Dudleya nesiotica

My first experience with *Dudleya nesiotica* was quite a surprise. In my garden I grow mostly small alpines, and I am always on the lookout for new species that are unusual, beautiful, and can fit in with the small scale and intimate nature of my rock garden.

*D. nesiotica* is different than many other dudleyas in several ways. Whereas most of the genus bears perennial rosettes of succulent leaves, often with a glaucous or waxy coating, *D. nesiotica* is one of a small number of deciduous, geophytic species belonging to the subgenus *Hasscannthus*. These have non-glaucous succulent foliage on, under favorable conditions, longer decumbent stems that grow only during the winter rainy season. In summer these dry and fall away leaving only a subterranean tuber to generate new above-ground growth during the following winter.

The flowers of dudleyas are of two types. Some are tubular and yellow, orange or red, attractive to hummingbird pollinators. Those of *D. nesiotica* are of the other type, having spreading petals that attract bees or nectar-feeding flies. The large, white-petalled flowers of *D. nesiotica* make a particularly worthy floral display in a rockery.

*D. nesiotica* is an uncommon plant, designated as Rare in California and Threatened federally. Its entire natural habitat is limited to Santa Cruz Island off Southern California, a locale reflected in the specific epithet, which is derived from Greek *neso*, meaning “island.”

I obtained my plant from John Trager at the Huntington Botanical Gardens who had produced seedlings from controlled pollination of surplus plants from an ongoing research project at the Santa Barbara Botanical Garden. It started out in the spring looking like a lot of other small succulents, but by late April a long array of flowers started to form, and by June the garden came to life with the display shown here. A few weeks later the entire inflorescence began to dry up and spiral around like a miniature tumbleweed—ready to blow away and spread its dust-like seeds across the landscape. (Fortunately I was able to grab it for my own purposes before it could satisfy its natural impulse.) After the whole plant broke off above ground, it went into summer dormancy with no visible clue of its presence. In October, it robustly came back to life to repeat another cycle.

So far, *D. nesiotica* seems to be quite hardy and well adapted when it is grown outdoors in my garden in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is a small plant, only about 5 cm high, with a floral display about 10 cm across. Though it could easily become lost in rock gardens devoted to larger plants, in a garden designed for miniatures *Dudleya nesiotica* is a spectacular addition.