



RCMG SW Branch News

Summer 2024

Editor's Welcome

Welcome to the latest edition of the regional newsletter. Compared to this time last year and the year before when the threat of prolonged drought was hovering in the air, this year is far more relaxed. Certainly, there are plants in the garden that are still showing signs of stress from previous dry years but, as I write, there is an abundance of moisture in the ground and the garden is thriving.

Weeds are growing strongly and I'd almost forgotten the level of hoeing required in a more normal weather year! Last year's wet end to the summer certainly helped create a fabulous display this year from all our rhododendrons and camellias; despite unusual flowering times due to temperature fluctuations in the spring.

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 look at the benefits of camellia foliage and late-flowering magnolias.

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

What a wonderful flowering year it has been for our genera – the best I can remember – and most likely the (only?) upside to the constant rain we have had. The only glitch in my garden was the very cold few days before Christmas after a mild autumn which frosted a few buds on a couple of tender rhododendrons and killed a plant of *Rhododendron 'Fragrantissimum'* in the open. These are minor points in the whole scheme of things.

It is remarkable how quickly deaths are forgotten and new plants popped in to the vacant spaces; sometimes the triumph of hope over experience. Gardening is always looking forwards, continually planting for the future, if not for one's own. I will choose a few of the successes which are flowering better than ever. The first is *Camellia japonica 'Hawaii'* (right) which seems to be carrying on without taking breath. Another is *Rhododendron zaleucum* (left) inherited from my father-in-law, flowering better than I have seen it and showing its characteristic white leaf undersides. Ted Millais' *Cinnabarina* hybrid *R. 'Crosswater Belle'* (right) is dripping flowers. These are just a few of the plants in flower now; others have been spectacular earlier in the season such as *R. Loderi* Group 'King George'. More to come as well; all too exciting.



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As I write, the medal winners at the Chelsea Flower Show have been announced, and from our Southwest Branch, Jeremy Wilson won a Gold medal for his Strete Gate Camellias stand which was truly amazing. Burncoose also won gold for their fantastic display. Many congratulations to them both.



John Marston

Snippets from a Camellia lover

As we all recover from the shock of seeing so much obvious petal blight this spring season, helped by the mild weather since February, it is a relief to see good new growth colour on lots of camellias, meaning that they are contributing another season of interest outside their floral display. The ones I noticed today were *Camellia sasanqua* 'Hinode-gumo' (below left) with dark mahogany coloured new leaves, *C. 'Dr Clifford Parks'* (below right) with reddish-bronze new growth and *C. 'Crimson Candles'* with its prolific pinky-bronze new leaves making it look as pretty as it does in flower. In fact the new growth made a complete picture as it was displayed across the whole plant in each of the three. Not many genera with new growth colour give such a good display. In looking at new growth colour, we might notice those pesky aphids, which sometimes collect on the soft, young leaves and need removing before they do some damage.



Certain camellia hybrids are famous for their juvenile colour such as *C. 'Night Rider'* with its extraordinary dark red display of new growth, and many of the *C. lutchuensis* hybrids have pink young leaves such as *C. 'Spring Mist'* or *C.*

'Fairy Blush'. But it is easy to forget that many Sasanquas can be just as good, and they tolerate sunny positions: with *C. 'Cleopatra'* (left) most obviously having an orangey-pink juvenile coloration. Most of the variegated Sasanquas

provide good mahogany new growth such as *C. 'Sasanqua Variegata'* and *C. 'Rainbow Variegated'* (right), a sport of *C. 'Rainbow'*, which itself ticks all the boxes for a useful plant anyway, thoroughly deserving its recent

AGM status. Two other



Reticulatas spring to mind for such a display in *C. 'Miss Tulare'* and *C. 'Nuccio's Ruby'*. Turning to the species, we all recognise the red-coloured juvenile leaves of *Camellia transnokoensis*, but what about

C. minutiflora (below) which has already turned completely rusty-red here as in my photo, and last year did not start

fading via pink to green until October; this is an unequalled five month long display. *Camellia parviflora* is another species I obtained from our seed list which has good new growth colour and both these two have coped with a -10°C episode successfully. All of these camellias mentioned and others truly give excellent garden value as foliage plants outside their flowering season.

