



# RCMG SW Branch News

Winter 2024

## Editor's Welcome

Welcome to the latest edition of the regional newsletter. I'm writing this on the day that Greenway reopened after its winter break. My fears of a winter washout did not come to fruition and the closed weeks proved particularly productive. The six weeks of closure have flown by in a blur and whilst I'm not working today, I'm hoping that regular visitors will notice the changes in the garden; they are, after all, rather hard to miss!

The cold snap was most welcome as it saw off the biting insects that were swarming around us like clouds through the warmer days of December. But the overall mild winter has led to a very early camellia season, as many of you will have seen for yourselves. Thankfully there seem to be plenty of buds yet to open on those shrubs that are already in full bloom. Many rhododendrons are also coming into flower; hopefully this is at no detriment to the months yet to come.

This edition sees a round-up of the horticultural delights from around our region. We've our usual contributions from Devon and Cornish gardens plus a tribute to a local horticultural stalwart and an informative review of the scented camellia season.

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

The days are getting longer and spring is springing. We have had a weird winter so far with a cold snap, then very mild with rain and wind. Apart from a few days, there is now a general air of greyness and dampness in the garden here. Notwithstanding, the spring bulbs are pushing up and snowdrops, crocuses and early daffodils are flowering. The bud set on our three genera has been wonderful this year. I hope the rest of this month is kind so that we can expect an abundance of blossom. Our camellias are starting to flower well, together with the winter ones which are still flowering such as the lovely *Camellia* 'Winter's Charm' and *C.* 'Yuletide', which is particularly good this year. A favourite of mine is also out now, *C.* 'Leonard Messel' (*below left*). What a wonderful camellia (and of course magnolia) to have named after you. I shall be talking a bit about the Messels in my February Garden Walk.



*Rhododendron* 'Crossbill' (*right*) is out at last, a bit later than usual and has reached 10 feet into a *Berberis valdiviana* tree. It has certainly benefited from the support. I notice that *Magnolia campbellii* 'Darjeeling' is swelling its buds now, so that will not be long to come out in flower.

I mark the sad death of our member and Chairman of the Cornwall Garden Society, Andrew Leslie, elsewhere in this newsletter. I sent a card of condolence on our behalf to his widow Vanessa, and have received a card back from her conveying her thanks to the Branch for



our kind thoughts. The new Chairman, Martin Petherick, whose garden at Porthpean we visited several years ago, has indicated that he is keen to foster relations between our two groups. I look forward to meeting him at Rosemoor.

And thinking of Rosemoor, you will have received the entry forms for the Spring Show and Competitions, so please bring some of your treasures along; there are so many different categories for you to enter, there will be something for everyone, I'm sure.

We have visits on two days this spring; we will be spending the day at Scorrier House and nearby Tregulow on 11 April and at Greencombe, Porlock on 5 May. Details to follow. Meanwhile, I hope to see you at Rosemoor in March.

*John Marston*

## The Scented, Early Camellia Season

We had an early start for the *Sasanqua* season in late-September, and now we find it is an early season for the spring cultivars. However, as I write, on 31 January the later flowering *Camellia sasanqua* cultivars are still blooming, and some such as *C. 'Jennifer Susan'*, *C. 'Tago-no-tsuki'*, *C. 'Versicolor'*, *C. 'Crimson King'* and *C. 'Narumigata'* started in mid-October! The reason being they are large plants, but also that they always flower for around three months. Some naturally flower later, because they have more Japonica genes in their make-up, such as interesting, stripey *C. 'Ashtar'* (below left) bred in SW France, *C. 'Bonanza'*, *C. 'Elfin Rose'* or *C. 'Sekiyo'*, amongst others.



However, I would like to introduce you to *C. 'Pam's Rose'* (above right) which usually peaks in January-February time here in mid-Devon. It is delightfully, sweetly scented with a true rose scent, and often looks just like a pink rose. I was generously given it by Pam Hayward in 2018 for my National Collection of Sasanquas which had just been approved. It is a seed-raised "Sasanqua" from our seed list and the seed had been donated to us by Camellia Forest Nursery of North Carolina, USA. Pam had no idea what it would be like in 2018 as it had not flowered; it was billed as seed from a species *C. sasanqua*, so it might have been a white single, peaking in October theoretically. But it emerged with bigger leaves

than a typical *Sasanqua* cultivar, showing *C. x vernalis* genes which means a later flowering period with larger, thicker leaves. *Camellia x vernalis* cultivars have more Japonica genes and are in fact hybrids following from a direct *C. sasanqua* x *C. japonica* cross a few centuries ago in Japan. *Camellia 'Pam's Rose'* has leaves more like *C. x vernalis* cultivar *C. 'Egao'*. Whilst there are few *Vernalis* cultivars outside Japan, the Camellia Register shows there are in fact around 160.



