



# RCMG SW Branch News

Spring 2023

## Editor's welcome – Notes from a Devon Garden

Welcome to the latest edition of the regional newsletter. It's been a busy winter in the garden at Greenway. The dry February was an enormous help in allowing us to get jobs done although we seem to have paid for it in March. Of course, I should be careful what I wish for as the memory of last summer still lingers in the air and I hear that the dry winter has done little to alleviate the issue of drought which looms ever present. We are still waiting for various plants that struggled last summer to decide if they are going to bud-up this spring before we officially declare them as victims of the drought and take a mattock to them. Thankfully, most are showing promise although there are undoubtedly going to be casualties. The waiting game goes on.

Many plants of our three genera have been making the most of the calm February and have flowered prolifically. One very early camellia, currently labelled as *Camellia japonica* 'Devonia' (right) (although this is suspect) has been flowering since January and still has some blooms on it now. The magnolias have also benefited from the calm weather with the large *Magnolia campbellii* surviving its whole flowering season without being hit by frost, heavy rain or wind.

The early winter was dominated by tree surgery. We have a lot of mature *Fagus sylvatica* on site, many of which are playing host to various fungi that do little to prolong their lives. One of the biggest challenges we faced was to do with the beech trees on the main drive, several of which have *Meripilus giganteus* which are slowly eating away at their roots. This particular fungus makes me nervous, and rightly so, when I think of the numerous stories of near misses and unexpected tree failures.

Through November, we had a team of tree surgeons on site reducing the crowns of 5 trees and 'monolithing' two others in order to take the sail out and reduce the stress on the root-plate. We'll continue to monitor the trees each year with planned phased reduction every two years minimum. By phasing these trees' decline and using techniques such as coronet cuts, mimicking the result of a natural snap in a branch or trunk, we are able to maximise their potential for wildlife, creating cracks, holes and areas of rot beneficial to bats, birds, insects and a whole host of other organisms that would naturally take advantage of a declining tree. It's all too tempting to remove the tree in its entirety on the grounds of safety but in doing so, we would deprive vital ecosystems of valuable material.

We've also removed two large *Laurus nobilis* from above the Rockery as we start to clear Meyer's unique creation and prepare for restoration. Above this Rockery in spring is a carpet of *Narcissus cyclamineus*. Whilst we'd realised that these beautiful daffodils would now be visible from the rear of the house and the dining room, we hadn't appreciated just how impactful the view upwards would be. This will only be enhanced when other shrubs and small trees are removed from the Rockery. Similarly, the view down from the path above the Rockery now affords magnificent views of the many magnolias that adorn the front of the mansion with the backdrop of the Dart.

On a less destructive note, we've also done a lot of planting this winter including many rhododendrons amongst which *Rhododendron souliei*, *R. 'Cilpinense'* and *R. maddenii* ssp. *maddenii* which I look forward to seeing as they grow. It was also a real pleasure to return to Rosemoor for the early spring shows after a hiatus of, I think, 3 years for me. It was lovely to see so many familiar faces there and just to spend some time marvelling at the many plants we all grow.

I hope you enjoy this edition of the newsletter. Suggestions, comments and contributions are always welcome. If you would like to contribute to the newsletter, no matter how short or long your thoughts, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me, Pam Hayward or John Marston.

Ashley Brent



## Branch Chairman's Foreword

As I write this, spring is definitely in the air; the birds are singing, daffodils are out and the new lambs in the neighbouring field are bleating and skipping. It has been a strange season, and here in North Devon, we have been behind in our magnolia flowering, although the camellias have been unperturbed by the heat, drought, frost, and deluges of rain; flowering serenely through it all. I think we have seen the back of the very cold weather now, so the garden should settle down. Indeed, the magnolias here are playing catch-up.



Apart from *Magnolia campbellii* 'Darjeeling' and *M.* 'Caerhays Belle', a lovely early magnolia to flower here is *Magnolia denudata* 'Scented Gem', found in the garden of the late John Gallagher by Kevin Hughes. It has a wonderful scent and lives up to its name. It is also not too big a grower and of a pleasing shape. Growing next to it is a very old (35 years plus) *Buddleia farreri*, from the late Jimmy Smart at Marwood Hill which flowers in March and is an almost glowing blue colour. Both together make a very pleasing combination (left).

