



RCMG SW Branch News

Autumn/Winter 2024

Editor's Welcome

Welcome to the latest edition of the regional newsletter. The sun is shining whilst I write this – and it is very welcome as I've just seen the first snowfall of the winter. The recent persistent grey has taken its toll on the mood of most people I have spoken to. And certainly at Greenway, we're fed up with fighting off the multitude of midges that have proliferated in the damp warm of mid-autumn. Autumn colour has been late but wonderful; camellias are starting to flower too, as well as some eager rhododendrons – but falling temperatures should bring those back into check. The bud set is also promising for the spring ahead.

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

Autumn has definitely arrived. The colour here in the garden is rather subdued this year, although I find that *Acer palmatum* 'Osakazuki' is starting to colour with vivid scarlet. It always provides reliable autumn colour every year, which is good as the Southwest is not as amenable to as vivid fall colouring as the Southeast. Stewartias are another genus growing and colouring well in our acid soils.



It has been remarkably mild still and in our genera, my 40-year-old tree of *Magnolia* 'Maryland' still has a few buds opening. The main display is, of course, the *Sasanqua* camellias which are starting up ready for their climax of flowering in November to December. Their scent fills the air on a still day, which is an extra bonus. I show photos of *Camellia* 'Sparkling Burgundy' (left), and a pink variety just labelled 'Sasanqua Rosa from Galicia' (right).



I am hoping that we do not have a sudden plunge in temperature after this mild spell, which is what happened last year. Plants need to acclimatise, and then all is well. I have noticed the bud set on the rhododendrons and magnolias has been excellent, promising great things for next spring.

I have been given several seedlings of various genera, including rhododendron seedlings (right) from Hergest Croft, thanks to the generosity of Rowan Griffiths who was our speaker at the recent Autumn Meeting. These include large leaved *Rhododendron protistum* var. *giganteum* seed ex KW21602 from Achamore, *R. arizelum* seed from the Castle Kennedy plant (KW or Forrest), *R. falconeri* seed ex KR6385, as well as *R. lutescens* and *R. williamsianum* – all very exciting, never mind the *Sorbus*, *Betula*, *Deutzia* etc. Now to find where to put them!

A good garden is one with many plants in pots waiting for an opportunity; sometimes a death freeing up space – mourned for a short while, then filled with another treasure and soon forgotten.

John Marston



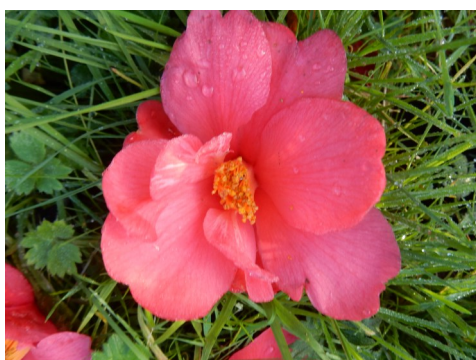
Pretty in pink and multi-bud sets

The Sasanquas are producing a lot of flowers all together this year rather than in succession over many weeks, so the display may be exceptional. But the early-winter show has also started in some gardens with the scented *Wabisuke* group of camellias bred in Japan from the 17th Century. I expect *Camellia* ‘Showa-wabisuke’ (synonym *C.* ‘Hatsukara’) to be out mid-November but it has been pipped to the post by *Camellia* x *williamsii* ‘Toni Finlay’s Fragrant’ (right) which came out on 14 November. Two flowers are quirkily a much lighter pink, almost white, which has never happened before, but cannot be from sports as they are on opposite sides of the same bush.



However, Gene Phillips of Georgia, USA’s 2016 introduction *C.* ‘Strawberry Moon’ (left) is even more delightful, seeming to tick all the boxes for a good plant, not least scent. It is a hybrid seedling from *C.* ‘Yume’, keeping its pink and white colouring; so it has at least one quarter *C. yuhsienensis* genes, which is reflected in its multi-bud set and larger leaves, up to 9cm long. The scent is also reminiscent of *C.* ‘Yume’, smelling like primroses and violets, and not at all musky. The very pretty double flowers are lasting well and have an early and more open secondary stage. It may flower slightly later next year, as it came into flower on 28 October, arriving from a polytunnel at Trehane’s; we are indebted to Jennifer Trehane, who visited Gene in Georgia a few years ago, for its arrival in the UK.

