



RCMG SW Branch News

Autumn 2023

Editor's welcome

Welcome to the latest edition of the regional newsletter. I'm writing this on yet another wet day and, whilst I have no desire to revisit the summer of last year, I do find myself fearful of the winter yet to come. With autumn having been wet for almost every single day, the list of late summer and autumn jobs that remain unfinished barely gets shorter. And at the same time, I've had apples in blossom, rhododendrons in bloom and tender plants outdoors later than ever. Yet whilst I begrudge opening a newsletter with a subject as predictable (or not as the case may be) as the weather, it does perhaps give some indication that we are seeing a change in weather patterns. Or at the very least we are all starting to pay a little more attention to the climate around us. I've certainly had more conversations about the weather than ever before with visitors to Greenway this year so it is clearly something that is not just on my mind. Indeed, articles in this newsletter will prove that it is something that is on the mind of others too.

After an unscheduled summer break, we're back with a round-up of the horticultural delights from around our region. We've our usual contributions from Devon and Cornish gardens plus reports from group away days, our branch AGM, a journey to Lake Maggiore and more.

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. I'd be particularly keen to hear from the more eastern areas of our region.

Ashley Brent

Branch Chairman's Foreword

A season of contrasts; hot and dry for a month and our genera already suffering the late effects of the drought last year, all looked rather sad. Then came the rain. An understatement and it began to look like reparations were being made for the dry spell. As I write, there is a gale blowing and it is raining and certainly wet which I hope will bring some trees back from the brink. Storm Ciarán luckily did no real damage here as the wind was the 'normal' southwesterly which the plants have adapted to over the years. Our latest storm, Debi, has passed to the north of us and has only produced a few hours of moderate wind. A hot summer for a week in October, followed again by almost incessant rain. The climate has definitely changed in the 45 years I have been gardening here.

The late rhododendrons looked very sorry for themselves, but have now perked up with *Rhododendron auriculatum* and a rhododendron species collected by Alan Coombes doing well. This last was a present from the Group when they visited my garden with Mike Robinson several years ago, wrongly labelled 'aff. *glanduliferum*'. Splendid growth and scented flowers in September (right). It was unaffected by the droughts and I expect it to be a large grower in time.

I have been very fond of *Magnolia 'Maryland'* which I planted in the walled garden 40 years ago. The *Magnolia virginiana* parent has restricted its height – now still only about 5m tall – and it flowers well over a long period from May to October. It is about the only evergreen magnolia that will flower in the north east of Scotland where *M. grandiflora* – its other parent – does not, according to Chip Lima who works in Callander Perthshire. Otherwise, here the Sasanqua camellias are flowering away.

John Marston



RCMG South West Branch Away Day, National Trust Killerton, Saturday 1st July 2023

Fourteen South West Branch members gathered at National Trust Killerton near Exeter for our annual Away Day entitled 'The Living Collections and Plant Conservation at the National Trust'. Our hosts were the National Trust Plant Collections Curator, Alison Crook, newly in post, and Plant Conservation Centre Manager Chris Trimmer. Chris had come to Rosemoor many years ago to give a practical demonstration of rhododendron propagation, and we invited him back, as his previous visit had been most interesting and very instructive.

I have written more extensively on this Away Day for the Group Bulletin, but I thought I would share a few points that stood out for me. The first is that they (and the National Trust) have been peat free for over 20 years, and still manage to grow rhododendrons in this medium. However some of the various composts they use are not available to amateurs and indeed some are ordered by the ton!

Compost Mixes

- **Cuttings – Peat Free Jiffy Plugs**
- **Large batches of cuttings – 50/50 coir and Melcourt propagation bark**
- **Seed (annual) – 50/50 coir and propagation bark**
- **Seed (perennial) – 3: coir 2: loam 1: grit**
- **General potting – Petersfield T2**
- **Asparagus mix – 1 Petersfield T2 1 loam 1: sand 0.5: grit**
- **Gladiolus mix – 3 loam 2: coir 2: Petersfield T2 1: grit**
- **Southern Hemisphere mix (no feed) – 1 old Petersfield T2 1 loam**
- **Erica Mix – 3 old Petersfield T2 2 loam 1 propagation bark**

Chris showed us a slide (*above*) demonstrating the composition of the specialised composts that are used. One can only dream of them being available in smaller quantities, since the ericaceous composts I have tried have been terrible. Something needs to be done before peat is completely banned.