It is only a few weeks since our Spring Show at Rosemoor which was a great success and remarkably well supported by exhibitors in spite of the season's late start. More about the show later.

I am hoping that Pam Hayward, who is doing so much for our branch and for the group as a whole, might send out late notifications about our members' gardens which are flowering well. Could you let her know if you would like to share your garden with others if it is looking particularly good. Many of our members open their gardens for the National Gardens Scheme and it is worth looking at their website for spring gardens to visit.

Ian Gillbard, ably assisted by Joanne Court, has organised interesting visits for us, about which you will be hearing soon. We will keep in touch. Meanwhile, I send you my best wishes for a happy season ahead.

*John Marston*

## Searching for Tyerman's Legacy

Truth be told, five years ago I wasn't that interested in camellias, rhododendrons and magnolias. Thirty years of living and gardening in Cornwall had made me appreciate them for their bold spring displays, but it was the exotic 'jungle' plants that thrive in the mild, wet Cornish climate that filled my gardens.

All this changed back in 2017 when I started work at Roseland Parc, a retirement village in Tregony, Cornwall. The gardens were a mishmash of old and new, with no real theme or connection but did contain a modest collection of our three genera. Carrying out some early clearance work in the older areas of the garden and finding lost features led me to start researching the history of the grounds as a guide to how to more sympathetically restore things. It didn't take long to find the name John Simpson Tyerman, who owned the old house on site, Penlee, in the 19th Century.

Tyerman was a Kew trained horticulturist and highly regarded plantsman, who made his name as the curator of the botanic gardens in Liverpool. He formed connections across the globe, bringing in plant material new to science and conversing with Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, amongst other esteemed names in plant collecting. He was a keen collector of ferns, and is remembered by an interesting species named for him, *Davallia tyermanii* (right) the silver hare's foot fern. He was also an avid shell collector and has a sea snail named after him!





He retired early to a life of leisure in Cornwall in 1871, taking over the house and its grounds, which included a productive walled garden. However, it is only in the last couple of years I have found out that he appears to have had a go at rhododendron breeding when I discovered *Rhododendron* ‘Tyermanii’ – a hybrid between *R. formosum* and *R. nuttallii*.



I’ve been lucky enough to see a couple of specimens of this plant here in Cornwall at Glendurgan (*left*) and Lamorran, and what a beautiful thing it is, with large, heavily scented creamy white flowers, flushed pink with a yellow base. What isn’t certain is whether Tyerman bred this plant himself, or if it was named after him by someone else. If he did breed it, was this his only success?

Sadly his retirement wasn’t long, and he died aged just 58 in 1889. After his death the house was bought by J. C. Williams of Caerhays fame, who appears to have set about removing many of the

specimens, explaining how “*most of my gardening friends then shared in the loot*”.

In the days before garden centres, collecting rare and unusual plant species often involved travelling the world, so finding a horticultural cornucopia for sale on his doorstep may well have been a major attraction when buying the property. In Tyerman’s letters, (sent to me by the wonderful Stephen Lyus who happened to be researching Tyerman from the Liverpool end of his story) he mentions visiting Tregothnan and the house of Rev. John T. Boscawen of Lamorran, (brother of Lord Falmouth) who according to Tyerman, “*takes particular interest in Rhododendrons of which he has a very good knowledge... he has the direction to a great extent of his brother’s grounds as well as his own where a very large collection of Camellias and Rhododendrons are growing*”.

If anyone knows any more of Tyerman’s foray into rhododendrons I would be very interested. I can be contacted at [bobmehen@googlemail.com](mailto:bobmehen@googlemail.com).

*Bob Mehen*

## Notes from a Cornish Garden

If you want to bet on conversation topics for gardeners, your safe money is on the weather, shortly followed by comparing when plants come into growth; be it year-upon-year or region-to-region comparisons. The two are intertwined, and particularly dominate much of our thoughts around this time of year as we try to navigate the likelihood of rogue frosts, fool’s springs, dry springs and whatever else the weather feels like throwing at us.

