

RHS Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia Group



WESSEX BRANCH NEWSLETTER – FEBRUARY 2017

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Dear Members

The Centenary events already seem a distant memory. I am proud of all our members who put in so much effort to make it such a success. The events were well organised and many compliments were received by the public.

Time moves on and I cannot wait for the new season now, especially our own branch show at Ramster. I want the theme for this year to be rhododendrons and associated plants for the smaller garden. I want to dispel the myth of rhododendrons only being suitable for large gardens. All rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias, magnolias and woody plants are welcome of course, especially if these are the only blooms available on the day.

I am hoping to display a very simple fact sheet on various stands showing how easy they are to grow, i.e., best position, how deep to plant, correct soil and mulching. Hopefully we may even sign up some new members! And for those of you who feel worried about exhibiting, especially if it is your first time, please don't! There will be plenty of members on hand to help and if you wish, I can send you a fact sheet I was given when I first started showing.

It would be lovely to see more of our membership turn up as there are many of you I still have not met. If there is any difficulty with transport please let me know and I am sure we can arrange something.

Finally, appraisals by Brian Long are shown below covering our activities since our last Newsletter.

Visit to The Water Garden, Warren Road, Kingston-upon-Thames – 9th October 2016

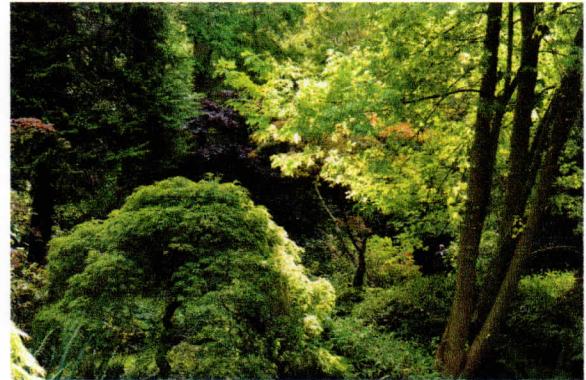
Members of the Wessex Branch enjoyed an interesting and varied range of activities during autumn 2016 and our first visit was to The Water Gardens at Kingston-upon-Thames, which was once part of the Veitch Coombe Wood nursery.

Some two hundred years ago, gravel quarries had formed the contours of a small deep gully within a naturally sloping site. The Veitch brothers laid out this part of their nursery as a Japanese-style garden, consisting of a series of small lakes, linked by streams, fed by a number of underground springs.

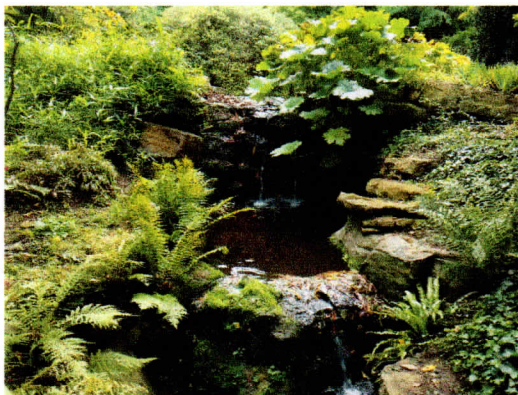
The nursery fell into decline during the middle of the 20th century, with a few acres including the Water Garden being sold for housing development in 1988. Two large apartment blocks were built on relatively flat land adjacent to the Water Garden, but very fortunately the gardens themselves were saved to act as communal gardens for the residents. At this time the gardens were very overgrown, but a programme of renovation commenced and indeed is still ongoing. Usually strictly private, the gardens now open under the National Gardens Scheme for just one day in spring and one in autumn each year. This determined

the date of our visit on 9th October, even though this seemed rather early for the full glory of autumn colour.

On the day, a good number of members arrived in good time for the opening at 2pm. Waiting outside the locked and gated entrance added to our anticipation. Once inside we were soon excited by the sound of running water, although this was obscured by dense vegetation.



Initially we feared the water gardens may be completely overgrown, but we ventured through a narrow passage and a hidden gem was revealed. There are three good sized ponds at descending levels, with cascades and waterfalls running the length of the stream connecting them. A great deal of rock had been used in their construction and also for the paving that criss-crossed the valley. We could but marvel at the way some chunks of massive proportions had been placed and at over a century this had now stood the test of time. We crossed several bridges of widely differing styles ranging, from a single stone slab to a most impressive arched bridge crossing the centre of the middle pond. This was a great vantage point to view the numerous very large koi carp of various colours gliding below.



These water features certainly lived up to our expectations. However what was totally unexpected was the comprehensive range of magnificent conifers that formed the backbone of the garden and a canopy

for the water features. These included various Pines, Cedars, Cryptomeria, Sequoia and Sequoiadendron; and in a hidden corner of the garden we discovered the very rare *Taxodium ascendens* 'Nutans'. These massive trees clearly dated back to the original plantings and even slower growing varieties and forms were now very large trees. Seldom seen as tall trees, *Chamaecyparis obtusa* and *pisifera* were displaying most attractive reddish peeling bark. Most of the conifers now had clear trunks to allow access and views of the water garden. However, one notable exception was *Thuja plicata* 'Zebrina' growing on the slope facing the main water garden: this was a magnificent specimen, a perfect spire clothed with branches to ground level; many were planted during the last century, but few have survived like this.

