

PANAYOTI KELAIDIS

Rocking on!

PANAYOTI KELAIDIS is a lifelong Colorado gardener who has worked at Denver Botanic Gardens for more than 40 years. Known for his expertise in rock gardening and alpine plants, he is a longtime member of the North American Rock Garden Society. This interview took place during a society conference at Cornell University in June 2022.

SCOTT BEUERLEIN: Tell me a little bit about how you got started in horticulture.

PANAYOTI KELAIDIS: I have to kind of blame my parents, because they were very keen vegetable gardeners. It was maybe a thousand square feet and they grew a lot of things that you couldn't buy in grocery stores back then, Greek greens especially. I remember thinking it was really weird that they were out there all the time. We lived in Boulder, Colorado, which is a nice town, but our house was ornamentally threadbare and I thought that we could have a nicer yard, so I wanted to grow some flowers.

But what really did it for me was my brother-in-law, Allan Taylor, who married my sister when I was eight years old. He was a passionate gardener. And because he was an Anglo and my parents were these foreigners—they were chubby and short with accents and he was tall and spoke English natively—and so I idolized him because he was kind of like a second father in a way

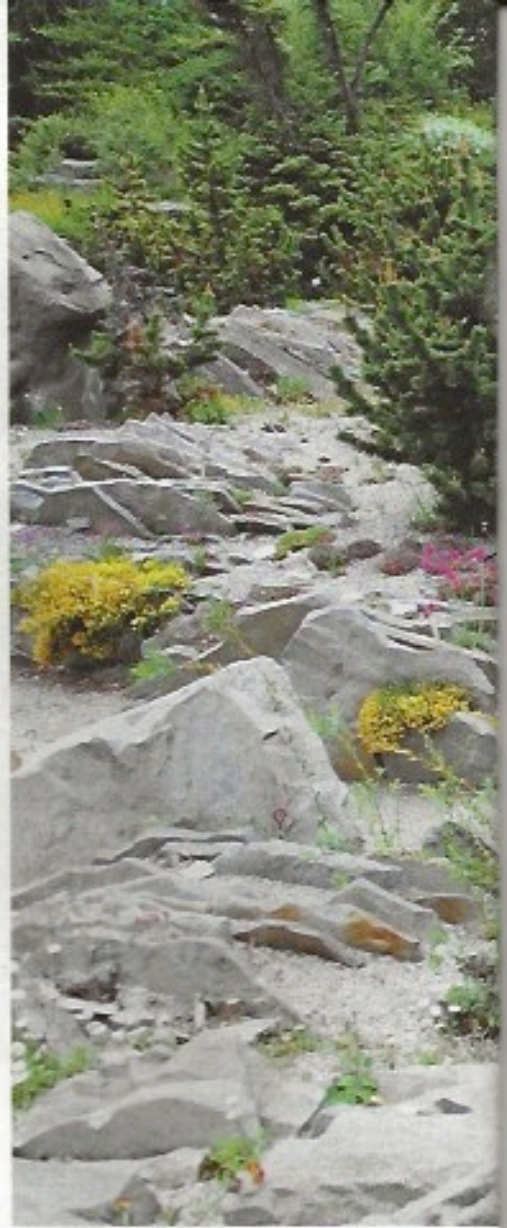
SCOTT BEUERLEIN is the Manager of Botanical Garden Outreach at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden. His Garden Views Horticulture column presents perspectives from fellow gardening professionals across the United States.



Above: Panayoti Kelaidis. **Right:** A lifelong rock gardener, he points out that crevice gardens, like this one at Montreal Botanical Garden, are helping draw younger people to the hobby. Stones are set vertically, with plants inserted between them.

because, you know, my real parents weren't quite good enough for me back then.

He was a passionate rock gardener and built this huge (to my eyes) rock garden around the north side of our house and I was out there all the time with him, because it was the excuse to be out, away from the family. (Now I realize there's this raucous Greek family and he was kind of looking to get a little peace and quiet!) But we'd be out there and working together and it was the most wonderful thing in the world. We'd go out and get the rocks up in Sunshine Canyon, which nowadays you'd get arrested for, but we'd bring them back and he would arrange them and I would try to help. He didn't want me to get hurt, so mostly I'd just sit there and watch him work. Decades later,



having been doing it professionally, I look back and realize what we see as a kid has an impression on us that lasts forever.