So, true to type, I’ll start with the weather. Hot on the heels of the heatwave and driest summer/autumn we’ve experienced for some time, we had an extremely cold (for us) week in December that did its best to rival the heat and dry for causing havoc. We are still yet to see the full impact of the heatwave and drought, but the cold was quick to leave its mark. Again, some of our more borderline plants were predictably at risk, plus those that we have perhaps taken for granted being able to easily grow as perennials outdoors. We even lost quite a few plants in the polytunnels! Our entrance route borders took quite a hit, and we now have some gaps to fill this season; or more optimistically new opportunities to plant. As with the heatwave, it highlighted the different microclimates across the garden with the same taxa faring from dead to completely untouched, sometimes within the same border. One unexpected joy was finding *Westringia fruticosa* (*right*) completely unscathed and happily throwing out flowers in January in the three sites we have it planted. Definitely one to go on the propagation list this year.





It's a lesson in patience and steady nerves. We've become accustomed to having lots of plant growth happening on our main entrance borders by the start of season opening in mid-February, so it was somewhat demoralising find so much dead or knocked back by a few months. We're still trying to exercise patience and holding fire on ripping out and replacing some plants, with the window for resurrection not quite fully passed. But it's the very visitors that we worry about impressing who sometimes remind us just how good we have it here with their comments about how much further ahead and greener we are compared to their home gardens, even after the frosts.

Which brings me neatly to gardener conversation topic number two – timings of plants coming into growth or bloom. We pin our year to it, the order plants spring into life around the garden becoming a living calendar. And any irregularities throw us all of a dither! Dramatic perhaps, but whether you're a garden open to the public hoping not to disappoint, waiting for your favourite shrub placed by the kitchen window to enjoy viewing at breakfast, or pensively willing that favourite rhododendron to flower in time for the next flower show, timing is key.



After a racing start and our early camellias such as *C. 'Cornish Snow'* and *C. 'Minato-no-akebono'* flowering from November through to March, things slowed down with the magnolias flowering somewhere nearer a normal time instead of their early entrance of recent years. For us this was beneficial as in some years our campbellii magnolias will have gone over, or close to,

before we've even opened our gates to visitors. This year the large *Magnolia campbellii* Alba Group that hangs over the maze (above right)<sup>1</sup> was still in mid-flower at garden opening. Interestingly though, *M. stellata* was our first into flower this year, beating the campbelliis by a week or two. Not quite the magnolia super bloom we had last year, but they are still putting on a good show. Perhaps a combination of over exuberant flowering followed by heatwave and drought last year has taken its toll. Our most popular camellia this year has been *Camellia 'Buddha'* (above left)<sup>2</sup>, the massive blowsy hot pink flowers countered by a graceful open habit and narrow leaves. Or 'the camellia that looks a bit like a rhododendron' as one visitor described it – it was the droopy leaves I guess.

As I type, the rhododendrons are getting into their stride, started as ever by *Rhododendron irroratum* (right), always one to keep an eye on for the early show bench, followed by *R. barbatum* another early show stalwart though we never manage to get it to keep well after cutting. We've thrown ourselves into showing this year. By 'we' I mostly mean Harriet and Jamie who have gone 'full show' and were last seen coveting wicker baskets and fending off camellia flower stealing mice in our shed. But that's a story for another time...

Nicola Johnson



Photo credits: 1 Harriet English, 2 Jamie Pikesley



# From the West End to the Wild West: the path to ‘Wheal Jenny’

On a plateau, nestling in the hills, hidden away 500 feet above the River Tamar stood ‘Wheal Jenny’ – an unusual wooden house surrounded by mature gardens, seemingly planted with a galaxy of desirable trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. With similarities to JMW Turner’s painting *Crossing the Brook*, it had a commanding view of the river, the old railway viaduct linking Devon and Cornwall and the ancient quays of Calstock.