The second point was the use of Air Pots: plant pots with holes in the sides which encourage the roots outwards and not confining them to a fate of winding around the inside of solid pots. They are reusable, as they unclip and unroll, to be rolled up and clipped into a cylinder again for another plant. Thus although initially expensive, they can be used again and again. Chris brought in large rhododendron plants which looked very happy in these air pots in peat free medium.

A third point was that the cuttings are grown in a hydroponic mist unit with misting beneath the cuttings rather than on top, and these were in individual Jiffy Plugs of compressed wood fibre which expand on soaking. These were held in cellular trays which can be lifted out of the unit and the cuttings can be inspected for roots underneath without disturbance.

Alison meanwhile demonstrated the amazing power of computing now which is being developed for National Trust gardens and parks, mapping individual trees with all the information available on that particular tree, the story behind it, its provenance, age, importance and where it is sited. The information can be obtained via a QR code on an app for a smartphone; a major project which is now going ahead. It should be an amazing resource when finished.

A tour of the garden followed (*right*) and some of the principles we had learned of earlier could be seen, which included, for example, some Cedars of Lebanon growing in the park that had been sourced from seed of the original stands in Lebanon, thereby ensuring genetic diversity.

It was an excellent day; many thanks are due to Alison and Chris for their excellent arrangements.

John Marston



Notes from a Cornish Garden



At the risk of being terribly unseasonal, I'll start off with one of our *Rhododendron edgeworthii* which was out in flower back in June. As with many rhododendrons, it's one that for me that earns its keep on foliage alone so I'm happy to highlight it in what should rightfully be the time for showcasing autumn-flowering camellias. This specimen is propagated from material collected in Arunachal Pradesh by Keith Rushforth. It's now well established in its epiphytic position on the base of the trunk of a *Dicksonia antarctica* (right) and has a stronger pink blush on the petals (left) than seen on some others. We do tend to find rhododendrons self-seeding freely in tree fern trunks in our Cornish gardens, but not with quite so much glamour as this planted specimen. Or perhaps we weed them out too soon to discover what they may become?

In the same area on another *Dicksonia* we also have *R. emarginatum*, (left) a yellow-flowered *Pseudovireya* from China that I'm yet to catch in flower. This particular tree fern is also home to orchids, *Dendrobium kingianum* in both purple and white forms, and more notably an impressive, naturalised colony of *Pleione formosana* (right) that always stops visitors in their tracks. Though naturally terrestrial growing, these pleiones are very happily nestled into this mossy trunk.



Continuing with the theme of epiphytes, this year we have added to the collection in the New Zealand and Australia-themed area of the garden by finally planting out a *Platycerium* (stag horn fern) that Tom our Assistant Head Gardener had been patiently growing on for three years in our nursery. We also added some *Astelia hastata* (syn. *Collospermum hastatum*) (left), with more waiting in the wings to find a home in the garden. Sadly, as I write we are clearing damage in the same area following storm Ciara sending an oak over. The crown decimated a significant section of New Zealand woody plants, and the trunk is going to take some work to make safe. The less said about the ferns Tom painstakingly divided and replanted only two weeks before, the better, though they are all still alive.



Fortunately, we are into the closed season now, making clearing both easier and a bit less time sensitive. We hadn't planned any big winter work this year, but nature had other plans for the first closed week. It's always sad to lose plants in this way but, as ever, it's an opportunity to redesign and replant.

To bring us back to the genera of this group and to the current season of interest, I'll leave you with what we have named as *Camellia sasanqua* 'Setsugekka' (right), one of two with that name growing on our Camella Walk. Out in October it's our first

autumn flowering camellia to flower this year. It's been suggested that the ID for this one, and possibly the other, might not be right. We'd be happy to hear of any ID suggestions from those of you that know it.



