

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

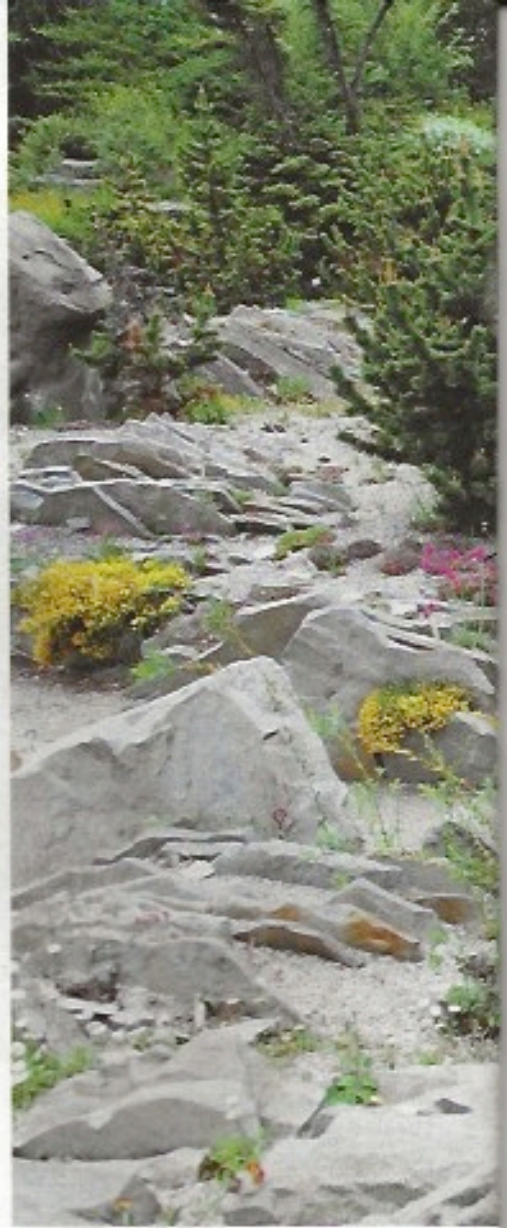
SCOTT BEUERLEIN is the Manager of Botanical Garden Outreach at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden. His Garden Views Horticulture column presents perspectives from fellow gardening professionals across the United States.



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 platter.

