

RHS Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia Group



WESSEX BRANCH NEWSLETTER – AUGUST 2017

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Dear Members

Gosh what an eventful year again. So much has passed since our last newsletter!

Micro-Propagation Talk & Slide Show

We started off this year after our February newsletter with a talk and slide show by John Talbot on micro-propagation in the 1980's. John spent his whole life in horticulture, first as a nurseryman and then in sales.

Micro-propagation was unique then bringing in the process of laboratory conditions for temperature and hygiene. The range of plants that could be produced by this method was vast and the quantities unbelievable. The nursery produced acres of uniform sized plants for sale. However, not every plant could be reproduced using this method. I suppose there is always the exception to the rule!

Round Pond nursery where John worked, was a successful enterprise until 1998 when it was sold by the Atkins family to Notcutts. Notcutts eventually closed this arm of the business as they already had a laboratory of their own, but they also ceased micro-propagation in later years.

It is sad that other countries now dominate this field of propagation.



Andy presenting John with a 'thank you'



Very interesting questions and answers session

Garden Visits

Members of the Wessex Branch were fortunate to enjoy two separate garden visits during spring 2017. I show below two excellent appraisals by Brian Long. He is a very valued member of our committee who seems to have a photographic memory. He can walk around a garden, taking no notes and then can recall

minute details later. How we all envy him as I do not know about you, but our memories seem to be fading!

Visit to Maurice Foster's Garden 15th April 2017 – White House Farm, Kent

Maurice and his garden are of course well known to many members of the group. The Wessex Branch had last visited in May 2011 and it proved most interesting to compare growth and further plantings in these six years. A past chairman of the Group, Maurice is closely associated with Magnolias and in particular the introduction of many new varieties from America. This was immediately evident in the main garden surrounding the house on three sides where we commenced our visit. There is a good section of notable yellow hybrid magnolias as well as more traditional varieties including 'George Henry Kern', recommended by Maurice as reliably free-flowering and long-lasting. However, for many of us there was one really outstanding magnolia on the day: 'Daybreak'.



We had in fact seen this as a very young plant back in 2011; then it was some 6ft tall with just three flowers, now at least three times the size, a good shape and covered in vibrant yet subtle coral pink flowers. Maurice had sited it away from the main magnolia beds among some dark conifers and this seemed ideal as it really lit up this area and was a great stand-alone plant.

This original garden area extends to five acres and contains a great many really fine trees and shrubs. We could have spent the entire afternoon in this area and it would still have been a great day out. However, many years ago Maurice also acquired an adjoining 7 acre field and 3 acre woodland that he has developed into a wonderful and really comprehensive collection of trees and shrubs. The field slopes gently to the north away from the house and the woodland is mostly situated towards the top of the hill and hence provides relatively frost-free conditions. The planting within the grass field had taken place over many years in a series of mostly rectangular beds laid out on a grid system. This was very apparent at the time of our previous visit. However, growth had been so substantial that the character was now of a natural woodland garden.

One particularly notable tree growing on the woodland fringe was *Quercus crassifolia*, a rare and unusual oak from Mexico. This has bold leathery leaves with striking red to white felted indumentum on the reverse. It is technically evergreen but unfortunately only borderline hardy and not at its best and at the end of a British winter. Maurice's tree is thought to have particularly reddish indumentum and attempts

are being made to introduce it to the trade under the cultivar name 'Flamingo'. Surely worth trying in a sheltered garden when it can be obtained.

Walking down to the highest part of the former field two fine young *Sequoiadendron giganteum* stood out. They were probably around 10m in height and fine plants, but what really made them stand out was that Maurice had cleared all the lower branches to a height of at least 2m. I have seen this approach taken with other conifers elsewhere and not always approved, but with this species it was really effective. Striking views of the North Downs several miles away could be glimpsed looking past the trunks.

Later in our walk we came across a young specimen of the very fine and seldom seen conifer *Abies delavayi* from south-west China. This was like a choice form of the better known Korean Fir, *Abies koreana*, which Maurice also grows. The Chinese plant had even more intense deep violet cones. One further notable conifer was growing towards the north-east corner of the field. This was the striking Wollemi Pine, *Wollemia nobilis*. The remarkable story of its discovery and introduction to cultivation is well known and most of our great gardens now grow at least one. However, Maurice's plant is the largest and finest that I have yet seen. It must have been one of the first planted in this country and very well placed to allow room for growth in decades to come.

