

Frank Cabot's Stonecrop Reminiscences: The Beginnings

A gift from Anne's grandmother, Evelina Ball Perkins, in the late 1950's, Stonecrop has grown from its original 40 acres to just under 70 acres, roughly divided between rocky woodlands and open fields. It was part of a 3,000-acre tract acquired by Evelina Perkins in the 1920's that included a dairy farm originating in the 1750's, that had supplied dairy products to West Point, across the Hudson, over the years. During the Perkins tenure the property was known as Glynwood Farm. Today all but the 250-acre core has become a part of Fahnestock Park while the core, in turn, is leased to Glynwood Center, a philanthropic enterprise devoted to the preservation of farmland and open space, notably in the Hudson Valley.

After our marriage in 1949, and a stint in Boston where Anne started her first garden and acquired some alpine plants, we returned to New York and spent our weekends at Glynwood Farm, staying at her parents' house. Anne had brought her alpinines down from Boston and we made a small herb garden and a rock garden which are no longer extant. It was during this period that we became devotees of The New York Botanical Garden and were introduced to the American Rock Garden Society by Elizabeth Hall, NYBG's all-knowing and marvelous librarian. This in turn led to involvement in the Society and exposure to the aficionados and legendary horticulturists who dominated it and, slowly but surely, to a thorough exposure to alpine and rock garden plants.

As chronicled in *The Greater Perfection* (Cabot, 2001) our interest in alpinines had followed the planting of *Armeria juniperifolia* 'Bevan's Variety', a choice, sessile form of the sea thrift that is ubiquitous on the coasts of Europe and the U.K. In the first garden at Glynwood we were able to try a number of equally charming alpinines which were available from Walter Kolaga's Mayfair Nurseries in New Jersey, at the time the only source of alpinines in the Greater New York vicinity. The first plant acquired from Mayfair was *Aethionema iberideum* and it has prospered at Stonecrop to this day, some fifty years on, as a consequence holding a special place in our affections. Of course many alpinines didn't survive since we were beginners starting out on the long journey of learning how to satisfy their requirements. Fortunately there were sufficient survivors to keep us going.

In 1957, construction began on a house designed by George Hickey of Polhemus & Coffin. George Hickey designed houses with a French flavor, many of them modeled on sketches from Polhemus & Coffin's



Clockwise from left: Frank Cabot with *Saxifraga* 'Tumbling Waters.' The Pin Oak (*Quercus palustris*) being planted. The tool shed and first fence where the Flower Garden now blooms.

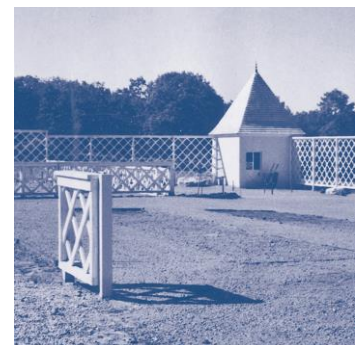
1926 publication - *Small French Buildings*. We had seen photographs of his houses in *House & Garden* and asked him to come up with one for our hilltop site.

The house was completed in the summer of 1958, somewhat shrunk from George Hickey's original suggestions which included a tower, embodying a servants' wing, over the garage (ultimately reappearing as the Potting Shed in 1960) and we moved in that September with a Pin Oak, given us by Anne's mother, planted in the entrance courtyard a month later, our first planting in that empty field. The next spring two Sugar Maples were planted flanking the southern end of the house and apple trees were planted around the entrance court. (The maples, alas, declined in recent years and were removed in 2005—the Pin Oak is hale and hearty.)

At the outset the house was very much a bump on a log in its hilltop field and it wasn't until June, 1959 that a roughly 100' square area to the south of the house was enclosed by an eight-foot open fence with a widely-spaced diagonal lattice for a garden with two little corner houses in the French style to anchor the space.

