

RHS Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia Group



WESSEX BRANCH NEWSLETTER – FEBRUARY 2020

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Dear Members,

I started this newsletter on the 9th February 2020 as even with the greatest will in the world, I did not think I would have achieved much in the garden that day with Storm Ciara. The strong wind gusts were frequent and alarming. The plus side I suppose is that any dead heading and pruning I missed should have been taken care of! It is now a week later and we have had Storm Dennis. More strong winds but even more rain. I hope that you have all remained safe and your gardens have managed to weather the storm.

The Items below cover our events since our last newsletter.

09.11.2019 – 1st AGM, Ramster Tea Rooms, Petworth Road, Chiddingfold, Surrey GU8 4SN

We arrived at Ramster Garden at 10.30am to enjoy refreshments before our Autumn walk around the woodland garden. Considering the strong winds a week earlier, there was still a huge amount of leaf colour to see.



Not far into the walk we sighted a magnificent *Acer Palmatum Seiryu* and several *Acer dissectum*s.

Parrotia persica was just coming into its own as was *Metasequoia Windrush*. Many of our native trees, especially the oaks with their many hues of colour stood out against the dark greens of the mature conifers such as a magnificent *Sequoia giganteum* Wellingtonia.

The bog garden has now become quite eye catching with many different ferns to view and the new Centenary garden already looks well established. This garden takes on a different aspect each time I visit.



There was so much more to see and I had a job to round everyone up to get back to the tearoom for lunch and the raffle.

Thank you, members for your generosity in donating so many plants and gifts for the raffle which turned out to be great fun with winners taking home some incredible specimens. Two donations were too good to raffle and we decided to auction them which proved a huge success. Many thanks for these to Therese McKenzie and David Millais.



Many points were raised and discussed with members at the AGM meeting to which I would like to thank them for, especially ideas on trying to encourage young people to take an interest in our genera. I would also like to thank Brian Long our Treasurer who does a sterling job behind the scenes in maintaining our finances.

It was so rewarding for the committee and myself to know that whenever we need it, help will be forthcoming.

16.11.2019 – Talk & Slide Show on Italian Gardens by Rosemary Legrand



This talk featured the seasonal splendour largely around the gardens of Lake Maggiore. It also took in the architecture and explored various islands and nurseries.

Rosemary had everyone enthralled with the beautiful scenery including the snow peaked mountains reflected in the lakes. The baroque architecture of many of the houses, follies and chapels clothed with various citrus trees cleverly clipped were unforgettable and brought back memories to those among the audience lucky enough to have visited with Rosemary.

Some of the camellia nurseries that they visited on the tour were amazing in size and plant quantity.

One of the gardens visited was the late Sir Peter Smithers, a former intelligence officer, politician, diplomat and also a well noted gardener. He laid out the garden at Vico Morcote in Switzerland mostly with magnolias which he loved and planted them at a lower level to his house deliberately so that as they matured, he looked out directly into the canopy of the trees where he could admire the flowers.

His garden and others displayed so many varieties of our genera, trees, shrubs and plants that below are only a list of the ones that captured my attention:

Rhododendron	Camellia	Other Trees/Shrubs/Plants
Ririei	Japonica Fimbriata	Corylopsis
Seta	Magnoliaflora	Pinus Montezumae
	Snowman	Prunus Kursar
	Villa de Nantes	Clematis armondii Snowdrift
		Acacia Riceana
		Edgeworthia Chrysantha

The hour long talk went far too quickly, but was followed by tea, coffee and biscuits allowing members and guests to discuss all the they had just seen. Thank you, Rosemary for an excellent afternoon.

25.01.2020 – Talk & Slide Show on Magnolias in the UK and New Zealand by Rod Wild

Report by Brian Long

Some 30 members of the Wessex Branch gathered to enjoy an illustrated talk given by magnolia expert and enthusiast Rod Wild, covering both New Zealand and the UK.



Rod and his wife Val had taken part in the International Magnolia Group's trip to New Zealand in 2003 and had taken many stunning photos of magnolias and other plants and also the spectacular scenery. He felt New Zealand was the ideal place to start his presentation as it is regarded as the magnolia capital of the world as a result of the near-perfect climate that has also attracted magnolia breeding on a most impressive scale.

The Jury family at Tikorangi nursery have bred many of the very best large flowered hybrids now grown worldwide. Rod included lovely photos of 'Athene'; 'Iolanthe'; 'Vulcan'; and several examples of M. 'Felix Jury', probably the most spectacular of all with really large flowers in a vibrant shade of pink. Mark Jury had named this plant in honour of his late father and one photo pictured him together with the original plant growing amid a grove of sister seedlings at the nursery (the parentage being M. 'Lanarth' x M. *sargentiana robusta*). This hybrid is becoming widely available and often known simply as 'Felix', although sadly it has proved rather tricky to grow and the large flowers seem prone to weather damage.