Plymothian by birth, I’d been living in a place that couldn’t be more different – Soho, in London’s West End. As ‘The Soho Gardener’, I was designing and creating gardens from there; roof gardens, atriums and courtyards for film companies and ad agencies. However, from 2000, due to family responsibilities, I found myself increasingly back in the West Country and had decided to look for a country property. In ‘the smoke’, the constraints of the ‘bijou rectangle’ had long instilled in me the desire to garden on a greater scale, imagining an elysian idyll where plants painted their own pictures within a natural landscape. And, importantly, somewhere I could indulge my passion for bamboos. So, eventually, after many years of searching, in the autumn of 2008 I found myself gazing in disbelief at the very manifestation of my dream.

The moniker ‘Wheal Jenny’, was coined after the Medieval/Edwardian silver and lead mine nearby. The vendors, Tony and Pam Neave, had been gardening earnestly here since 1982, completely transforming what was once a market garden site and totally blank canvas, into the opulent garden that now confronted me; a legacy beyond measure. The Neaves’ planting near the house occupied approximately one acre, leaving a further five and a half acres of wild uncultivated countryside; wooded and steeply sloping in parts, with a spring meandering through the foot of the valley. At the front, the aforementioned river view faces north-west – the sun setting full square in front of the house by midsummer. Below the plateau, at the sides, are many acers, magnolias, oaks, birches, a huge *Cornus controversa* ‘Variegata’ (the wedding cake tree), cherries and mature eucalypts, as the garden unfolds through short wooded walks towards a pergola, greenhouse and vegetable garden, before ending, (in this direction at least) at another ridge – a 40 to 50 foot drop, like a giant ha-ha... the old railway cutting!

Leaving the conservatory at the side, and crossing the terrace, a gate leads into an arboretum, now augmented and ameliorated with numerous stands of different bamboos between the trees. Turning right, up towards the top of the ground, a raised bank clothed with ancient oaks and carpeted with ferns, stretches as far as the eye can see. This top run, and much of the valley below, was almost impenetrable. Massive brambles erupted from the tops of trees – bracken and nettles were everywhere; ash, beech, birch, hazel, holly and oak, jostling as rogue seedlings. To facilitate traversing the slopes, pathways were needed, cut slalom fashion across terrain that in places would prove to be deep stratal slate, on very precipitous ground. When my contractor and I first surveyed the site together, hacking our way through the jungle at the very top, the most breathtaking view imaginable was revealed. Buzzards circled below, their mewing cries punctuating the silence. “Nice place for a seat”, ventured my companion. “How about a big chestnut deck?” I countered. Pause. In unison: “Wow!”.



*Over the hills and far away – the view up the river to Endsleigh*



Below the deck, walkways and linking pathways were fashioned with three large staircases built from railway sleepers linking the newly formed ‘tranches’ of land; simple oak-topped benches positioned throughout. A most revealing advantage of the steep terrain is the ability to look at plants from different viewpoints and angles whilst travelling through the garden – above, parallel and below. At the bottom of the valley runs a spring risen from higher ground, gurgling down in cascades and waterfalls as it runs behind a fascinating tree covered ‘island’, then downstream, entering a natural bowl-shaped amphitheatre. In spring, thousands of *Narcissus* ‘Princeps’ carpet the ground here. Contemplating this ‘Rivendell’ landscape with wonder, I realised that by rerouting the stream slightly, we could make a natural pool. At its tail, another deck – the overflow from the pool forming an impressive waterfall underneath and behind, as the stream, now a torrent, sped its way through a culvert towards the Tamar below.

Upward again, under the vast canopy of a line of enormous beeches, a kissing gate leads directly into the most amazing garden feature – a 40 foot deep gorge – the old railway (*right*) ... a ‘cutting garden’, dear Mr Beeching having decommissioned the line in 1968. Untouched for fifty years, its sheer sides embroidered with native ferns, and massive slabs of exposed slate, dripping with jewel-like droplets of water. The floor, a carpet of ferns, moss and ivy, in a woodland of native trees, self-seeded in the detritus of the years - their monstrous, moss covered, claw-like roots invading the surface of the snaking pathway. Originally, and unbelievably, dug by hand by Dartmoor prisoners in the 1880s, here it was now, an emerald, verdant underworld roamed by deer, badgers, foxes et al, with bats silently negotiating the gloaming.