I have re-acquired very pretty, pink *C. sasanqua* ‘F.L.M. Marta Piffaretti’ (right) after voles deeply gnawed into my original plant’s trunk so it died in early 2023. It was introduced around 1974 by Floricoltura Lago Maggiore of Italy, now closed. They introduced a couple of Sasanquas which sadly are rarely found in the UK. So I was very glad to obtain a replacement when another Italian nursery sent a delivery to the wholesaler Provender Nursery in Kent; thus I can give you a photo showing some influence of Italy on the flower form, as it has spent most of the year in a hotter climate. It has been easy to grow and flowers well as a young plant. This plant was labelled *C.* ‘Eleonora Genoni’ (not in the *Camellia* Register) which was a name given in memory of a young girl who died of cancer; but I am told by Italian cognoscenti it is identical to *C.* ‘F.L.M. Marta Piffaretti’ and there is only a slim chance it is a seedling from it. Its habit is narrowly upright and it flowers very well.



Finally, a brief comment on *C. azalea* ‘1001 Summer Nights Jasmine’ hybrid (left), one of which started to flower here as early as it has ever done, on 14 September, which is still not summer as the marketing blurb led us to expect. However, as described in our 2022 Yearbook in Brenda Litchfield’s article, *C. azalea* hybrids from China are notable for their multi-bud sets which we do not see on many camellia species. One of my plants is exhibiting a multi-bud set for the first time and I counted 8 buds together on the same stem, which I have attempted to photograph. I separated out the 3 cuttings I received in the same pot from Thompson & Morgan in June 2021 to make 3 plants, and all 3 have flowered this year again; but only the mid-sized plant of the 3 which is just 32 inches (80cm) tall is really giving so generously with so many flower buds; perhaps the other two plants will follow suit next year. The approximately 10cm diameter, scarlet flowers have thick, waxy petals and 9-10 petals on a flower. The UK received

a mixed consignment of different scarlet-coloured flower forms all named *C.* ‘1001 Summer Nights Jasmine’ (right) which was very confusing! The only feature of difference apart from the flower forms was bronzy new growth on one double form. On the ICS stand at Chelsea Flower Show in September 2021, there were 4 or possibly 5 different forms as they had arrived in this “muddle” directly to Chelsea from Holland, having come from China via Italy. I have overwintered my plants inside so far but risked one against a wall with some covering last year: but as we are due a frost after a very warm two weeks, I may pull all three inside now because they are not hardened up. But I am impressed by the multi-bud set of this *C. azalea* hybrid, whatever its name is and however late it flowers!



Caroline Bell

Diana Gilding 1954-2024

Diana (Didee) Gilding died of aggressive cancer on 14 August, two weeks before her 70th birthday. She was a great asset both to RHS Rosemoor Gardens as Events Manager for 18 years, and also latterly, over several years, to the South West Branch of the RHS Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group (RCMG) helping with our shows at Rosemoor. As an example of her thoughtfulness, she donned her apron in the early mornings of the shows and made bacon rolls for the exhibitors which was very welcome as many had travelled long distances to get to the show.

Diana was born in Winchester and then spent her childhood in Stockbridge in Hampshire. Her father worked for the Ford Motor Co. and the family moved to Australia, where he supervised car production, and then to India to supervise tractor production.

Diana was one of five children, and her two sisters moved to live in Australia where they brought up their families. Although Diana had no children of her own, she enjoyed the company of her nephews and nieces and her great nephews and nieces.

The West Country had been a love of hers and so twenty years ago, she and her partner Chris moved to Weare Giffard where they bought a house after scouting around Devon & Cornwall.

She had noticed the job of Events Manager at Rosemoor advertised, and decided that this was her dream job. She applied and came runner-up at interview. Fate intervened however, as the person allocated the job had not told his wife he was applying (!) and his wife refused to move, so the job became Diana's. Fate had smiled upon us.

