Harebell is One Tough Contender – Who Knew?

I enjoy hiking throughout our various National Parklands for many reasons. For the gardener in me, these excursions provide the opportunity of seeing plants reveling in their natural environments. Often, this is when I have that 'aha moment' and suddenly realize what the plant actually needs to thrive and look its best. Such was a recent experience with *Campanula rotundifolia*, commonly known at Harebell. It is a plant I have grown for years and although it flowers admirably, it always looked a bit 'floppy' or tired. When I saw it growing upright and proud at an elevation near 12,000' in Rocky Mountain National Park, I suddenly understood – this delicate looking plant actually prefers rather harsh growing conditions to look its best and not the pampered conditions I was inadvertently providing. Who knew! An image of the overall alpine landscape is seen above right while the Harebells growing near 12,000' are seen in the closing image.

The genus *Campanula* is a member of the Campanulaceae or Campanula Family and has over 500 species found throughout a broad range of temperate and tropical regions in the northern hemisphere. *Campanula rotundifolia* has an equally broad native range, stretching from Europe across Russia and China and much of North America. This broad native range is matched by an equally diverse number of native environments including meadows, rocky slopes, wooded hillsides, alpine ridges and sandy beaches near lakes – all conditions I would not describe as pampered! Interestingly, some authorities believe the plants in North America are a different species while most botanists and the USDA consider these to simply be varieties within this species.

The genus and species were originally described in 1753 by the Swedish botanist and physician Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778). Inspired by the bell-like floral shape, he crafted the genus from the Latin *Campāna* meaning bell and the diminutive suffix *Ula*. Thus, the genus directly translates to 'Little Bell'! The plant was also thought to grow where Hares (Rabbits) typically live, inspiring the common name of Harebell. Considering the diversity of environments where the plant is known to naturally grow, I would not be surprised if many of those environments are populated with Hares. Folklore also has it that witches would create a juice from the flowers, allowing them to be transformed into Hares!

Fortunately, *Campanula rotundifolia* is far too jolly looking of a plant to be associated with the shaman practices of witches. Beginning in late fall, Harebell produces a dense basal clump of

small rounded leaves with a lightly dentate or toothed margin (as seen at left in late March). These 1" long leaves only reach 1-2" tall and persist throughout winter and into the following spring. It is the shape of these leaves that inspired Linnaeus to pen the species name of *rotundifolia*, from the Latin *Rotundus* for round and *Folia* for leaf. Beginning in late May, a number of wiry floral stems begin to emerge through the basal foliage. They ultimately reach 6-18" tall and in contrast to the basal foliage, the foliage emanating from these floral stems has a slender, lance shape measuring 1-3" long (as seen in the image below). The leaves also become increasingly more narrow as they progress up the stem. I have noticed these stems have fewer and much thinner leaves on plants grown in more stressed environments. These initial stems often branch to produce numerous side shoots which produce multiple flowers over the course of the summer. Each stem typically ends with a flower. Interestingly, as the floral stems expand, the overwintering basal leaves gradually wither and fade, only to reappear come later that fall (as seen at right in mid- November).

The floral stems result in an attractive cloud of blue, bell-like flowers lasting from June through September, with a few still opening as late as November! In some instances, the flowers are also white or pink in color. Naturally, the flowers are bell-shaped and consist of 5 petals perched atop 5 short and very slender sepals. Each petal is ½-1¼" long and is fused to the adjacent petals along the lower ⅔ of the flower. The petals along the remaining ⅓ of the flower flair outward before coming to a point at the tip (as seen at left). Each flower usually hangs downward, although a few are oriented outward and each persists for upwards of a week.

At the center of the flower is a very pronounced white female style which splits threefold at the tip into a tripartite

stigma (as seen above). Each stigma curls backward, ultimately giving the appearance akin to a jester's hat. Located deeper within the flower are 5 stamens. The flowers are typically bee pollinated, although they can also self-pollinate during strong winds. The blossoms are followed by small, ¼" long seed capsules that gradually turn from green to tan with the tiny seed disseminated once again via wind gusts. The plant is not prodigious at producing seedlings, but it is not uncommon for one or two seedlings to appear each year, typically in crevices between stones, as seen above or where gravel is used as a mulch. The seedlings will quickly produce a taproot, but are easily moved and this has been my preferred method of adding plants to new locations in my garden! Plants are reputed for being short lived, yet my original plant of over 7 years is still growing well and showing no sign of decline.

Best grown in zones 3-6 in full sun or light shade, the key to properly growing Harebell lies in replicating their harsh native conditions. Where soils are too rich, the floral stems grow too quickly and collapse under their own weight. In gritty, well-drained soils that lack supplemental fertilizers, the flower stems grow shorter and slower, enabling them to stand proud and present the flowers to the viewer. I have noticed plants growing in these harsher environments also start to bloom earlier, often by mid-May!

Obviously for garden settings, the plants used in combination with the Harebell should also appreciate and thrive under similar conditions. In Colorado it was growing in association with the white flowered Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) while I have it growing nicely with Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), Beardtongue (*Penstemon* species), Prickly Pear (*Opuntia* species), the Three-Leaved Stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*) and various species of Pussytoes, such as *Antennaria parviflora*. It also combines well with any number of spring or autumn blooming bulbs. For autumn, consider the creamy white flowers of *Crocus ochroleucus* or the blue blossoms of Bieberstein's crocus (*Crocus speciosus*) which provide color when the floral stems of Harebell have grown quiet of flowers.

Granted, it may be tough to replicate the gritty hillside soils of a forest in Utah or the alpine conditions of a Colorado ridge, as pictured in the image below. However, having the opportunity to study plants growing in the wild provides a valuable understanding of a plants' constitution and to be honest, I could have lingered in that alpine meadow for days studying the various flora emerging from the gritty soil! For *Campanula rotundifolia*, I learned this delicate looking plant is actually one tough contender and appreciates a far less pampered garden location than I thought possible. Who knew?

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