SB: Did you go to hort school?
PK: No, actually I went to the University of Colorado, which is where Allan eventually taught linguistics. I grew up in a family of language teachers and everybody I knew was a teacher and figured I'd be a teacher, too. That was kind of the expectation of my family. The only horticulturists I was aware of—and I hate to say it, because it's really rude, although it's true—but back in the '50s they used to hire bums to work in the parks to water



the turf and plants. These guys lived in trucks and were always surreptitiously sipping something out of out of their back pockets. So they weren't an image that you would aspire to! And it was a university town and there was no agricultural program, so it never really occurred to me that you would do horticulture as a business. So I went through college going to be a language teacher and decided on Chinese, because Allan had given me a book of Japanese poems (haiku), and that got me started on East Asia.

So gardening was the hobby. You could do it as a hobby, and it was a pretty absorbing hobby, because I was spending more and more time

and getting a great deal of pleasure out of it. I didn't start thinking about doing it professionally until the Denver Botanic Gardens created this very large rock garden. The architect, Herb Schaal (who is still very much alive), was the master planner for the gardens. He actually got three of us from the North American Rock Garden Society to sign up as volunteers, but the other two didn't have the time for it. But I was a teacher at the time and had the summer off and he really liked me and realized after he finished this colossal rock garden that nobody on the staff back then had any knowledge about it, so he told them to hire me and they did.

No kidding, that's how it began. I started essentially as a volunteer.

SB: So you started managing the rock garden and taking care of it.

PK: Yes, for 17 years! That was my job. I curated the rock garden, which is an acre, and it's probably one of the biggest ones in the world. Then I got booted upstairs a little bit. I became in charge of naturalistic and native gardens back in the '90s. Then I became the curator of plant collections around 2000. Now I'm Senior Curator and Director of Outreach. Basically I do projects of all different kinds and work with all different departments, but my heart is still with the horticulture.

SB: But this gives you a lot of opportunity to do cool things like travel, speak and introduce new plants through Plant Select, which is a plant-introduction collaboration between Denver Botanic Gardens and Colorado State University.

PK: I helped create that program and did most of the “grunt work” for the first 10 years—producing brochures, contacting growers and mailing out plant labels—and I have been heavily involved with it, although I eventually realized I’d become a bit of a dictator. I found out people don’t like dictators and suddenly found I was no longer helping manage the program. As Mel Brooks observed, “it’s good to be the king,” but not so much fun being a peon afterwards!

SB: How is the program doing?

PK: It’s doing great. In the early years we had so many phenomenal plants—all the early ice plants; we had these fantastic South African *Gazania* and *Osteospermum*. We had these incredible plants that could be developed fast, like annuals. They went from seed to bloom in a couple of months, or from cutting to bloom, and, as a consequence, it’s been hard to come up with new plants of that caliber. So the program sputtered a little. Especially when I ceased being the “the king!” (Laughs) And I have mixed feelings, of course. Part of me felt “Ha, ha!”—but the fellow who is running it now, Ross Shrigley, is a very good friend of mine, and Mike Bone handles Plant Select at the Botanic Gardens and he’s a protégé and somebody I really respect and I think they have some really great plants.

But introducing plants to the industry is incredibly difficult, because you can have the world’s seemingly best plant but it really has to be something that is very easy to grow, very quick to propagate, lasts

Near right: Kelaidis is credited with bringing ice plants (shown here, *Delosperma cooperi*) to the US garden market. **Far right:** *Lonicera reticulata* Kintzley’s Ghost, a woody vine treasured for its long-lasting silver bracts, was introduced through Plant Select, a program that Kelaidis helped create.

on a shelf for a long time, looks good on a shelf and then when people stick it in the ground it will tolerate shade or sun, drought, overwatering and perform over time. The number of plants that can do all of those things are very few. But I think Plant Select has introduced more good plants than any other program I know of and they still are doing good plants. I’m very proud of the program.

SB: What are some of your favorites?