Now, fourteen years on, after continuous planting and development, with occasional valued help from horticultural students and volunteers, Wheal Jenny has evolved into a very beautiful, naturalistic, wild landscape garden. Membership of the RCM Group has proved pivotal in furnishing the garden; one visitor amusingly described it as ‘The Eden Project, without the bubble wrap’.

The old railway is planted with a luscious cornucopia of tree ferns, bamboos, palms and other exotics. The excavated foundations of an old cattle shed are now transformed into a firepit courtyard, replete with ‘Versailles tubs’ fashioned from old stillages filled with *Hydrangea* ‘Ayesha’. Circular tables made from old cable drums are positioned throughout the walks, with comfortable seating to enable visitors to linger and enjoy the many different vistas. Throughout the garden, hundreds of rhododendrons, camellias, magnolias, hydrangeas and many other rare trees and shrubs luxuriate in the ethos. Over 550 bamboos, including the new blue caned *Borinda* species from Tibet (*left*), contribute evergreen visual grace and elegance; stirred by the merest kiss of a breeze, their gentle susurrus also enhancing the soundscape of the valley.

*John Bailey*

Wheal Jenny Garden, Tuckermarsh is open to garden societies and by appointment. New garden volunteers are always welcome. Please contact John Bailey on 01822 840860 or 07876 413387.

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## Rosemoor Spring Flower Show, 11-12 March 2023

While much of the country was shivering in the snow and ice of yet another cold snap, the weather was being a little kinder to us in the southwest. Yes, it was miserable, with sleet, rain and little sun, but at least we were above freezing and our gardens were starting to blossom, albeit about a week later than normal. So, once again, slightly against the odds, the Early Spring Show at Rosemoor was a resounding success and perhaps more varied than ever.

As before, the RHS Early Camellia and Daffodil Competitions shared the Garden Room with the SW Branch Early Magnolia, Rhododendron and Spring Ornamentals Competitions. All this took a lot of organising, for which we are particularly grateful to Jonathan Webster and his team from RHS Rosemoor, Georgina Barter from the RHS Shows Department and Pam Hayward from the SW Branch.





It was not surprising that the magnolias were few in number and were dominated by two Cornish gardens – Caerhays and Botallick – who both brought some magnificent exhibits. The most spectacular was a huge vase of *Magnolia* ‘Caerhays Belle’ (above left), which won the Lamellen Cup for Caerhays, who also took away the Brother Vincent SSF Cup for the best single bloom, won as so often by a colossal flower of *M. ‘Felix Jury’* (above right)<sup>1</sup> – what a wonderful magnolia this is.

Rhododendrons were also a bit sparse and again Caerhays and Botallick saved the day, though it was good to see Hergest Croft also providing some nice exhibits, along with several other exhibitors, both professional and amateur. For me, the most outstanding exhibit was *Rhododendron moulmainense* (below left), a large spray of which was exhibited by Caerhays. The superb fragrant pale mauve flowers of this tender plant are rarely seen in the UK, and I feel sure that most growers of tender rhododendrons would love to be able get their hands on it. The Tremeer Cup for the rhododendron exhibit judged best in show went to a perfect truss of the blood-red *R. ‘Shilsonii’* (below right) from Botallick.



The camellias were as good as ever, which demonstrated the amazing toughness of these plants despite the prolonged drought of 2022. Botallick and Marwood Hill were probably the most prolific exhibitors, but the Rosemoor Award for the best bloom in the show went to Caerhays for a perfect flower of *Camellia ‘Royalty’* (left), which was one of many magnificent forms and hybrids of *C. reticulata* on display.