Nicola Johnson



Camellia '1001 Summer Nights Jasmine'

It is always an exciting moment when a plant first flowers. It can be either a disappointment (magnolias) or a joy, as here. My small plant of this *Camellia azalea* (syn. *C. changii*) hybrid (*left*) has produced its first flowers and there are quite a few buds still to open. It is a startling crimson red colour which, with a bit of orange undertone could be difficult to place with other camellias, especially the pink sort. Here it is in a bed with predominantly purple leaves and flowers so does not clash. The leaves show the influence of the *C. reticulata* and *C. japonica* parents as does the large flower.

The parentage of *C. '1001 Summer Nights Jasmine'* is an unnamed seedling of *C. azalea* x *C. 'Dr Clifford Parks'* which is itself a hybrid between *C. 'Crimson Robe'* and *C. 'Kramer's Supreme'*. So *C. '1001 Summer Nights Jasmine'* is 50% *C. azalea* 25% *C. reticulata* and 25% *C. japonica*. There have been a few hybrids made with *C. azalea* as a parent to extend the season, and I'm sure there will be many more. This hybrid is not hardy in the colder areas of the British Isles but hardier ones will no doubt come along for our friends in the north to enjoy.

John Marston

Trip to Lake Maggiore to see Sasanquas

Over the first weekend in November we travelled to Lake Maggiore to see the wonderful displays of *Camellia sasanqua* and allied hybrid cultivars at the invitation of the Italian Sasanqua national collection holder, Dr. Andrea Corneo. On arrival at Lake Maggiore, the glowing colours of Sasanquas were immediately visible as specimens and sometimes hedges, and one was even being used in a roundabout planting scheme! Lake Maggiore is a fabulous area in which to see and grow camellias of any kind, with *C. sinensis* self-seeding and described to me as a 'weed' in two of the gardens we visited! Tea plants were in flower and a large-leaf form of *C. sinensis* was being used as a hedging plant at Villa Anelli, ICS Camellia Garden of Excellence. I was especially excited to see two other late autumn-flowering species in *Camellia crapnelliana* (*below left*) and *C. granthamiana* (*below right*). The latter had huge flowers and grey papery buds and the former was exhibiting its smooth orange-tinted bark at Villa Anelli. Villa Anelli also has other tender species growing in an unheated, shady greenhouse including *C. chrysanthia* and *C. azalea* (*below middle*), the latter in flower and exhibiting new growth colour.

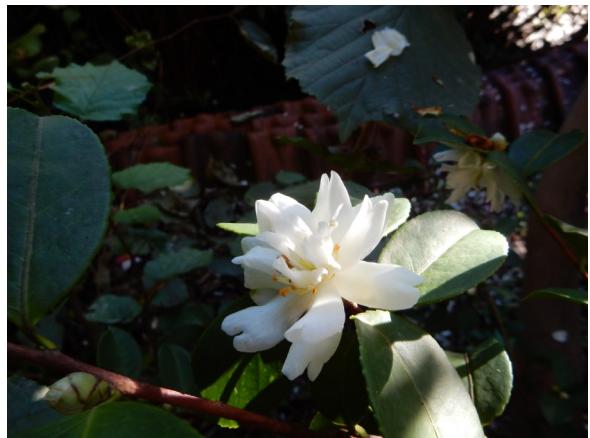


We then saw a few antique, specimen Sasanquas at Isola Madre Botanic Garden, an island garden on Lake Maggiore belonging to the Borromeo family and an RHS Partner Garden. Our last visit was to the Italian National Sasanqua collection of approximately 50 different cultivars at Villa Maioni Verbania which is freely open to all, in the grounds of a public library. Several *C. azalea* hybrids with Chinese and occasionally an English name, are grown at Villa Maioni and I was told the naming muddles coming out of China from Gao's Palm Landscape Architecture Co. in Guandong province, China are a problem there too.