With Montagu Free's *All About The Perennial Garden* in hand we established three parallel linear beds for perennials along with a vegetable garden enclosed by a low fence within the enclosed area, choosing to emulate the diagonal cross-hatching of the perimeter fence for the pattern of the vegetable beds and the paths between them. As all these beds were being dug we found that the soil was so rocky that after the painstaking work of screening the rocks there was very little soil left. As a consequence we elected to remove everything in the beds for a depth of at least two feet and replace it with truckloads of good quality top soil. At the time we were searching for a name for the place and, inevitably, 'Stonecrop' came to mind.

—Francis H. Cabot



*The second in a three-part series
on the early history of Stonecrop*

Frank Cabot's Stonecrop Reminiscences: Rex Murfitt and Stonecrop Nurseries

In the late 1950s, after building our house at Stonecrop, we were living in the city and gardening on weekends, bringing up seedlings raised by Anne under lights in a defunct maid's room in our New York apartment. As we settled into the house and the garden grew, it became imperative to have someone living on the property, but the twenty acres of arable land was too small to justify a viable farm.

In that era the principal nursery propagating alpine plants in the Greater New York area was Walter Kolaga's Mayfair Nurseries in New Jersey. When we learned that Kolaga was closing Mayfair, we decided to establish a nursery for alpinists at Stonecrop and thereby have someone on the premises throughout the year. Through the American Rock Garden Society grapevine we learned that Rex Murfitt, who had worked for a number of years at the well-known Ingwersen nursery at Gravetye, William Robinson's estate at East Grinstead in Sussex, was then living in Victoria, B.C. and might be interested in getting back into the propagation of alpinists.

In the spring of 1960 Rex and his wife Ruth came east for a visit and Stonecrop Nurseries was conceived. Sites were chosen and plans initiated to build a house for the Murfitts (now known as the "Bothy"), as well as a Potting Shed with greenhouses attached for the nursery. We pledged that the buildings would be functional by the time the Murfitts returned in October. (George Hickey, our architect, finally got his tower on the property in the form of a Potting Shed.) One greenhouse was designated to be the Alpine House. An extensive saxifrage collection imported from Ingwersen's soon arrived along with a wide variety of sempervivum, a favorite genus of Rex's. Stonecrop Nurseries was off and running, in due course offering a broad selection of choice alpinists to enthusiasts in the region as well as by mail order around the country.

Rex first built a low raised bed for alpinists that ran the length of the Potting Shed, using rounded boulders from a perimeter stone wall that had been removed to make room for the new structures. On either side of another stone wall, Rex built alpine beds that ran parallel to the new greenhouses with an L-shaped extension, taking advantage of a bit of protruding rock ledge and framing a low, raised island bed adjacent to one of the greenhouses. On the opposite side of said wall from the potting shed, Rex built a large island bed—some fifty feet square that levelled the slope between the potting shed and the ground behind the greenhouses. There, a roadway linked the nursery and the Murfitts' new house, which was set at the edge of the woodland and soon screened by plantings of white pines and



Stonecrop Nurseries



Potting Shed



The oriental-style pavilion



Alpinists continue to flourish in Rex Murfitt's raised beds, with the Potting Shed tower standing guard.

other conifers. There was ample room to start an alpine garden.

The deep benches in the Alpine House were made of asbestos (whose adverse effects were not yet well publicized) and are still serviceable nearly fifty years later. Filled with gravelly sand and dampened, they provide the ideal plunge bed for shallow clay pots planted with choice alpinists that would not necessarily survive in an outdoor setting. In the center bench of the new Alpine House we elected to create a display of tufa acquired from Ilion Gorge in upstate New York with a permanent planting of temperamental alpinists that would not survive the hot and humid summers of the Hudson Valley. My uncle Pat Morgan, an artist and keen gardener, happened to be spending the weekend with us and contributed greatly to the effective placement of the blocks of tufa in which holes were soon drilled and filled with alpinists that are still there today.