PK: Well, that’s like asking you to pick out your favorite child. I’m extremely proud of having introduced most of the hardy ice plants into cultivation. In fact, on my gravestone I’m expecting it to say “Mr. *Delosperma*.”

But you know some of my favorite plants from Plant Select aren’t even mine. I mean *Lonicera reticulata* Kintzley’s Ghost is a phenomenal plant, and that was found by William Kintzley in Iowa over 100 years ago! It was actually Scott Skogerboe from Colorado State who put it in the program. I remember when it was going in I told them we have got to patent this plant. It is so phenomenal. But everyone said, “Oh no. It’s never going to be that productive or that good.” But now it’s become bread and butter all over the world. And they missed out! If they’d only listened to me! The dictator! (Laughs)

SB: You’ve been able to travel all around the world to collect plants, to botanize and to speak.

PK: Well, you know that *Saturday Night Live* thing, that “Baseball been very, very good to Chico!” Well, botanic gardening has been very, very good to Panayoti. I’ve been



very lucky that Denver Botanic Gardens has been an institution that has really thrived and grown enormously. And because I was hired on early and because of a lot of things the Gardens have done, I’ve gotten credit for far more than I deserve. But I graciously accept the credit (laughs) and I have a long rope, so to speak. Of course, a lot of my travel has been underwritten by grants. I mean it’s not like it’s just been handed to me on a on a platter.



You know I work at it, but it's true I've been to China five times, South Africa six times, South America and New Zealand twice, and Europe probably thirty or forty times over the years. I was asked to speak in England one year three times.

SB: Did learning Chinese help?

PK: Well, I actually studied Chinese here at Cornell. I came here on a scholarship and halfway through my first year I realized I was



not that good at it. Some people have a tremendous facility with language, and I can speak a couple of languages pretty well, but there's a big difference between speaking a language pretty well and really mastering it and then being able to teach it.

And it was springtime at Cornell and the woods were full of trilliums and trout lilies and the weather was idyllic and I would take these hikes and would be gone for four or five hours and lost in the woods and I gradually realized that I liked doing that more than studying more Chinese characters! (Laughs) So I kind of blame Cornell for making me realize...

SB: And Cornell has such a great hort school.

PK: Yeah, I went to the Hortorium one day and suddenly realized, "I'm in the wrong college." Back then it

was called Cornell Plantations. It wasn't called the botanic garden, but I remember it going all over the campus. I mean it's a vast thing. I would take these walks. In fact, the very first day I was in Ithaca I went down by this wet meadow and it was full of *Lobelia cardinalis*. I'd never seen it before in my life and I just sat there with these towers—it was late August—and there were these towers of scarlet, hundreds of them, along this stream and I just sat there transfixed. Then as I was walking out a fellow passed me with a kestrel on his arm. A falcon on his arm! So it was like this little vignette that I captured and has stuck with me for 50 years.

I went early in the spring once and they had a bunch of rhododendrons blooming, the PJM types, but they had one that was a soft pink. I later realized this had to be *R. mucronulatum* "Cornell Pink"—

maybe the original one. Then, later in the year I visited again and there were masses and masses of candelabra primulas in every color. So the gardens and the campus did distract me from my Chinese studies.

SB: Like a lot of horticulturists, you love pretty much every kind of plant, but you're really known for alpenes and for your work with the North American Rock Garden Society. In fact, you're the President now. Tell us about your love of alpine plants.

PK: In its purest form, if you look at what it was in the 19th century when rock gardening was started, it's trying to build these gardens that look like nature, and growing plants that come from high mountains. So true rock gardening is kind of alpine gardening and I love that. I have an alpine garden at home where I grow those kinds of things. But almost all rock gardeners—well, you know, if you're in the Hosta Society—and I love hostas to a point—but they kind of just do hostas. Or if you're in the Conifer Society, it's all about conifers.

But rock gardeners tend to be interested in trees and shrubs and

all plants, and you can see in the field trips we've done and in almost all the gardens we've visited they have fantastic shrubs, beautiful perennial borders and most even have vegetable gardens. Rock gardeners tend to be broader minded. They're really more interested in growing plants naturally, or wild plants. The Rock Garden Society people are really my peeps.