The camellias looked spectacular and photos do not do them justice, especially when taken in full sunlight. But one difference and advantage we have in the UK is better scent on the Sasanquas. I attribute this to our wetter climate and their drier summers; the Japanese also rate Sasanquas for sweet scent and have wet summers. I focused on taking photos of the Sasanquas we do not have in the UK such as *C. 'Autumn Dawn'* (below left), *C. 'Grady's Egao'* (below middle), *C. 'Hiryu-nishiki'* (below right) which is a surprising semi-double, *C. 'Weroona'* and *C. 'Kamakura-shibori'*, together with those camellias with which we have identification issues.



There was some interesting labelling. *Camellia 'Hiryu'* is said to be the most popular autumn camellia in Italy, and I could see it as we drove along in many gardens; but I was surprised to see how like some clones of *C. 'Crimson King'* it looked. *Camellia 'Crimson King'* was imported to the UK from Japan, certainly by March 1939 for Norman Hadden, whose planting records exist. It now seems likely it is either a renamed *C. 'Hiryu'* for the British market by Wada's Hakoneya Nursery who first coined the name in a 1937 catalogue, or, at least a seedling of it, as it seems so similar in leaf and flower. Second, it is likely that what was labelled *C. 'Gin-no-zai'* (right), an old, rare and unusual Japanese cultivar, is in fact *C. oleifera* 'Plena' or 'Semi-plena', as agreed by Dr. Corneo; it is certainly a very attractive plant which we very rarely see in the UK. We also saw it at Villa Motta, another ICS Camellia Garden of Excellence, belonging to ICS President Dr. Gianmario Motta, beside Lake Orta. While what we grow as *C. 'Fuji-no-mine'* was labelled *C. 'White Doves'* and at Villa Maioni a plant labelled *C. x hiemalis* 'Fuji-no-yuki' seems a good fit with some of our plants of *C. 'Mine-no-yuki'*! This naming confusion which originates outside the UK should not detract from appreciating the flower-power of any of these wonderful Sasanquas and the joy they can bring in an increasingly brown landscape!



Caroline Bell

Autumn Meeting 2023 RHS Garden Rosemoor, October 28th

We had great attendance at our annual South West Branch Autumn Meeting with AGM held as usual in the Learning Centre at RHS Garden, Rosemoor (right). It followed the usual pattern of plant sales, quiz, raffle and guest speaker, on this occasion Seamus O'Brien. It was great to have Seamus with us for the whole day participating in our ever popular Show and Tell session. Seamus is Director of the National Botanic Garden of Ireland, Kilmacurragh and spoke of his trip to Sikkim in the footsteps of Joseph Hooker. An excellent and varied talk with photographs of the same places that Hooker sketched which were shown for comparison, mostly unchanged in a hundred years.



Before this, the morning Show and Tell session as usual came up with an extraordinary variety of different topics, from, among many contributions, cuttings in tea bags (Pam Hayward), the future of composts (Jeremy Wilson), *Rhododendron 'Sir Charles Lemon'* (Alan Mort), the rarest plant on the planet (!) or so it was claimed – *Deppea splendens* (Russell Beeson) (right), and the intriguing shapes of different camellia seeds (Caroline Bell). Seamus (below) had brought along a great selection of material from Kilmacurragh including a sample of the lovely and endangered Chinese conifer *Cathaya argyrophylla* showing its beautiful needles with glaucous undersides.



I arranged the plant quiz which was challenging in parts, with five questions on rhododendrons contributed by Pam Hayward. Many attendees did remarkably well, but Dick Fulcher came out top, winning a large plant of *Camellia 'Yuletide'* generously contributed by Jeremy Wilson. Our Branch members donated many lovely plants as raffle prizes, and for the members' plant sale. Willing volunteers helped at the plant sales and with the preparation and sale of raffle tickets; the SW Branch is very lucky to have so many generous members.

At the AGM, I recalled this year's branch visits and our successful Summer Away Day at Killerton, hosted by Alison Crook and Chris Trimmer of the National Trust. I hope that when our committee meet in the new year, we will organise an interesting set of visits.

Ashley, our treasurer, went through our finances which are in a very healthy state. We try to keep a balance of £1,000 in the account, but are now well in excess of that. An invitation to Ireland and Kilmacurragh was extended, and it is just possible that we could in some way subsidise it to an extent and make it a Branch event! More investigation is needed.