Slowly but surely a collection of alpinists, almost all acquired from the U.K., was established. Many of the choicer slow-growing "buns" are still thriving in their clay pots, notably the aretian gypsophilas from the Caucasus and various drabas from around the world, even if their longevity has resulted in a rather huddled, cheek-by-jowl setting. Other species have waxed and waned with saxifrages and, particularly, alpine European primulas putting on a reliable show in March. In the 1970s we refrigerated one of the benches in the alpine house and added an air conditioner to mitigate the consequences of the muggs of July and August. The concept was derived from a conversation with the late, great Tom Everett of the New York Botanical Garden who pointed out that alpinists often roasted in the hot summer sun in their native montane habitat but, invariably, cooled off at night. Therefore it made sense to keep the roots cool to the extent possible.

Rex next added a sunken pit house comparable to those he had worked with at Ingwersen's nursery where only the glass roof lights were above ground thereby facilitating temperature control in all seasons. This



The stables, barn and nursery garage under construction

in turn was filled with primula, species cyclamen and dwarf bulbs, the beginning of a collection which, under Caroline Burgess' direction, has burgeoned significantly over the years, providing color and botanical interest from November through April.

During the first half of the 1960s Stonecrop was a regular exhibitor at the New York Flower Show in Grand Central Palace and, one year exhibited in the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society Show in Philadelphia, generating considerable interest in alpine plants there as a consequence. It was a complex and major (although satisfying) effort to exhibit and to ensure that the alpines were coming into full bloom at that early date. Rocks and soil all had to be hauled to the exhibition hall and mounted on staging so that when the potted alpines were plunged and the whole dressed with gravel it became a reasonably natural setting.

By the mid 1960s the perennial beds near the house were maturing and the enclosed area between the house and the two little garden houses had been extended to the potting shed and greenhouses, with the



Alpine beds

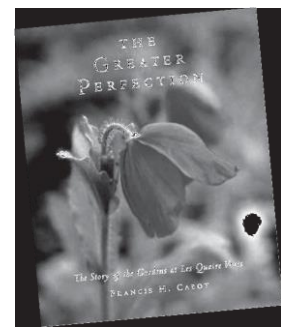
westernmost garden house expanded into a combination stable, barn and nursery garage, converting what had been a square into a larger rectangle, the site of the present-day Flower Garden. An allée of flowering cherries (*Prunus subhirtella autumnalis*—and no longer extant) had been established outside the tall perimeter fence surrounding the vegetable garden, opposite an allée of sugar maples. A collection of mostly shrub roses had become established within it along with a variety of trees and shrubs. A twelve-foot square oriental-style open pavilion, acquired from a neighbouring exhibit at the last flower show held in Grand Central Palace was incorporated into a corner of this new space and, in due course, became the frame and setting for the ultimate in raised beds—filled with gravel some forty inches deep. Choice plants loved the gravelly root run and to our delight a seedling of *Mertensia maritima*, a blue-flowering, diminutive treasure with a three-foot tap root found occasionally in beaches along the St. Lawrence, actually bloomed.

The mail order nursery lasted about six years until Rex and his family, pining for a more moderate climate, returned to British Columbia. We missed them sorely, as did some of the more temperamental alpines.

—Frank Cabot



Currie Cabot (left) and Richard Rowlands circa 1958.



The Greater Perfection by Frank Cabot

"One of the best books ever written about the making of a garden by its creator."
—*The Oxford Companion to Gardens*, 2006

This award-winning book about Les Quatre Vents, a garden created by the Cabots along the St. Lawrence River in Quebec, may be purchased online at www.hortuspress.com



Frank Cabot's Reminiscences: The Garden Starts to Grow

(The third and final segment in this series on the early days at Stonecrop)

During the decade from 1965 to 1975 there were no changes to the garden. Rex Murfitt, who helped us establish our alpine gardens and nursery operation at Stonecrop and was the first resident of our Bothy, returned to British Columbia with his family (see article in the Fall, 2007 Stonecrop newsletter). The Bothy was subsequently inhabited by John Lesenger, a Scottish gardener who grew voluptuous cinerarias and chrysanthemums, and then Larry Pardue, the information officer at the New York Botanical Garden. The most notable event of the period was the blizzard of 1969 that resulted in an eight-foot high snowdrift covering much of Stonecrop and shutting everything down for a week before the place was dug out and became accessible again to vehicles.