The garden was not entirely dominated by conifers. Of particular interest to our group was a very tall *Magnolia campbellii*, with a most amazing straight trunk, growing towards the top of the rock garden. *Cyclamen hederifolium* provided enchanting drifts of pink and white in some of the shaded glades. The Veitch nursery played a leading role in the introduction of the pocket handkerchief tree *Davidia involucrata* to this country and it is fitting that some two dozen of these are still growing throughout the Water Gardens. Some of these are grouped together and their strange fruits were covering the ground like windfall apples. I have never before encountered such a planting of *Davidia* and for this reason I am determined to one day return to see these in flower.

Walk & Slide Show at Ramster about Meconopsis in the Wild – 29th October 2016

We were delighted that Richard Thornton had made an incredible recovery from a severe stroke last year and was able to deliver his talk and slide show on *Meconopsis*.

Our afternoon started with a walk round Ramster Garden hosted by Miranda Gunn. The gardens had actually closed to the public for the season the previous weekend, but the autumn colour was still first-rate for our visit. Highlights included *Acer Palmatum* 'Osakasuki' clothed to the ground in vibrant red and the multi-stemmed *Davidia* which was a particularly deep gold this year.



Acer Palmatum 'Osakasuki'



Incredible Autumn Colour

The outstanding plant in the Acer Glade was tall 'Seiryu', still displaying bright yellow cascades of foliage. Nearby, in an island bed, the intense silver foliage of an excellent form of *Rhododendron pachysanthum* provided brilliant contrast to the red hues. Several Blue Atlas Cedars (*Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca') gave a similar effect on the wider scale.

Ramster is of course a well-established garden and some ongoing rejuvenation is required to keep it in first-class condition. This is of particular interest to the many hands-on gardeners within the Group. An over-mature larch had recently been felled and would provide a new planting opportunity. We were shown many young plants in various parts of the garden. The most recent planting was the newly introduced choice form of *Davidia involucrata* named 'Sonama'. This form should produce large bracts at

just a few years old. Nearby grows a young Wollemi Pine (*Wollemia nobilis*) presented to Miranda and Paul by members of the Branch Committee as a 2' plant on the occasion of their golden wedding anniversary six years ago and already three times the size. A further notable young plant was *Franklinia alatamaha*, now becoming established enough to flower for the first time this year. We were too late for the flowers, but it was still displaying good autumn colour.



A young Franklinia Alatomaha



Outstanding Autumn Colour

The major project over the past year has been the clearance of a thicket of *Rhododendron* 'Gomer Waterer' and the planting of 'rhododendrons and companion plants for the 21st Century'. This area already contains several hundred fine and interesting young plants. Within it is the latest of a trio of craft bench seats carved by chainsaw from fallen trees: this one depicts a fox stalking hen and chicks. There was so much to see that we well exceeded the scheduled hour before heading to the tea rooms where we enjoyed delicious homemade blueberry muffins by Jenny.

This was followed by an interesting talk on *Mecanopsis* by Richard Thornton. Richard is a member of the *Mecanopsis* Society as well as being a long-standing leading member of the Wessex Branch of the RCMG. He has made several trips to China and the slides of *Mecanopsis* growing in the wild that accompanied his talk were taken by him on these journeys.

My own knowledge of these plants was sadly lacking. I thought they came in blue and occasionally white and was therefore surprised by the range of colours depicted: all shades of blue and indeed white, but also yellow, pink, red and a lovely deep purple. This was an excellent presentation and a fitting conclusion to the activities of the Wessex Branch for 2016.



Forthcoming Events

Saturday 4th March 2017 – Slide Show at Ramster on Micro Propagation by John Talbot

Address: Ramster, Petworth Road, Chiddingfold, Surrey GU8 4SN

£3 each towards speaker and funds for future events.

10am Meeting for Tea, Coffee & Biscuits

11am Slide show and talk on Micro Propagation in the 1980's by John Talbot

Saturday 15th April 2017 – 2pm. Visit to Maurice Foster's Garden in Kent

Address: White House Farm, High Cross Road, Ivy Hatch, Sevenoaks, Kent TN15 0NN

Maurice's garden has various Rhododendrons, Camellias and especially Magnolias to delight our Group. Of course there are many other plants and trees which will no doubt create a lot of interest.

I know there are many members wanting to go so please contact me regarding this so we can get a handle on the numbers to pass to our host.

Ramster Flower Show, 20th May 2017 (Time to be Confirmed)

Address: Ramster, Petworth Road, Chiddingfold, Surrey GU8 4SN

The emphasis will be on rhododendrons and azaleas for a small garden. We want to show and prove to the public that they are a much more diverse genera than many think.

Happy Gardening!

All the very best

Andy Fly

Chairman of the Wessex Branch

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