

Conversations: The Markerts

How one gardening couple made the best of boggy ground

Norbert and Irma Markerts's Ogdensburg, New York, yard slopes steeply into a bog bordering the St. Lawrence River.

"Forty years ago we slid down the hill on our bottoms. I would go by on a sailboat and hold up a rake, and you couldn't see me for the reeds," says Norbert. They cleared the hillside and built 30 stone steps down to an area that flattens out, then built 25 more.

"We kept the reeds at the river's edge, except around the dock area," explains Irma, a retired college biology teacher. "They protect the shoreline from erosion caused by waves. The reeds shelter ducks and shorebirds, and lots of red-winged blackbirds nest there."

Norbert waited until fall, when the



The Markerts

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Conversations

(continued from page A2)

water level was two feet lower, and got three-inch metal pipes from a plumber. He sunk them in the bog to anchor the wooden boardwalks and bridge he built with help from their then-five-year-old son. The boardwalks curve up and down the uneven site.

"At first I tried to grow onions and celery in the bog garden," Irma says. "They didn't work, and we called it Irma's Folly."

Irma's Folly is now a primrose paradise. Irma started *Primula japonica* under lights in the basement. They have naturalized in the bog garden and crossbred into many rosy colors. They bloom in June.

"Primula are a challenge to grow from seed, but once established, they are carefree," she says. She also grows *P. florendae*, which blooms later.

Primula japonica are carefree be-

cause they self-sow and crowd out the weeds. The primroses only need weeding every two to three years. The Markerts fertilize the bog garden occasionally, because they do not add compost to it. Irma removes the primroses' seed heads to prevent them from spreading into the river's ecosystem, and there have never been any escapees.

The USDA Zone map shows Ogdensburg as Zone 4, though Irma has found pockets she considers Zone 5 in their yard. The Markerts grow skunk cabbage, royal fern, cinnamon fern, and native yellow iris in the bog garden. Norbert and Irma also planted moisture-loving shrubs, including buttonbush and red and green twig dogwood. Birds enjoy the berries of native holly, *Ilex verticillata*.

Irma also grows Himalayan blue poppies, *Meconopsis betonicifolia* and *M. grandis*. The poppies are very diffi-

cult to grow, and live in only one spot in the bog garden.

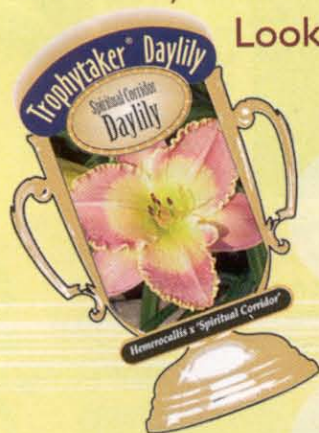
"The Himalayas are moist and cool. The poppies germinate easily, but they would get mildew and die. A professional told me to spritz them with water once or twice daily, and this does prevent mildew. Also, do not let meconopsis bloom the first year, or they will die," she says.

Norbert has a bachelor's degree in horticulture and worked one year in the field before serving in World War II. After the war he returned to school and became a psychologist. He says Irma "leapfrogged" him as a gardener.

"When we were first married, he was always out in the garden, so I joined him," says Irma. "People always remark how unusual it is that we garden together. He's the one with the knowledge."—*Sally Bush Lynch gardens in Potsdam, New York.*

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