However, in the latter part of the 1970's, the garden began to expand in earnest. Sara Faust, a graduate of the New York Botanical Garden's School of Horticulture with a good eye for landscape design, took charge of the garden. Cono Reale, a Sicilian mason, was hired to improve the rock walls in general. They both had a major impact on the Stonecrop landscape.

The connection with Cono is described on pages 76-77 of *The Greater Perfection* (a book I wrote about our Canadian garden, Les Quatre Vents) as follows:

A few individuals are, instinctively, good builders of walls. One day in the mid-1970's, while driving north on Route 9 near Cold Spring, I saw some handsome terraces under construction and came to a screeching halt. The terraces were the creation of Cono Reale, who was busy turning the hillside behind his house into a landscape reminiscent of Capo d'Orlando, his native village on the north coast of Sicily. An agricultural engineer turned self-taught mason, Cono took one look at the round field-stone walls that needed rebuilding around the garden in Cold Spring, rubbed his hands with glee and announced in an authoritative, if almost unintelligible, Benito Mussolini manner, "There is a great deal of work to be done around here. You better believe it!"

We worked closely together for the next twelve years and I learned much from the process. Cono had the native Italian flair for construction and his association with (both) Stonecrop (and Les Quatre Vents) was enormously positive. His sensitive eye and innate sense of proportion meant that his modifications and adjustments to my ideas on how a bit of rock ledge was to be placed, how a wall was to be configured, or how a garden pool designed, invariably turned out to be an improvement over the initial concept. There is no substitute for the hands-on artisan with aesthetic sensibility working with the gardener. Having gone through the learning process with Cono, we subsequently followed this route in developing our gardens and eschewed professional help except when it came to the proportions and detailed drawings for important hardscape and structures.



At Stonecrop, one of my dreams had always been to create some rectangular free-standing raised stone beds, with alpine filling crevices on all exposures. It was in the course of that process, working with Cono, that I learned the principles of wall building with square cut field stones and could apply my knowledge of the preferences and idiosyncrasies of alpine plants. The formality of a geometric element made sense near the potting shed at Stonecrop as a transition to the more naturalized areas of the garden. The first step was to replace a retaining wall made of rounded boulders.

It was a symbiotic process. While I was observing the principles that underlie the making of a solid and well-laid wall, Cono soon learned how to handle the plants and identify which were best suited for a particular crevice. Since Stonecrop always had a wide variety of alpine plants it was an easy matter to assemble plants as the walls rose and to draw on this available reservoir as needed. The walls and raised stone beds went up rapidly each spring during the month or so before it became too hot and dry to risk exposing the plants' roots to such an extent.