Secondly, we rejoice at the excellent news that our local, specialist camellia nursery, Strete Gate Camellias of Devon, run by Jeremy Wilson, achieved a Gold Medal at Chelsea



Flower Show 2024. What an achievement at the first Chelsea for Strete Gate and what a fabulous camellia-themed tie (right) Jeremy was wearing! The stand provided education about growing camellias of every type including Tea plants. I especially loved the way Jeremy had floated camellia flowers in bowls. The one that caught my

attention was full of *C. japonica* 'Dahlohnega' (right) (synonym *C. Nuccio's Golden Anniversary*) and it was well chosen, as of course the public might not expect to see a light yellow camellia flower looking so very beautiful in all its purity of form. [*Camellia 'Dahlohnega'* is an American origin camellia registered in 1986. Its charming flower is small-to-medium size, often darker than in my photo according to Jeremy, and more of a 'Canary yellow' as the Register describes it; it is a formal double cross of 'Witman's Yellow' x [seedling x ('Elizabeth Boardman' x 'Colonial Dame') and bred by W.F. Homeyer Jr., Macon, Georgia, USA.] Jeremy filled other bowls despite the late May date – we can easily forget that some camellias usefully continue as they have a succession of blooms over 3 months. This is exemplary flower-power indeed, and there is not much to beat it, although my favourite alternative would be the scented *Magnolia* 'Fairy White' (formerly *Michelia*) bred by Mark Jury, which is only just going over, having started in my garden at the end of February.



The other snippet I picked up at Chelsea was the story of invading Asian hornets on a Discovery Zone stand; there is massive concern for our native bees and other useful insects, which the hornets will devour, even taking out a honey bee colony in a single strike, all of which could have a very serious effect on pollination. They hover around the hives from July to November catching the bees coming in or out. Honey bees can pathetically starve to death because they are then too nervous to leave their hive and one hornet can eat up to 50 bees daily. Asian hornets, I was told, really like autumn camellias because they are the best nectar sources available at that time of year. So the bee-keepers and civil servants running the Chelsea stand, anxiously asked me to circulate this and directed me to two websites, which are ahat.org.uk and www.nonnativeSpecies.org/asianhornet. They contain photos and information. The defining characteristic of the Asian hornet to look out for, is its distinctive yellow legs compared to other insects. So if we see Asian hornets, willing

volunteers will be only too eager to deal with the problem for us, and get rid of the nest. As they can sting repeatedly, they are not good news for children or the unwary.



The Asian hornets have flown in across the Channel from France and look very different from our slower-moving European hornets. My photograph shows one preserved in glass at Chelsea (left). The devastating effect of even British origin European hornets was brought home to me early last June after two swarms from a honeybee colony which had taken up residence in our roof left; then the hornets moved in to kill the rest of the colony. It was a complete destruction operation but apparently they just leave the bodies, while Asian hornets are true predators. I had noticed the rather clumsy and non-aggressive hornets feeding on our big Tea bush, *Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis*, the previous autumn and that they also visited some Sasanquas.

Caroline Bell

Branch Visits

On Thursday 11 April, the SW Branch visited two Williams gardens near Redruth; the first was Scorrier House and then after lunch the adjacent Tregullow.



Ollie Williams welcomed us at Scorrier (left) with a feast of coffee and cakes and then took us round the gardens (right) which were extensive, with two walled gardens filled with ornamental trees and shrubs. As William Lobb had been head gardener in the 1850s (at both gardens) there were many Chilean and North American plants, especially myrtles which had seeded about, and mature redwoods. Ollie had recently taken over the estate and house from his mother and was still feeling his way. The priority was not plants but ways to make the place commercial. Weddings and events including a massive pop festival with 7,000 attendees, are some of the things happening. There will be opportunities for more planting in the future.