I first started getting the quarterly when I was in my teens. I joined in my 20s. We're talking a half century! And over the course of that half century I've been coming to meetings like this that we're at right now, and I have had so many experiences and have met so many people who have become best friends. Honestly the average rock gardener is so sophisticated and interesting.

SB: What's the state of the Rock Garden Society right now? Is it doing well?

PK: Yeah, I think you know almost all clubs are aging, and with most of our chapters the average age is probably well into retirement age. And as people age they tend to become more cautious and they

don't want to go out on evenings and so some of the groups are suffering. During the pandemic, the ability for a chapter to Zoom became so important. So, the chapters that could Zoom are thriving while the ones that didn't are sputtering.

But there is a new generation of rock gardeners and this was exemplified by Kenton Seth and Paul Spriggs (authors of *The Crevice Garden*), who spoke last night. Crevice gardening seems to really appeal to younger people and they seem to be bringing a new face to this new generation.

The challenge for our Society is how can we welcome and empower that new group, because younger people are not into the same things that older people are. My idea of a really great meeting is to have somebody with a really thick accent come and talk about plants that I'll never see or grow in some remote part of the world I'll probably never go to. For me, that's ecstasy. For a lot of young people, that's like poison. They want to do social activities and "hands on" and demonstrations. I've been doing this stuff all my life—why would I want it demonstrated to me? So there's a problem there that we have to learn to accommodate.

SB: With climate change, what is the future of alpine plants in the world?
PK: We really don't know. It sounds grim if you think about it, but plants are pretty resilient and they hang on in places you wouldn't think possible. My hope is that humans, who are incredibly clever creatures in both good and bad ways—we create awful things like climate change, but we can also create incredibly positive things. The trouble is we tend to focus on the negative, because you can't change things if you say



Left: Kelaidis was transfixed by cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) when he first arrived at Cornell University as a student.



Dwarf broom (*Genista lydia* var. *lydia*) thrives in the heat and quick drainage afforded by crevice planting.

“PLANTS ARE PRETTY RESILIENT AND THEY HANG ON IN PLACES YOU WOULDN'T THINK POSSIBLE.”

everything is fine. So you have to say, “Oh, it’s terrible!” so that people do something about it.

The example I like to think of is a few years ago I was driving back from Los Angeles and I visited with a very good friend of mine in Durango. I didn’t realize that my friend’s father helped invent the catalytic converter. So I was telling her that the first time I went to Los Angeles there was such smog that I literally got sick and I didn’t go back for a long time. I avoided Los Angeles like the plague. But now I go back all the time, different times of the year, and the air is always crystal clear. And she said, “You can thank my dad for that!”

Turns out, the catalytic converter is designed to clean the pollutants the car produces but, in fact, it also cleans the air it takes in from the outside. So the reason LA’s air is so clear is because they have millions of vacuum cleaners driving around cleaning it! It wasn’t designed

to solve the smog problem in big cities, but it did so as an unintended consequence.

Imagine if we could have an unintended consequence that is so profound. What if we as humans focused on what is really possible and did things positively, instead of just trying to produce another variation on a hosta—oops, did I just say that?—or invent another kind of Winnebago? We keep doing the wrong kinds of things, but if we focused on the right kinds of things, we could avert a lot of disaster we might not otherwise.

SB: What’s the future of Denver Botanic Gardens?

PK: Denver Botanic Gardens has gone from 30 staff when I started to now over 300. It has been blossoming and growing like crazy and I honestly say that I think that it’s become kind of a model for gardens around the country, because we have this unusually good team and

have had visionary management from the board and the directors.

Most botanic gardens do something well—plant collections, or scientific research, say. Denver Botanic Gardens seems to do everything well. We have enormous plant collections magnificently displayed and maintained with beautiful design, and at the same time we have a rapidly growing scientific research department doing a wide range of studies. We have ambitious adult and children’s education and a host of art exhibitions in our galleries. We stage extremely popular concerts and all manner of events. We are the “flavor of the month” in Denver—over 50,000 members and growing, and visitorship soars far past a million every year over the last decade. I believe we have created a template for public gardening as an essential element of the community. It behooves our peers to emulate what we’ve done. ☞

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