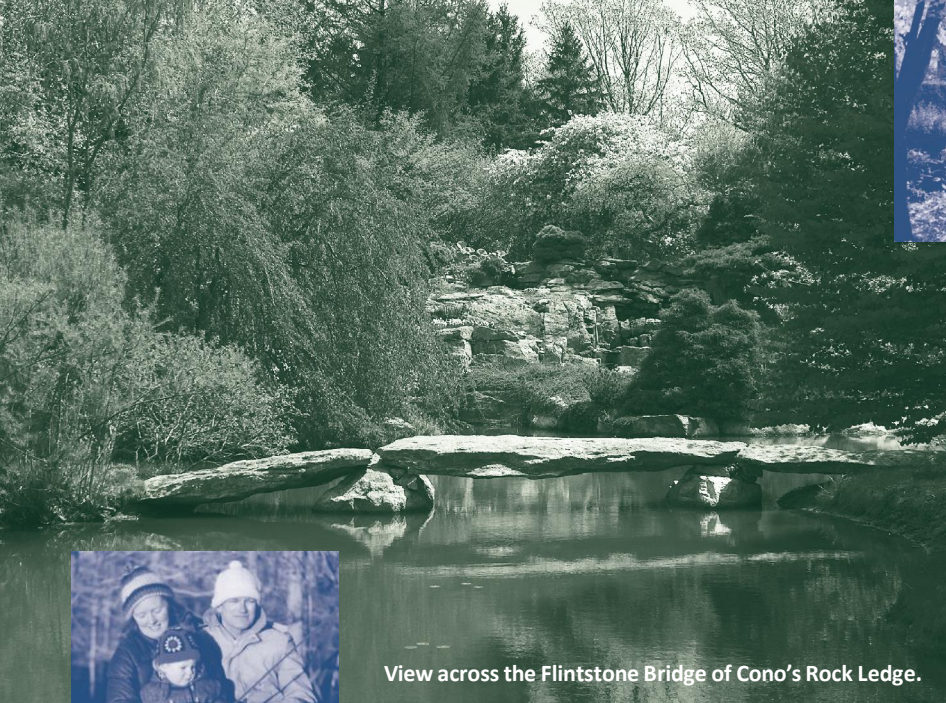
In the early years of Cono's involvement we not only created new geometric beds in front of Rex Murfitt's large raised bed, but we also replaced Rex's first bed with the middle section of the bed that now wraps around the corner of the Potting Shed. While the bulk of this bed is made with blocks of tufa from Ilion Gorge, we built field-stone turrets at either end. For want of a better name, we called our new bed the Tufalump—our own variant on Winnie the Pooh's "heffalump." The centers of our turrets were topped with partially buried fieldstone outcrops in whose interstices choice alpine plants thrive. To our delight and surprise, a tiny plant of *Gypsophila aretioides* 'Caucasica' with a northern exposure has endured the intervening thirty years and is slowly but surely expanding into a solid, horizontal, and thoroughly alpine dinner-plate-sized mat of green.

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Above: Frank Cabot working under Cono Reale's tutelage. Above right: An early manifestation of the alpine beds in bloom, and a spring view from the house over the Flower Garden toward the Potting Shed.





View across the Flintstone Bridge of Cono's Rock Ledge.



Above: Anne and Frank Cabot with their granddaughter, Annie Cabot, circa 1976, and Anne Cabot, with daughters Currie & Marianne, in front of the house at Stonecrop after the blizzard of 1969.



The Flower Garden in autumn.

Once the raised beds had been rewalled and replanted, the garden began to grow in a westerly direction. On the west side of the path that runs behind the greenhouses towards the Bothy, there was a promising native White Oak of moderate age and a number of stone outcrops. These led to a drop over a steep rock ledge to a hillside below, which in turn, sloped down to the west. Working with Sara and Cono, we elected to create an artificial stream and pool above the rock ledge, bringing in slabs of rock from the surrounding woods to echo the natural stone outcrops. Sara planted the area with *Iris pumila* and dwarf conifers among shrubs and other perennials. She also arranged the plantings in the vegetable and flower gardens within the fenced enclosure near the house.

At about this time, a deer fence was installed around some twenty acres of fields, gardens and buildings with cattle guards placed where the fence intersected the road that ran through the site. It is a relatively low, broad and sloping fence rather than a high fence, and it is electrified for winter protection. It has worked perfectly over the years. Visitors don't realize it is there.

With a water feature now on the west side of the garden, it seemed logical to try to develop a pond on the east side of the Potting Shed along the entrance road. As elsewhere in the garden, water had to be piped to this pond since there was none on our hilltop. The pond that is there, now filled at its north end by a wing of the Conservatory, is primarily Sara's design, embellished to a degree by slabs of rock placed by Cono. It had to be a rather shallow pond and it took some years before it became relatively maintenance free. The buildup of algae in the pond wasn't brought under control until a re-circulating and aerating system for the pond was installed.