Tregullow on the other hand, was still quite private and we were shown around by James Williams (right) who had been there about 40 years. On taking over, he had chainsawed his way through the 'jungle', revealing features (and plants) lost for years. There were many interesting plants, mainly rhododendrons such as *Rhododendron 'Trewithen Orange'* and *R. 'augustinii* (left), camellias still flowering since Christmas, and magnolias, mostly over, but some *Magnolia laevifolia* and *M. 'Fairy Cream'*. It was a garden of a gardener, and unashamedly spring biased.

James took us outside the bastion-like walls of the second walled garden to look down over the front drive and a massive and wonderful *Saxegothaea conspicua*,

one of three Lobb originals, with another at Killerton (which we saw on our visit there last year) and Kew. Propagation is going on and plants are going back to Chile to repopulate the gene pool and make good the losses due to (illegal) logging. We presented James with a scented azalea by way of thanks.



On Saturday 4 May, our second SW Branch visiting day was to West Somerset near Minehead. First stop was Dunster Castle where we were met by Jonathan, the Senior Gardener. Previously there had only been two full time gardeners looking after the fifteen acres but two years ago another two were taken on (including Jonathan), which is making life easier for them. The situation affords wonderful views of the Bristol Channel (left) and the microclimate is very mild.

A lot of clearing had to be done as the garden had become somewhat neglected in parts. The site is very challenging as it is mostly steep slopes (right) which means maintenance is

difficult due to access issues. There were some interesting plants such as *Grevillea* and *Grevillea* which indicate what a mild climate this coastline has. The famous Dunster Meyer's Lemon in its purpose built case died a few years ago and was replaced by a cutting from the original plant. After several years of waiting it fruited and turned out to be a grapefruit! An actual lemon plant is being brought on in the greenhouses. The rhododendrons however, were mostly over but a spectacular azalea was flowering next to a fallen bent tree trunk (above right) making an interesting composition. After an early lunch at the castle, we made our way to Greencombe at Porlock, where the rest of our party met up.



We were welcomed by owner Rob Schmidt (on the right in the picture, left) whose aunt, Miss Joan Lorraine had created the garden in the 1960s, and who had spent much of his childhood staying there during the holidays. Apparently her gardener at the time went around other gardens and took cuttings of likely plants to suit their north facing aspect – about 1000 in all! When Miss Lorraine took over, vegetation and trees were cleared and as access to the site was difficult, the stumps were blown up with dynamite!

It is a woodland garden and has a magical feel to it as you walk along the paths in the woods (right), inhaling the scents of the 'smellies' – rhododendrons such as *Rhododendron lindleyi* and a great many plants of *R. 'Lady Alice Fitzwilliam'*. There

was a gigantic *R. protistum* – a champion reaching way up to the light. *Rhododendron 'augustinii'* was abundant in varying shades of blue; a fantastic sight. I also noticed a patch of the double form of white wake robin, *Trillium grandiflorum* 'Plenum'.



Greencombe is a spring garden, but I wonder what happens in high summer onwards, as I didn't notice hydrangeas or eucryphias for instance. It was good to experience its magic in May.

We rounded off the afternoon with a welcome cream tea before going our separate ways.

John Marston

Notes from a Cornish Garden

Some of you may remember that my very first article for this newsletter in 2022 included a section about us cutting and staging approximately five hundred *Narcissus* for the National Trust's first *Monograph* event. Well, we've been at it again, though this time in a much smaller capacity, lending a hand with the team planning and running of the flower show competition that forms part of this yearly event – this year hosted by Bodnant. As you'll read below from Ashley, this year it was the turn for rhododendrons to take centre stage.

The flower show is a fun event to encourage gardens to take part in showing for the first time, and also increase the number of different plants on display across the main event. We kept the schedule simple and included non-rhododendron and photography classes to make it as accessible as possible. We weren't sure how many gardens would manage to make the trip to Llandudno laden with blooms (narcissus and roses from the previous years were a touch easier to transport!), but we had exactly 100 entries (*right*) across the plant categories from 15 different gardens, many of which had never entered a flower show before.