The Spring Ornamentals classes go from strength to strength, particularly in a season in which rhododendrons and magnolias were hard to come by. For the first time, several exhibitors entered palm foliage in the class for evergreen shrubs, leading to the suggestion that, in future years, palms might warrant their own class; the winner here was a huge frond of the very glaucous *Butia capitata* from Overbeck’s. However, possibly the most outstanding exhibit in a huge

collection of rarities was a large branch of the conifer *Araucaria angustifolia* (*right*)<sup>1</sup>, from a female plant bearing cricket-ball sized, globular, prickly cones. Some admirers wondered whether there may be a male plant available to enable seeds to be produced. This handsome relative of the Monkey Puzzle tree, exhibited by Caerhays, won the Alun Edwards Memorial Cup for the best exhibit in the Ornamentals section.

To complete the picture, lovers of daffodils were able to admire the many competitive classes, ranging from tiny miniature species to the most modern hybrids, as well as the usual spectacular non-competitive display by Scamps of Falmouth.

*Russell Beeson*

Photo credits: 1 *John Marston*



## Trials and tribulations of our three genera

Sometimes it feels like everything is out to get us. When the drought broke last year we started to see sudden spurts of growth from many of our plants; it would have been OK if we had a normal winter, with the significant cold after Christmas. Did we get that? Of course not! We had a week or so of damaging cold earlier in December that was detrimental to late new growth. At the time of writing and across the gardens under my care, I have one tree that has failed and taken down part of another tree, two trees that quite frankly I'm astonished are still standing, honey-fungus in three gardens (although I'm optimistic about managing it in two), one garden that's so wet that you can barely step off the hard surfaces without sinking, not to mention the deer and rabbits that can be a major problem in rural gardens. Then there's the weather...

I think you've got to be a bit of an optimist to grow our core genera. Some plants grow at more sensible times of year, yet the bulk of the rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias we grow flower at a time of year when the weather is at its least predictable. When I see mushy camellia flowers I console myself with the fact that most still have new flowers to come, but when a magnolia hitting its crescendo gets frosted badly, it feels like a massive loss. Growing magnolias is an extraordinary gamble; some years you win with a vintage year for blooms, some years you lose badly. Rhododendrons on the whole seem to scrape through, yet even here bad luck can still come your way.



*Magnolia 'Iolanthe'*

I see these people who say that gardening is relaxing and therapeutic and wonder how? As a professional gardener I have a different relationship with gardens; gardening is something I generally enjoy but must also endure, working in weather that sensible people would shy away from and often doing the sorts of jobs other people loathe for days at a time. At its best, gardening is fun and interesting and exciting, but it can also be challenging, brutal and dull. At times it feels like everything is against you and that you should just throw in the towel. Good times will come, I promise.

*Ben Probert*



## Dates for your Diary

- ◆ 22-23 April 2023 – Main Rhododendron Competition and SW Branch Competitions at Rosemoor.
- ◆ 28 April 2023 – Branch visit to two gardens near Redruth; Trevince with Michael Stone and Burncoose with Charles Williams.
- ◆ 4 May 2023 – Branch visit to the wonderful gardens at Sidbury Manor near Sidmouth which will be opened for us by kind permission of Lady Cave.
- ◆ 1 July 2023 – AWAY DAY. Location TBC. Alison Crook and Chris Trimmer from The National Trust Propagation Unit will present '*Living Collections and Plant Conservation at the National Trust*' (to include a discussion/demo of propagation without peat, as the Trust's Plant Conservation Centre has been peat-free for 40 years).
- ◆ 28 October 2023 – AGM and Autumn Meeting at Rosemoor. Guest Speaker: Seamus O'Brien, Curator of the National Botanic Garden, Kilmacurragh, Co. Wicklow.

### Plant Swap Shop

Please do send in lists of plants that you wish to make available in the future to [ashley.brent@nationaltrust.org.uk](mailto:ashley.brent@nationaltrust.org.uk) and I will add them here at the first available opportunity. Many gardens have already benefited from the generosity of members' surplus plants. Thank you!

Your personal details will not be shared on the newsletter.

## Submit a contribution

Feeling inspired to contribute? Perhaps you have something that you're keen to discuss with the group?

Please send any contributions, no matter how short or long, including photographs to [ashley.brent@nationaltrust.org.uk](mailto:ashley.brent@nationaltrust.org.uk).

*Photo credits: by the article author unless otherwise stated*

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