am unsure which one of the subspecies of *Lewisia columbiana* that Rick used. There are three that are recognized- 1) var. *columbiana*, 2) var. *wallowensis* and, 3) var. *rupicola*.

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**PHOTOS FROM VIRAGS SHOW & SALE WEEKEND with Visit  
to Gardens of Amanda Carruthers and Paul Spriggs**





Photos from June Strandberg and Barbara Kulla