*Camellia x vernalis 'Egao'* (left) which started to flower for the first time here on 4 January, has glossy leaves, but sadly no scent. Its flowers are bigger than *C. 'Pam's Rose'* and its growth habit is more open. *Camellia 'Pam's Rose'* is bushy and dense, and it started to flower on 6 November which is around four weeks earlier than it has done in previous years; it is still in flower, showing the typical three month flowering pattern, which makes Sasanquas and their allied *Vernalis* hybrids such good value in the garden.



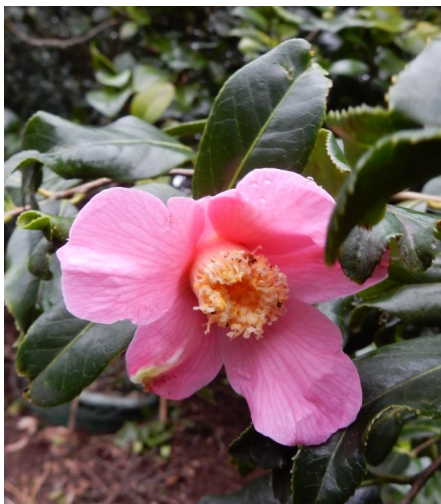
*Camellia x vernalis* cultivars *C. 'Ginryu'* and *C. 'Star above Star'* are about to flower here, but *C. x vernalis 'Yuletide'* which usually starts by the New Year, opened in late November. *Camellia x vernalis 'Himekoki'* (right) is different with its tiny leaves and a delicate, miniature, pink, rose form flower on a low growing bush. But I have to say *C. 'Pam's Rose'* would win the Vernalis and late-flowering class for me, because of its pretty flower, scent, glossy leaves and its good habit!

Another group out at the moment are the crosses between *Sasanquas* and *C. yuhsienensis* which includes scented *C. 'Yume'* with its new AGM from last year. *Camellia 'Yume'* has been used in hybridisation too; *C. Marshall* (below) is the *C. 'Yume'* seedling that currently

impresses me and it was bred in Georgia, USA by Gene Phillips. It is vigorous, and very floriferous, with an interesting white and pink striped flower, and it is usually sweetly scented unless it is too cold. In its first season here is *C. 'Vanilla Moon'* with a vanilla scent.

Overlapping with these *Sasanquas*, many early Japonicas are providing an excellent, often scented show. I enjoy the "Fishtail" group of camellias which scent in the right weather conditions and their leaves have an intriguing fishtail-shaped ending which makes for an interesting plant out of flower. *Camellia*

*japonica 'Kingyo-tsubaki'* (syn. *C. 'Quercifolia'*) (right) which in Japanese means 'the goldfish-tail camellia' was recorded in 1789 in Japan. My plant can be traced back to an old plant, perhaps from the 1930s, in the garden at Cockington Court near Torquay. Greenway have a lovely mature clump of *C. 'Kingyo-tsubaki'*, put in by our member, Roger Clark, some years ago. The branches are attractively pendulous and the flowers are rosy-red, medium to large, and single. There are other Fishtails such as *C. x williamsii 'C.F. Coates'* (below left), a hybrid with *C. saluenensis* made at Kew, which is also in flower, but more of a classic pink in colour; its branches are also pendulous. The white-flowering Fishtails and *C. 'Mermaid'* flower later.



The crosses with *C. lutchuensis* are usually scented and the Japanese origin small-leaved ones with miniature flowers, also start flowering early in the year. Currently in flower are *C. 'Minato-no-Akebono'* (above centre) and 'Koto-no-kaori', which have a honey-like scent, while the Fishtails and other Japonicas smell more like mild freesias.

As an aside, camellias which have variegated leaves also give another season of interest. *Camellia japonica 'Benten-kagura'* (above right) has a lovely pink peony form flower and the variegation is creamy and on the edge of the leaf. It is great to have it in flower so early this year.