Present committee members were re-elected en bloc.

The officers are

Chairman - John Marston

Secretary - Joanne Court

Treasurer and S.W. Branch Newsletter editor - Ashley Brent

Archivist and information officer - Pam Hayward

Visits co-ordinator - Ian Gillbard

Our committee members are Val and Dave Dann, and Peter and Pat Bucknell. My thanks to all the committee for their help and advice this year.

Lastly, many thanks are due to Emma Marsh and the staff at Rosemoor who get everything ready for us and clear up afterwards so efficiently. I will be having discussions with Emma about new RHS guidance on bringing our own plant material into the meetings to minimise the risk of infection.

I wish you all an uneventful winter and, judging by the bud set, a spectacular spring.

John Marston

Notes from a Devon Garden

Despite the challenges that the wet end to summer and the consistently wet autumn have thrown at us, it's been a productive few months in the garden. Outside of our three genera, work has continued on the restoration of the Rockery at Greenway. We've been surprised by just how much rock work has been hidden for decades under the accumulated compost build up as the before (*below left*) and after (*below right*) images show. Nowhere more so than adjacent to the



steps, in the left of both images, where almost 100 years' worth of material swept off the steps had been dumped. We thought there may have been minimal rock in this area yet it has shown to be one of the densest areas. We're only a third of the way through the clearance and timescales have slipped as we've uncovered the true extent of the feature. Planting is now scheduled for 2025 but who knows what we'll find before then!

I've previously written about work to restore the Camellia Garden at Greenway as well. We're now at the stage of carrying out repairs to the built structures. We'll hold off any more horticultural work until the builders have moved out! But the lawn we know Agatha Christie would have used has taken nicely. This with a restored ornamental seat means that soon we'll be able to sit and enjoy the camellias growing here rather than just having to walk through as was previously the case. Hopefully by the next time I write, I'll be able to share some progress.

The biggest new undertaking (I say this with mild trepidation as we have enough big work in the undertaking phase as it is) is work to restore the upper reaches of the garden, otherwise known as Top Garden (for obvious reasons) or Susannah's Garden (after Susannah Harvey who built this part of the garden in the mid to late 1800s) as well as Thomas Bolitho's Plantation (late 1800s). We've recruited a new gardener to help us complete this work who some of you will have met at the AGM in October. Already we've carried out significant clearance work in the Plantation above the 70m+ herbaceous bed of Top Garden. The area has been carefully surveyed and labelled allowing for the self-seeds to be removed and overgrown shrubs identified for pruning. Views of the Dart estuary are opening up and airflow is increasing meaning that I'm less nervous about the potential spread of disease in a high risk collection. The area is full of unusual and rare plants including cultivars that have been propagated by this group and the National Trust to ensure their survival.



Surveying work has led to some interesting discussions as plants have proved themselves to not be what their labels and database entries indicated. This is very true of two camellias that had always been labelled as *Camellia sinensis*. Their age made me slightly doubtful of this as I know that there have been at least two very cold winters in the last 20 years that would have seen true *C. sinensis* off. A conversation with Roger Clark at Rosemoor revealed that one former owner of Greenway thought these plants were privets! One thing that was certain was that they were definitely camellias.

A chance return two weeks later saw both plants in flower. Something that has not happened in the last 20 years according to everyone that has come across these plants in the past. One of them has shown itself to be *C. sasanqua* (*left*) whilst the other one has proven a little trickier to identify (*right*). We initially thought *C. 'Crimson King'* but with comparison to others and checking against the knowledge of the National

Collection holder, Caroline Bell, this has been ruled out. Investigation continues and my thanks go to Caroline for her help in trying to determine what this old cultivar may be.



Ashley Brent

Dates for your Diary

- ◆ 09-10 March 2024 – RHS Early Camellia Competition and SW Branch competitions
- ◆ 20-21 April 2024 – RHS Main Rhododendron Competition and SW Branch competitions

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 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.

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Compiled by Ashley Brent