Although navigating setbacks in her health and her partner's, she remained very positive as was her nature, and after retiring, continued to take an interest in Rosemoor and the RCMG, helping at our shows, and I last saw her helping out at the RCMG Annual General Meeting at Trewithen as recently as the beginning of June, when she was her usual cheerful self.

Her youngest sister and her son (Diana's nephew) had, by chance, arranged to come over from Australia to visit and to take Diana on a European holiday. Alas it was not to be, but as a result they were with her during her final weeks, and the end came peacefully after a mercifully short illness.

One remembers Diana as an unflappable person, always willing to help with any task we set before her, and it is difficult to believe she is no longer with us. She will be sorely missed.



Notes from a Devon Garden

On more than one occasion I've written about rejuvenating areas of the garden through hard pruning of large clumps of planting. This time around, for a change, it's not me that is to blame for the hard pruning that took place recently at Greenway!

In mid-October, on a rather dreary wet day, I arrived at work to find no water. A quick search showed that South West Water (SWW) were dealing with a water leak in one of the villages up the road. No major issue there and so I thought nothing else of it. As I distributed bottled water around the estate to holiday guests, I noticed that on one particular garden drive, something seemed different. I couldn't immediately see what, but on returning down the same drive I couldn't help but notice the huge hole in the skyline and the massive shattered trunk and root plate of a *Pinus radiata* (below left) that had fallen in the night.



A short expletive-laden walk downhill showed the extent of the damage. We'd lost, without warning, one of the key trees that stands out in the canopy both within the garden and from the river below. Its crown had landed squarely in an area of planting containing some superb forms of *Camellia* 'Cornish Snow' (already in flower), *Magnolia* 'Leonard Messel', *Cornus capitata* and *Paonia delavayi* amongst others. I couldn't see any of these plants amongst the mass of pine brash (above right).



In terms of blessings, we can be grateful that we were closed as this tree came right across a path (left). Whilst the chances of being injured by a falling tree remain exceedingly small, I am nevertheless glad that this happened at a time when no one was about. You can see from the image that the path took some major damage in the fall as well.

I had a mild moment of panic when I thought our tree had fallen and caused the water leak that SWW were trying to repair. A quick conversation soon ruled that out for numerous reasons including timelines that didn't match up and maps that showed water pipes running under different paths. However, about an hour after this I came across

two very confused water engineers who couldn't understand why the network was still losing water after they had repaired their leak.

Despite no obvious above ground signs of a water leak and regardless of what SWW's own maps said, it soon became clear that this pine had punched a hole big enough into the ground to sever the water supply to Greenway – a water pipe that according to maps didn't exist. Many hours later, with numerous holes dug in the ground in various places and a 500m long 10cm diameter water pipe running across half the garden, temporary water was restored. Now began the task of moving the tree (right).



Being a steeply-sloped garden with limited access means that there are often few options available to us. The tonnage of wood to be moved was high and arguably had value as timber. However we did enough damage to surrounding plants and paths trying to get machinery in to process the tree, so removing timber for use elsewhere became a non-starter quite quickly. The tree had to move uphill in chunks if we wanted to avoid any further damage and save what had already been damaged.

It took four people two days to clear the tree to a point that SWW could repair the pipe underneath it. The image to the right¹ shows one of the tree surgeons (over 6ft tall) standing in a hole punched into the ground by one of the tree's limbs. You can also make out the remnants of the grove of *Paeonia delavayi* that was once there, as well as the temporary water supply running to Greenway. The tree surgeons had an unenviable task of not dropping wood onto a pipes holding 9bar of pressure.



Several weeks and several thousand pounds later, the pipe has been repaired, the path rebuilt and collateral damage has been dealt with. This key path will reopen in time for the start of the run-up to Christmas. The timber from the tree has been stacked around the fallen trunk to form an epic habitat pile. The *Camellia* 'Cornish Snow', whilst much smaller than before, is alive and in good health. The magnolias on the other hand suffered fairly catastrophic damage. We've taken them back to good wood and will now see what happens. It is unlikely they will form anything approaching a good specimen again. But I'm hoping that we will be able to propagate from any regrowth with a view to future replacement.