A very pleasant surprise was that the presentation included several examples of rhododendrons growing at Pukeiti. *R. macabeaenum* was acknowledged as the biggest rhododendron in New Zealand at 50'x50', a perfect shape and covered in good yellow flowers at the time of the visit. However, the slide that impressed the most was of *R. 'Rubicon'*, which had perfect rich red flowers complemented by the most amazing glossy foliage.

Our three genera were completed with a lovely slide of *Camellia 'Night rider'* growing in the garden of breeder Peter Cave. This was most unusual, with darkest red flowers contrasting with prominent yellow anthers.

Rod also treated us to slides of interesting and attractive plants beyond our three genera and of the beautiful and stunning New Zealand scenery, often with clear water and a backdrop of snow-topped mountains. Particularly impressive were magnificent shapely tall tree ferns that were indeed the height of tall trees that would dwarf even the largest specimens growing in Cornish gardens.

The UK section of the talk focussed on Rod's favourite magnolias, based in particular on his experiences at his own garden at Frosbury Farmhouse, situated a few miles north-west of Guildford. Rod emphasised that the growing conditions were challenging. The soil is predominantly heavy clay with very little topsoil and the garden is prone to frosts in early spring. Magnolias need to be tough to thrive. Experience has shown that magnolias with a good degree of *M. liliflora* in the parentage are the most reliable and this is reflected in Rod's very top favourites mentioned later.

In Rod's case the traditional top 10 had to be stretched to top 11. The plant that made this necessary, coming in at number 11, is therefore especially worthy: *M. stellata* 'Jane Platt'. Although placed at number 11, it is also Rod's selection for best small magnolia and therefore would be first choice for many people's gardens today. The audience endorsed this as the best pink *stellata*.

Rod expected his choice for best yellow, magnolia 'Yellow Bird', placed at number 9, to be more controversial and so it proved. The flowers appear rather late in the season and tend to be obscured by the leaves, which is generally regarded as a fault. However, Rod showed a slide of the tree at Frosbury with plenty of good yellow flowers sitting atop lush foliage, which gave a lovely effect. There was a good deal of support from the audience for *M. 'Daphne'* for good strong yellow flowers.

The rare species *M. zennii* is a longstanding speciality of Rod's and he awarded this 6th place as best early flowerer. It often commences flowering in late winter but most significantly Rod assures us that the flowers are able to withstand frost. It is amazing that this is not more widely grown or even known. If only it were more widely available.....

Rod selected four magnolias as especially outstanding plants that he particularly recommends.

4th place went to the old hybrid *M. 'Spectrum'* (*M. spregeri* 'Diva' x *M. liliflora*), as it is tough and reliable with a good show of erect reddish-pink flowers.

3rd place went to *M. 'Star Wars'* (*M. cambellii* x *M. liliflora*), which was also strongly recommended by Sir Peter Smithers following his own trials in Switzerland.

2nd place went to *M. 'Daybreak'* (*M. 'Woodsman'* x *M. 'Tina Durio'*). This has a good fastigiated habit and lovely pink flowers. Branch members have much admired this plant during some of our previous garden visits.

Finally, Rod currently awards 1st place to *M. 'Aurora'* (*M. 'Star Wars'* x *M. sargentiana robusta*). This has inherited the best qualities from 'Star Wars' but has lovely pink 'cup and saucer' shaped flowers that are certainly more attractive to my eye. I am now really keen to see it in flower first-hand, as if Rod considers it even better than 'Daybreak' it must be good!

This was a really informative and entertaining talk, with a good deal of interaction. Despite the challenging conditions Rod and Val have created a lovely garden at Frosbury, where the Branch have enjoyed several past visits and we hopefully look forward to more in the future.

Chairman:

Our autumn and winter programmes have again been well attended. The branches are important to the continuity of our horticultural societies. They are open universities to us all to learn more about the plants we all love.

Some people love showing, others technical aspects, i.e., taxonomy, others propagating and not to forget those that love networking and socialising! We have met so many new friends and accumulated so many more plants since joining the Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia Group, especially the Wessex Branch.

As long as we evolve with current trends, smaller plants for smaller gardens etc., we will continue to thrive.

Let's look forward to a positive 2020 and keep promoting our genera.

With very best wishes

Andy Fly

Chairman of the Wessex Branch.