As the garden grew, so did the need for a significant water supply. Since work had begun on planting the rock ledge just below our first stream and small pond, the idea of turning the area below it into a lake and also creating a reservoir for back up water supply seemed a logical next step. The only problem was that the site we had chosen for our lake was a steep, 300-foot long slope westward down to the neighboring field which was 50 feet below the bottom of the rock ledge. Fortunately, the highway department had elected that moment to improve Route 301 that runs beside the property, and they had to evacuate a great deal of fill to accomplish the job. To our mutual satisfaction, the fill was moved directly from Route 301 to below our rock ledge. We then created a level berm, some 200 feet square, to frame the lake and contain a subterranean concrete reservoir that could hold an additional 14,000 gallons of water. All this came to pass but not without endless headaches, since a large percentage of the fill consisted of large, rounded boulders, not exactly the ideal base for a lake where packed sand or clay is much preferred. In the long run the lake has worked out so that it is manageable.

Once we added what Caroline Burgess immediately dubbed the Flintstone Bridge—a massive slab of rock that forms an isthmus visually dividing the water into two main areas - it looked as if the lake had always been there. To disguise the reservoir, Franklin Faust, Sara's husband and an accomplished artist then on the faculty of Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, designed and built a Wisteria Pavilion of considerable charm atop the reservoir at the south end of the lake. With the lake and Flintstone Bridge in place, the rock ledge was amended with additional fieldstone slabs and ledges so that there were ample

The following is taken from page 79 of *The Greater Perfection*:

THE ROCK GARDEN WALL-BUILDER'S 10 COMMANDMENTS

1. On a 6-inch layer of gravel, build a solid foundation course of large square-cut stones that barely protrudes above ground level.
2. Place square-cut stones in courses, rising in a slight "batter," so that the finished wall slopes gradually back from the base to allow moisture to reach all crevices. Avoid aligning vertical joints to keep erosion of soil in the joints to a minimum.
3. As each course is added, fill in just behind the wall with large rocks of any shape so as to reinforce the façade and reduce the likelihood of instability.
4. Pack gritty scree mixture (75% poultry grit, rock chips or coarse sand; 25% organic matter) between courses, in joints, and behind the façade and compact it thoroughly by tamping and watering as each course is laid.
5. Plant the crevices between and above each rock with the smallest feasible specimen, making sure it has a good, established root system preferably reaching back to the soil mixture. Between courses press the root mass down as flat as possible and barely cover with gritty scree mix. (Keep roots constantly moist throughout the process.)
6. Use small flakes and chips of stone (tapped in as wedges) to fill gaps in the front of crevices, once a course is planted, to reduce erosion and ensure that the plant's crown remains in place.
7. The soil in the crevices need only be sufficient to fill the minimal air spaces between square-cut rock surfaces. Use almost all grit with a small amount of organic matter. The

richer mixture in the center awaits the plant's hardworking roots. Once these become well-anchored and produce a healthy mat of plant at the surface, the plant will look exactly as if it were growing in its alpine setting.

8. Indulge the exposure preferences of the plants: saxifrages and ramondas on north-facing walls, Mediterranean species facing south and west.

9. Assemble twice as many plants (in great variety) as you think you'll need. Overplant! A number of plants will succumb over the first two years. Be sure to include non-invasive campanulas; they will outlast most species and will obligingly fill in the empty spaces left behind.

10. Early spring and early fall are the best times for planting.



Anne Cabot, with Chip, on her favorite International Harvester tractor—which is still operative!

planting niches. Cono also devised a small waterfall and a series of descending pools to bring the water from the upper pond down to the new lake.