On leaving the field to the eastern side, the winding path descends to the lowest part of the garden. Halfway along this path was *Rhododendron calophytum* around 1.5m in height but some four times wider giving a bold horizontal shape; a really impressive landscape plant that was much photographed on the day. A good collection of species rhododendrons was growing in the woodland leading back to the house. Also just beyond these we were shown Maurice's trial planting of various newly introduced Camellias, some very rare and some borderline hardy. They tend to have interesting often tinted foliage and unusual flower buds. The current 2017 yearbook contains an interesting article about these camellias written by Maurice himself at pages 20 – 27.

Another delicate plant that caught our eye was a *Melliodendron*.



Melliodendron

Various birch trees were a particularly attractive feature throughout the gardens. The field contained several clumps of birch seedlings just maturing enough to display their bark. The main garden is enhanced by mature birch growing as lawn specimens. These included a really impressive *Betula utilis* 'Jermyns' with smooth creamy white bark, which contrasted with the copper shades of various forms of *B. albo-sinensis*. However, one birch was new to many of us; with a nice mixture of pride and amusement Maurice introduced us to *B. dahurica* 'Maurice Foster', a graceful tree with unusual tightly peeling bark in various shades of brown.

In a short article it is quite impossible to do justice to the vast and comprehensive range of plants growing at Whitehouse Farm. Indeed, even though our walk lasted for the entire afternoon, we probably only explored less than half the grounds. One member told me he was on his eight visit and still finding more to see. Many of the plants have been grown from seed collected in the wild by some of the finest plantsmen including of course Maurice himself.



Tea & Cakes in Maurice's Garden Which Were Greatly Received!

Isabella Plantation in Richmond Park

Just a couple of weeks later on 7 May we were fortunate to visit the Isabella Plantation in Richmond Park. Several of us had missed the visit in the centenary year as a result of being on duty and were particularly pleased to have this opportunity.

We assembled at the Broomfield Gate in the south-east corner of the plantation and were met by Jo Scrivener, Assistant Park Superintendent and the equally knowledgeable head gardener Gary Scarffe along with the senior gardener Dick Farr who kindly gave up much of their Sunday to show us around.

This was my first visit to the Plantation, but apparently until recently much of it had been overgrown by *R. ponticum*; which has been cleared during the last few years. Our tour commenced through some cleared woodland towards the east of the plantation where some new planting had commenced and adjacent established shrubs were gradually regaining their correct shapes.

Within the woodland, there is an extensive nursery area that is not open to the public, but which fortunately Jo permitted us to enter. As well as growing on young plants, this acts as a safe holding area for stock plants and for plants awaiting planting out within the plantation and many of the 'Wilson 50' collection of Kurume Azaleas are to be found here. We were also shown the various propagation facilities of much interest to most members.

After spending some time in the nursery, Jo suggested we head for a clearing in the centre of the Plantation. The route took us through more woodland with many fine trees throughout. At the edge of

the wood, on entering the clearing, we came across a Pocket Handkerchief Tree, *Davidia involucrata*, in full flower. Jo told us that eight were growing within the Plantation, each with slightly different characteristics and with differing flowering so that some would be in flower throughout May. We were really fortunate that this particular tree was at peak on the day of our visit. This is one of my favourite species and there are several fine specimens in Surrey gardens that I look forward to visiting regularly, but this magnificent tree was the best yet. It had a strong straight trunk and excellent even branching all round, giving a full, bushy shape from head height to the tip some 40ft above. Moreover, on the day it was covered very evenly with the large good shaped bracts that we always love to see.

The adjoining large grassy clearing is a surprising contrast to what we had seen previously and apparently is very popular with sunbathers. Island beds contain a collection of *Rhododendron yakushimanum* hybrids including the seven dwarfs and other early crosses.

For me, 'Grumpy' stood out as having fine foliage and distinctive colour flowers. Various large specimen trees including *Liriodendron*, *Nyssa*, *Metasequoia* and *Parrotia* are growing towards the fringes of this glade, which must be especially beautiful in autumn.

After spending several minutes admiring the view across Thomson's Pond, to the west of the glade, Jo led us to the famous Still Pond, planted in the classical Japanese style with maples and banks of Kurume Azaleas and indeed complete with mandarin ducks at the time of our visit.