The Glendurgan contingent felt growing shame as perfect truss after perfect truss arrived from all over. Even from as far away as Ireland – in suitcases nonetheless! We have often failed to get carefully selected blooms safely to the van, let alone just two hours up the road to Rosemoor, in show-worthy condition. The shame indeed! And the entries really did keep coming. To the extent that the class divisions were ever-widening, and extra tables were called for as we snaked further along the room walls and beyond our allotted space.

David Millais kindly agreed to judge the rhododendron classes, and it was a real treat to be able shadow him and get an understanding of what judges are looking for in winning entries. Stars of the show for us at Glendurgan were: a spray of *Rhododendron lindleyi* (*below left*) from Mount Stewart with perfect white flowers, which also won best in show; an impressive large spray of *R. 'Phyllis Korn'* (*below centre*) from Ness Botanic Garden, and an intimidatingly enormous stem of *R. sinogrande* (*below right*) foliage from Mount Stewart.



It was a completely different beast to be this side of the show bench for a change. We really enjoyed the frantic buzz of the two-hour staging window, and helping first time 'showers' navigate getting their carefully selected exhibits to the show bench. But hats off to our show crews that keep the Southwest Branch and Main RHS shows ticking over down in this part of the world, you all manage to make it look so easy! And to the judges, who also give up time to assess all the exhibitors' hard work.

Back to all things Glendurgan. Like everyone else trying to grow anything, we were somewhat held back by the relentless rain of the early season. The long, wet winter and 'spring that never was' of 2024 did have its upside though; the cooler damper conditions have meant we've been able to safely plant a little later into the season than in recent years. But it's not just the planting of new plants that's been on our minds the first half of this year. Tom and John have been working with our gardens advisor to assess the numerous views and vistas in the garden (*right*). In an historic valley garden like Glendurgan, with so many 'hide and reveal' views around every turn, it's so important to understand what views need protecting or reinstating from being obscured by mature planting, and which new ones are now possible by recent area redesign and tree loss. That list of views, and what needs to be done to preserve them, will then naturally help inform the placement of new planting going forward and become part of our longer-term management plan.





It's been another good spring for our meadows with possibly the highest number of orchids (*left*) in recent memory. It's difficult to know if this is a result of a slightly later summer cutback, followed by a slightly earlier winter cutback, or if weather conditions over the last year have been more favourable for orchids than usual. But we've enjoyed them regardless and our visitors have been in awe of them.

Each year there is a difficult period at the start of opening season where we try to balance keeping the emerging meadows safe from footfall, and not fencing every area off until meadow areas are distinctly obvious. After a few challenging incidents of visitor off-piste exploration last year, Tom and John came up with the idea of adding *Galanthus* and *Crocus* (*right*) to the outer edges of two areas, to encourage feet to stay on the path. Due to the terrible weather, footfall was low and those that visited were probably very keen to keep on the dry path anyway, but the new bulbs did appear to have the desired result. In some spots they were almost at risk of being completely sacrificial, but all remained untrampled and added some fantastic additional early interest to the meadows.

Unfortunately, our resident badger population was also very fond of the crocus and dug up one entire section of them. At least they waited until after flowering! Undeterred by this we're hoping to add to the *Crocus*, *Galanthus* and smaller species *Narcissus* populations in a few areas this autumn – both for additional interest and to further define the emerging bluebell meadows as distinct areas not to be walked on. I should add here that in February this year we were also kindly gifted many *Galanthus* cultivars by Lyn Sales, wife of the late John Sales, and these have been planted in appropriate spots around the garden.