I'm very much looking forward to the planting opportunities that this loss has given. On a similar positive note, the bud set on our three genera is good and the Sasanquas are already putting on a good show. Here's hoping that winter is kind and that spring delivers what late-autumn is teasing!

Ashley Brent

¹Photo credit: *Tristan Doble*

Branch Autumn Meeting

Our Autumn meeting and AGM were held in the classrooms of the Peter Buckley Learning Centre at RHS Rosemoor on Saturday 26 October. About 20 members attended which was fewer than in previous years, but the attendees were treated to an excellent day.

The plant sales did good business as did the raffle. We had to contend with new phytosanitary conditions introduced by the RHS and the limited use of the Car Park. The amount raised by Entry fees, Raffle and Plant Sales was £488.50, and after expenses we had a profit of £189.75.

The Plant quiz proved popular again and there were complaints that there were only 30 questions. Lively debate followed my giving out the answers, which proved (if proof were needed) that I am no botanist! Dick Fulcher came top with a full score!



The Bring and Tell session was as varied as ever, and ranged from spiky plants, through Wally's Wattle, Fiddlewood, superb piceas (*above left*) and *Dichroa/Hydrangea*. Our speaker, Rowan Griffiths had brought sack-loads of specimens (*above right*) to talk about, which he managed to rattle through at pace. He had many samples of *Sorbus* representing the

Aria types of which Keith Rushforth has just completed the revision, splitting into various new genera. As it happens, Keith was present, so we had much to-ing and fro-ing between him and Rowan, with rather mind-boggling technical details, but excellent to have actual specimens of the sorbuses in question. We were in the presence of experts.

The AGM followed and a synopsis of the Minutes is given below. After the AGM, Rowan gave us an overview of the rhododendrons at Hergest Croft after filling us in on the history of the garden and the illustrious gardening dynasty that is the Banks family. A fine and extensive collection which continues to be catalogued and added to. Rowan has grown hundreds of rhododendrons from seed, and has had to commandeer extra space in his own garden for all the seedlings growing on. A vote of thanks for a most interesting talk concluded a successful day, and members went away happy and with a carload of plants.

I wish to thank Rosemoor for hosting us and above all, the members present who generously contributed plants to the plant sales and as prizes.



Attendees listening to the AGM

SYNOPSIS OF THE MINUTES OF THE AGM OF THE SOUTH WEST BRANCH in the presence of 19 Branch members.

1. The present committee were happy to stand again for this year, and were duly elected. Jo Rouse was also elected as a new member of the committee - she has been a regular contributor to our shows and others with her prize-winning entries. We were very pleased to welcome her.

The Committee membership is as follows:

John Marston - Chairman

Joanne Court -Hon. Secretary

Ashley Brent - Hon. Treasurer and Newsletter Editor

Ian Gillbard - Hon. Events Organiser

Pam Hayward - Hon. Archivist and Membership Information Officer

Pat and Peter Bucknell, Dave & Val Dann, Ben Probert, Jo Rouse.

2. The Treasurer updated us on the Branch Accounts, which stood at £1,328.08p but since the Autumn Meeting, now stand at £1,517.83

3. We were sad to hear of the death of Diana Gilding, a stalwart member of the Branch and a great practical help at our shows. (See obituary in this Newsletter)

4. Membership of the Branch stands at 140, with Endsleigh the latest garden member. Affiliated membership has been abolished and all RCM Group members are welcome at all Branch events. Alan Robertson is the Group events coordinator who will be advertising all Branch events in the fullness of time.

5. We hosted a very successful Group AGM at Trewithen and the Centenary cup was won by Caerhays with a splendid *Magnolia rostrata* flower with a collar of its massive leaves.

6. We are planning garden visits for next Spring including a visit to Coletton Fishacre who would like some help naming their species rhododendrons while we are there.

The AGM closed at 2.20pm.

John Marston

Dates for your Diary

- ◆ 8-9 March 2025 – RHS Early Camellia Competition and SW Branch competitions at RHS Rosemoor
- ◆ 26-27 April 2025 – RHS Main Rhododendron Competition and SW Branch competitions 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.

Photo credits: by the article author unless otherwise stated

Compiled by Ashley Brent