Caroline Bell



## Notes from a Cornish Garden

In the last newsletter I left us starting the closed season in unplanned, dramatic fashion, clearing up the aftermath of storm Ciarán in the New Zealand area of the garden. Thankfully the rest of the season was incident free, despite several stormy episodes and the near biblical levels of rainfall that followed. The last week of November, however, did have us scratching our heads as the *Magnolia campbellii* decided it was time to try flowering. It's usually the first to get going,

and is often almost over before we open again, but this was a bit over keen!

On 30 November this bud (right)<sup>1</sup> was looking set to open imminently but was promptly frosted off a day or so later in a cold snap. We think this cold is what has held back all our magnolias a bit this year, which combined with a very early half-term reopening on 10 February means our visitors will get to see the full show of magnolias this year. At the time of writing on 3 February the *Magnolia campbellii* is just about to flower proper, once again reclaiming its title of first flowering magnolia.

In the lead up to Christmas, the clearing and re-planting of the New Zealand area continued. At the same time, we indulged in a mini-landscaping project. Over the last year the cascades along the drainage stream that runs through this area have been improved by damming with tree fern trunks (left), and the next dream was to create a pool in one area. Which naturally also called for a wider and more dramatic cascade to be made too.



A shallow bulge was scraped out to one side of the river by digger to create a pool. The next step was to divert the flow completely to that side so a wall could be built for the water to flow over (above left)<sup>1</sup>. To say it was muddy is probably a gross understatement! The wall is set at an angle so it can be seen from one of the main garden paths that runs parallel to the stream.

Once the wall was set the mud dam was removed and the water redirected itself over the new cascade (above right). We're still tweaking getting the water to go and stay exactly where we want it to, very much a learning curve, but the pool has already added interest to this side of the New Zealand area (right)<sup>1</sup>.

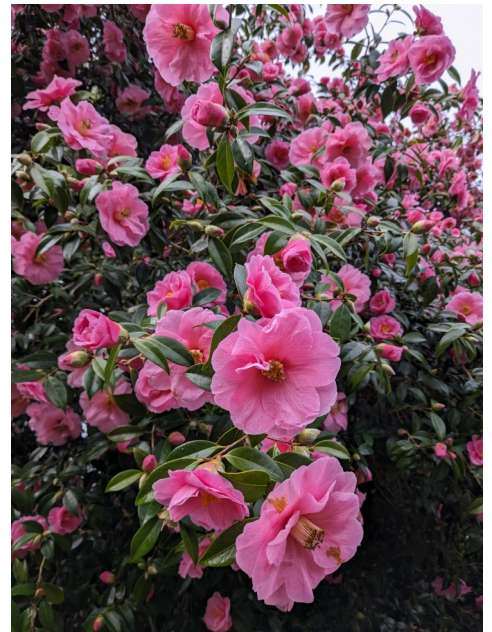






In the neighbouring Bhutan area, one of two *Rhododendron keysii* (left) was the first rhododendron to start flowering properly back in the first week of January. I have photos of this plant out in flower in April, and I'm sure we have shown it at several of the flower shows throughout March and April. In its defence, it has been a very mild winter so far. Except for one cold week in December, and a handful of chilly days this year, it's mostly been around or over the double digit mark. I've not noticed the second plant flowering – I've either missed it completely or it's still to get going.

We are of course now in full camellia season here, with the majority out in full flower. You may remember Pam's call for help finding specimens of *Camellia oleifera*. Last week Chris Trimmer from our Plant Conservation Centre collected material from a plant we have under that name, along with material from several Reticulata cultivars that are potentially in their final years. He also took material from our beloved almost 200 year-old *Liriodendron tulipifera* – the 'granddaddy' of the garden. This kind of conservation work is so important, both for preserving species and cultivars in general and succession planting with the same genetic material within our own garden. Watch this space for updates on their hopefully successful propagation.



I'll round off with two very contrasting camellias. Firstly, the well-known and commonly grown *Camellia x williamsii* 'Donation' (above right), currently an avalanche of pink waiting to greet visitors on our entrance route. And the diminutive lesser grown *C. grijsii* (left)<sup>1</sup>, with its distinctive two-lobed petals and leathery leaves. This is still a young plant with sparse flowering so far. It may at first pass be missed by visitors, but hopefully noticed by those with a discerning eye.