At about this time, John Sales, then the garden advisor to the U.K.'s National Trust, stayed with us while giving a lecture in New York City. I had proudly showed him our specimen of the dawn redwood, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, which we had planted opposite the Potting Shed by the new Upper Lake. He observed rather dryly, "Of course, in the U.K., we have groves of them!" With the new lake to be landscaped, that was a challenge to be met. We happened to find a small nursery in Maryland that was liquidating its stock and could supply fifty young trees at the right price. Today our *Metasequoia* grove abuts the Wisteria Pavilion, frames the south side of the lake, and spills down an area Caroline christened the Himalayan Slope. It looks convincingly like the groves one finds in Chinese botanic gardens and is a joy to walk through. I'm just sorry that John Sales hasn't been back to see the consequences of his casual remark.

One always benefits from good advice. I remember showing the new lake and its accompanying developments to François Goffinet, who had then just started his career as a landscape architect but whose later efforts include much work at the nearby Donald M. Kendall Sculpture Garden at Pepsico, in Purchase, New York. Surveying the lake, François frowned and pointed out that I needed to plant a screen of trees to block the competing views of fields and hills. A thick screen of spruce has done just that, channeling the vista and greatly improving the overall effect. It helps to develop an understanding of landscape principles.

Other English horticulturists have used us as a way station. Alan Bloom, the founder of Bressingham Nurseries, stayed with us in 1979 and introduced us to a host of new and interesting perennials. In due course, on a trip to the U.K., we stayed with Alan and his then wife, who was appropriately named Flora. We brought back a large collection of *Rodgersias* and the like, then unavailable in the U.S. These survived importation far more successfully than our first shipment of trees and shrubs from Hillier's Nursery fifteen years earlier. The sole survivor from that lot is *Halesia monticola* var. *vestita*, which graces the Entrance Court to the house at Stonecrop with its large, pink blossoms each year in early May.

By the 1980's we had resolved to try and develop a woodland garden on either side of Stonecrop's then entrance drive, starting with the west side where there was a handsome bit of rock ledge crying out to be the

backdrop of a woodland pool. The only problem was that there was very little organic matter on

our hilltop and what little was there was overwhelmed by rocks of all sizes. To create the woodland we were after, we scraped away as much of the loose rock as we could and brought in truckloads of compost made by Bud Bullpit from leaves carted away from Connecticut communities. With eight inches of this salubrious mixture covering the woodland "soil," there was sufficient purchase for the drifts of plants that now thrive there to become established. This garden, which in due course and under Caroline Burgess's guidance encompassed the woodlands on the east side of the drive as well, is a delight throughout the season (but especially in April and May) and is filled with unusual plants. There is a small patch of *Trillium decumbens*, a gift from Fred Case, author of the classic book on this genus, whose leaves lie flat on the ground. It is a different garden every two weeks during the spring months and is well worth close inspection. (Please read more about our Woodland Garden in Dick Lighty's article in this issue of the newsletter.)

Sara Faust left in 1983 and, in due course, became a landscape architect. During her tenure, she was helped by Oscar and Tommy Hallberg, the sons of Boone Hallberg of Oaxaca who lived in the Bothy.

In the spring of 1984, Caroline Burgess arrived to take charge of Stonecrop and she has made the gardens what they are today. Caroline, a graduate of the School of Horticulture, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, had apprenticed with Rosemary Verey and was the Head Gardener at Verey's famous garden, Barnsely House. At Rosemary's suggestion, Caroline spent six weeks at Stonecrop while on a field break as a student at Kew in the late spring of 1983. When she completed her Kew Diploma with Honours, she expressed an interest in returning to the U.S. and taking over management of the garden. Stonecrop has been delighted to have her ever since and, of course, Stonecrop has become her garden.



The Flower Garden in summer.

A 19th century French "epi"—finial—that is located on the peaked roof of the garage. This antique has been duplicated and enlarged for use by the Cabots on their Music Pavilion and the Pigeonnier in their Canadian garden.