Like many, we have also had a wonderful year for most of our rhododendrons and *R. macabeanum* (*below left*) in the bottom of Birches Valley put on a spectacular show, as ever. *Rhododendron dalhousiae* (*below centre*) was a very pleasant surprise to find flowering at the end of April, for what we think might be the first time. And the *R. keysii* I mentioned back in February is still in flower and has been flowering now for almost 5 months. Sadly, we have lost one of our two *R. hemsleyanum* (*below right*) in the last year, but luckily the other plant had a lot of lower growth just calling out to be layered into the ground, so hopefully we will have some new young plants in the next couple of years. I like to think that this plant has possibly the largest foliage of all the non-large leaf rhododendrons. I'd be keen to hear of any others that can top it.



The magnolias also did not fail to put on a show this year. The two large *Magnolia doltsopa* (*right*) by the maze flowered so heavily in March that the scent made its way into the maze and across the meadows. We tried to cut some for the early Rosemoor show but just couldn't find a bit that wasn't already too far out or still tight in bud. I had wondered if *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta* *Alba* might have worn itself out after last year's flowering, but yet again it put on a ridiculously blousy display.



We're now into what always feels like the last of the year for the three genera in Glendurgan. But in reality there

are still a few floral treats left yet to come. I'm already obsessively on watch for flowers on our little *Rhododendron kawakamii*, even though I know it's still a month from flowering time. I'll leave you with the rhododendron the Glendurgan team have been cooing over for the last two weeks. We have it recorded as *R. lindleyi* 'Geordie Sherriff' (*left*) but it's been recently suggested that it's not pink enough for that ID. Either way, we're completely smitten!



Nicola Johnson

Notes from a Devon Garden

As Nicola mentioned above, May saw four gardeners from Greenway and Coleton Fishacre and I head to North Wales for the *National Trust Rhododendron Monograph*. This year, it was good to see the attendee invite list having been expanded to include colleagues from other organisations and gardens that hold rhododendron collections, including English Heritage, the RHS, Ness Botanic Garden, Crown Estate, Minterne, National Trust for Scotland and more.

With several hundred attendees, the knowledge base in the room was broad and varied – ranging from those with a lifelong passion and detailed knowledge, to those who are just starting out, not only in their careers but also in the interest for this enormous genus.

The subject material delivered was equally as varied. For me, one of the most reassuring talks came from John Anderson VMM who has a similar approach when it comes to pruning (it's not just a light prune) and restricting visitor access (accepting that changing trends lead to changing behaviours that need to be monitored and responded to).

Michael Lear delivered a very inspirational talk on how he and his wife Beverley set about developing an understanding of unlabelled rhododendron collections. It was both reassuring and also daunting to hear that the only tried and tested method is examination by comparison. Mix this with a knowledge of the development of the collection and you have a slightly greater chance of narrowing down your cultivar. For me, with a poorly labelled and mis-labelled collection, this was a story that resonated.



We were also lucky to hear from Steve Hootman, curator of the Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden in Washington, USA, who talked us through the delights of new species introductions from 1980 onwards. Ken Cox and David Millais talked us through modern day growing whilst Hartwig Schepker (Director of the Botanic Garden and Rhododendron Park in Bremen, Germany) talked about European collections and hybridisation, giving a slightly different stance on the development of this genus. It was also interesting to hear talks by Tom Clarke (Exbury) and Ned Lomax (Bodnant), who many members will know from competitions, and Seamus O'Brien of Glasnevin. All in all, a good three days had – topped off by drinks on the terrace in the evening sun at Bodnant (*above left and right, below left and right*) listening to stories of childhood memories from The Hon. Michael McLaren KC (current Director of Garden at Bodnant).



Meanwhile, back in south Devon, it's been a busy few months working to restore Top Garden. The long mixed herbaceous bed is almost empty – and looks even bigger than before! Hundreds upon hundreds of plants are on order and we look set for a busy September of planting. Those of you who are sun lovers will not like to hear that I am secretly hoping for a fairly damp and overcast September so that all these new plants avoid getting scorched to a crisp. With no water in this area of the garden, watering will be a mammoth, arduous and complex task.