And now the last push to get the garden ready for opening, see you on the other side!

Nicola Johnson

Photo Credit: 1 Tom Cutter

## Andrew Leslie 1945 - 2023

It is with sadness that we record the death of our member, Andrew Leslie who died just before Christmas in Treliske Hospital.

Andrew was Chairman of the Cornwall Garden Society and it was in that capacity that I first met him at our Rosemoor shows. Latterly he started to exhibit rhododendrons and magnolias at the same shows, brought from his lovely garden at Ethy which the Branch visited a few years ago. I remember masses of new magnolia plantings and a section devoted to different varieties of Loderi rhododendrons which made for interesting comparisons.

His widow, Vanessa, sends her best wishes to the SW Branch and has Andrew's garden as, in her own words, 'a memorial and solace'.

John Marston





## Notes from a Devon Garden

It's been a busy winter in the garden. As I write, we are having the usual mad week tidying up before we open to the public after our six week winter closure. Every year, I promise myself that we won't let a woefully long list build up of small jobs relating to presentation standards and public safety. But every year, we get so enthralled by our big winter works that the same thing happens. Still, the results are worth it as the sense

of progress is undeniable after completing renovation projects.



Despite it being a very early camellia season, with visitors being treated to shrubs in full bloom like *Camellia* 'Mrs D. W. Davis' (left) and *C.* 'Bob Hope' (right), there are fewer overall blooms to enjoy this year as we have carried out rather drastic renovation work on two large camellia groves. Those of you that recall the work in the Camellia Garden might see a recurring theme here and wonder if I have a grudge against camellias! It's very much a case of being severe to be kind and ensuring that we get to enjoy, for years to come, the huge variety of



cultivars that fill the garden at Greenway. Both groves were hideously congested and choked with brambles and saplings of *Cornus capitata* amongst others. One grove was supporting snapped out limbs of *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* above the path and both were blocking sweeping views of the estuary. They had also been planted to underplant larger trees and in dense clumps so that they had ended up competing with each other for light. This meant that some were ripping themselves out of the ground as they were so lop-sided whilst others were losing out to their more vigorous cousins. By hard stool pruning them, we've brought them down to a level so that they will form a floriferous and colourful mid-storey, with blooms that can be enjoyed without straining one's neck.

We've similarly been carrying out work to restore the view from the currently ruined garden seat at Top Garden, otherwise known as Susannah's Garden after its creator, Susannah Harvey (c.1850). When I started at Greenway, this seat was described to me as 'Agatha's Summerhouse'. Alas, during Agatha Christie's tenure, the seat was already a ruin and had been repurposed on more utilitarian lines. I found that 'Agatha's corrugated iron tool shed' didn't quite have the same romantic appeal. It's still work in progress but the difference between the current view (below left) and the intended view (below right) is clear to see. Whilst we still have a decent patch of laurel to clear, I no longer have to lean over the barbed wire fence to get the same view as the image below.



We've also started working on the 80m herbaceous bed that runs adjacent to this seat. All being well, this time next year the whole area will look very different. And for those of you wondering about progress on the Camellia Garden restoration: we've paused this work to allow builders time to rebuild the timber seat and arbour as well as re-render the seat alcove. They are currently experimenting with different options to obtain the best match to the old render.

Despite camellias and rhododendron being early, the large *Magnolia campbellii* (right) in the tennis court garden started to come into flower only one day earlier than last year. Of course, this means we are likely due strong winds or a frost to prematurely end the wonderful display.



#### *Magnolia*

'Kew's Surprise' has lived up to its name, surprising us all by coming out weeks ahead of its normal flowering time.

Finally, despite being outside of our three genera, I can't let my favourite daffodil go unmentioned. The display of *Narcissus cyclamineus* (left) is as dense as ever above the newly cleared Rockery.

Ashley Brent

## Dates for your Diary

- ◆ 09-10 March 2024 – RHS Early Camellia Competition and SW Branch competitions
- ◆ 11 April 2024 – Branch visit to Scorrier House and Tregulow
- ◆ 20-21 April 2024 – RHS Main Rhododendron Competition and SW Branch competitions
- ◆ 5 May 2024 – Branch visit to Greencombe

## 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*

Compiled by Ashley Brent