We then proceeded towards the north-west corner of the Plantation to see another area of very different character. There is a bog garden, which eventually leads to a large pond known as Peg's Pond created in a natural style and this really seems to be part of the English countryside.



This was the opposite corner of the Plantation to our start point and we returned along meandering paths through woodland towards the south. We continued to come across many fine plants and vistas at every turn.

There was a good sized *Rhododendron augustinii chasmanthum* covered with bright pale blue flowers that was much admired.



augustinii chasmanthum

Further along, we were intrigued by massed plantings of unnamed but interesting deciduous azaleas, some with double or semi-double flowers.

There was a large multi-stemmed *Betula utilis jaquemontii* and a really fine *Betula albo-sinensis septentrionalis*.

Towards the end of our tour Jo pointed out another birch that he thought very highly of: by happy coincidence this was *Betula dahurica* 'Maurice Foster'.

Special mention should be made of the parakeets that were overhead in the trees throughout our visit. At first we found them to be charming, but rather less so after a couple of hours listening to them.

All the many local residents and especially the human ones are very fortunate to have this wonderful and unique garden available nearby.

Ramster Flower Show, 20th May 2017

As you are all aware, last year the Wessex Branch sacrificed our own flower show so that members could help with the Centenary celebrations. We all thoroughly enjoyed the Centenary, but I must admit it is nice to get back to our own branch events!

We are very fortunate to have such a beautiful venue to hold our shows. The added bonus is the excellent tea room that provides lunches and delicious cakes after the show. Thank you Miranda!

The show this year was judged by Colin Tomlin and the steward was John David. There were many new entrants and I would like to personally thank John David for putting them all at ease and helping to explain how to exhibit. Also, Colin spent time with members over lunch explaining what the judges look for when they are judging.

As Miranda had been on Gardener's World on the Friday, the visitors to Ramster that week-end were incredible and they had the added bonus of seeing our flower show!



It is so nice to see how keen members were and we all admired all the exhibits that were on show this year.

At our annual flower show at Ramster, we try hard to keep the format as simple as possible to encourage people to enter.

This year Richard Thornton produced a marvelous display of rhododendron leaves for the visiting public to see the diversity of our genera. This proved to be a huge success.



Leaf Display by Richard Thornton

New Entrants 2017

The following new entrants all managed to achieve the following prizes:

Dan Turner	2 x 2 nd
Jim Inskip & Trudy Breen	2 x 1 st , 2 x 2 nd , 2 x 3 rd
Neil & Myra Usher	2 x 1 st , 1 x 3 rd
Jackie & Fred Woodhams	1 x 3 rd
Rod & Mary White	2 x 1 st , 1 x 2 nd , 4 x 3 rd
Brian Wright	4 x 1 st , 1 x 2 nd
Mark Oddy	2 x 2 nd
Russell Beeson	3 x 1 st (including Best in Show) 2 x 2 nd , 2 x 3 rd

Well done Russell for some exceptional entries. The Best in Show was Buddleja colvilei and Russell takes home the cup for 2017.



Exhibit Buddleja colvilei by Russell Beeson



Ramster Cup being presented to Russell by John David

Summer BBQ, Sarum, Church Lane, Worplesdon GU3 3RU – Sunday, 13th August 2017 at 11am.

As detailed in our recent email, Jenny & I look forward to seeing members that can make it to the barbecue. Let's hope that the weather is kind to us

Future Talk (1) - 'Wanderings in the Wild'

Wednesday 11th October, 2017 at 7.30pm in the Tea Room at Ramster

Rama Lopez-Rivera to do a talk on his travels looking for plants in the wild. He hopes that this will be a warm up before his lecture next year at the Rhododendron Conference in Germany.

Future Talk (2) – Maddenias

Saturday 2nd December, 2017 at 10.30am in the Tea Room at Ramster

Russell Beeson will be doing a talk on Maddenias. He will also be telling us of his travels.

Autumn Walk/Garden Visit

Do any members have any suggestions?

Finally, before I close, I must congratulate Brian Long, our treasurer, for winning the Centenary Cup at Wisley this year. He turned up with a small cardboard box saying that he could not find anything worth bringing except for an unknown deciduous azalea he managed to find in flower!



With very best wishes

Andy Fly

Chairman of the Wessex Branch