With our three genera, it has been an interesting year. The display from the rhododendrons has been second to none! But the timing of the April show could not have been worse. We found ourselves in an odd gap whereby the early flowerers were going over and the later ones had barely started. I couldn't even find a specimen of *Rhododendron luteum* that was show-worthy – this having been a stalwart for us ever since I've been doing shows. When they did flower, there were magnificent though and the scent that has come off some of them has been divine. The year marches on and I realise that we don't have all that long to wait before the early flowering Sasanquas start to bloom.

Ashley Brent

Photo credit: *Stacey Toppin*

The Later Flowering Magnolias at Gorwell House Garden

It has been a fabulous flowering year for our three genera, and I thought I would share a few of the later flowering slightly more unusual and scented magnolias rather than the more ubiquitous yellows.

Magnolia 'Porcelain Dove' (right) is a smaller growing (3 metres in 10 years) semi-evergreen magnolia but with pure white, highly scented flowers of a lovely shape. A hybrid of *M. globosa* x *M. virginiana* var. *australis*, it usefully flowers after the frosts. It is a Todd Gresham hybrid selected in 1986 by Tom and Bill Todd, whose nursery in Alabama received a large number Gresham hybrids to trial. Gresham's house in California was called 'Hill of Doves' and the purity of the white flowers resembled porcelain. A very beautiful magnolia and highly recommended.



Magnolia sieboldii x *obovata* (left) is a deciduous magnolia I

obtained from Kevin Hughes and it has grown to over 3 metres in 12 years, resembling the *M. obovata* parent more strongly in flower and vigour. The large flowers are spicily scented and are of a lovely shape before they open flat and then turn brown (a fault of many later white magnolias). Flowering is sporadic over a few weeks, dotting the tree. This hybrid has not been given a name as far as I know.

Magnolia 'White Caviar' (right) is a rather bizarre name attached to a lovely pink, small-flowered evergreen hybrid between *M. figo* x *M. laevifolia*.

The ultimate height is probably about 3-4 metres. It follows its *M. laevifolia* parent in its profuse flowering and the flowers are scented. It has inherited the hardiness of the *M. laevifolia* parent.



Magnolia x foggii is an evergreen magnolia that was the result of a deliberate cross of *M. doltsopa* and a pink form of *M. figo* in the 1930s.

John Fogg taught botany at the University of Pennsylvania for 57 years in the 1920s to 1970s and also looked after the Morris Arboretum. This cross was replicated in the 1970s when named hybrids were produced such as 'Bubbles', 'Allspice' and 'Jack Fogg' (left). It is a very vigorous, densely-branched small tree and the flowers are produced over several weeks in April and May. The somewhat tender parents have produced a remarkably hardy progeny.



reputedly the first ever hybrid magnolia, discovered in 1802 in a batch of seedlings from an old tree of *M. virginiana* at Mr Thompson's Nursery in Mile End in London. One of the seedlings had larger leaves and flowers and greater vigour and the presumption was that it was a hybrid with *M. tripetala* growing close by. Its hybrid nature was confirmed in 1832. Whereas *M. x soulangeana* was a deliberate cross and therefore the first man-made magnolia hybrid, this magnolia was more of a chance event. It is rather an untidy grower to 4 metres and can be wide-spreading. It is semi-evergreen with white flowers dotted about the tree; some of which are rather crumpled.

Magnolia x thompsoniana (right) is a bilobed variant of *M. officinalis*. It is not found in the wild and only known in cultivation, therefore its origin is a mystery. 'Officinalis' means medicinal and its bark is used in traditional Chinese medicine. In

Sichuan we saw rows of *M. officinalis* under cultivation for medicinal use. Caught at just the right time, it has a handsome scented flower but this soon turns brown and is not a pleasant sight on the tree. However the bold foliage to almost one metre long is a splendid addition to a woodland.



John Marston

Dates for your Diary

- ◆ 3 August 2024 – SW Branch Away Day to Marwood Hill Gardens
- ◆ 26 October 2024 – SW Branch AGM at RHS Rosemoor

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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