



RCMG SW Branch News

Summer 2025

Editor's Welcome

Welcome to the latest edition of the regional newsletter. It's been yet another long, hot, dry spring for us in south Devon. The repeated cycle of drought stress is starting to show on some of our more mature plants and trees with some surprising losses and also surprising survivors. On the flip side, it has made many tasks in the garden much simpler as the ground is firm and everything dry. Meadow cutting has started early and been a much easier and less physical affair than previous wet summers. Every cloud has a silver lining.

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

We speak first of the weather – a British gardener's topic of conversation because of its extraordinary unpredictability. This spring has been no exception – hot and dry, howling winds, rain and back to cool and damp. One cannot keep up, and the plants are not too sure either. As I write, the garden here in North Devon is rather dry as a rule, but out weeding this morning all is refreshed and wet. The last flowers on what I have always known as *Rhododendron decorum* ssp. *diaprepes* (below left) are beginning to fade but there are still enough to scent the air.



I collected a *R. decorum* in Sichuan in 2004 but this flowers a good four weeks earlier. *R. decorum* ssp. *diaprepes* is a parent of well known late-flowering hybrid *R. 'Polar Bear'*. Nearby I grow its other parent, *R. auriculatum*, which is still in tight bud. This will come out in late July with larger scented trumpet flowers.

Of our other genera here in the garden, the later evergreen magnolias are putting out intermittent flowers. Especially notable is the beautiful *Magnolia 'Porcelain Dove'* (*M.*



obovata x *M. virginiana*) (above right) with spicily scented flowers over a long period. My small plant of the supposed year-long flowering *Camellia azalea* seems to be on strike having flowered in the spring. It does come from a sub-tropical area in China so may need more heat than I can provide.

Happy gardening!

John Marston

SW Branch People News

Rosemary Howell awarded the BEM

Our longstanding member Rosemary Howell (*right*)¹ of Lukesland Gardens, Ivybridge has been awarded the British Empire Medal by the King for her services to Guiding and to the local community. Although a major figure in the world of Guiding, and a Girl Guide herself 80 years ago, we know Rosemary best for her wonderful 24 acre garden which she began creating with her late husband over fifty years ago. A landmark of Lukesland is the immense Champion (by spread rather than girth) *Magnolia campbellii*. But many of our genera are grown there, enjoying the moisture provided by the stream running through the garden. Lukesland is now looked after by daughter-in-law Lorna, although still with much input from Rosemary.

The RCMG South West Branch offers our congratulations to Rosemary.



Joey Warren takes to the air



At 96 years young, Joey Warren (*left*) took a sponsored glider flight to raise money for her local church roof fund. She was featured on the local BBC television news and looked like she was enjoying herself, which she confirmed when I sent her a congratulatory message. Joey has been a stalwart and loyal member of the Branch and many years ago was our group secretary. She is to be seen at our garden visits with her electric buggy determined to join in.

Well done Joey!

Malcolm Pharoah awarded RHS Associate of Honour

Malcolm Pharoah, well known for looking after Marwood Hill Gardens almost since their creation by Dr Jimmy Smart five decades ago, was presented with the RHS Associate of Honour Award from RHS President Keith Weed (*right*)² in recognition of his long service at Marwood and also his expertise in breeding, cultivating, showing and judging camellias.

Many congratulations, Malcolm.



Mary Ashworth awarded the A.J.Waley medal

Mary Ashworth (*right*)³, our longstanding member, is to be congratulated for being awarded the prestigious RHS A. J. Waley Medal for her work classifying the Forrest rhododendrons at Werrington, one of the historic Williams gardens of Cornwall. She has also been active at Werrington in other guises as well, and the Medal was awarded to her at the Main Rhododendron Competition at RHS Garden Rosemoor by Michael Williams himself who gave a touching speech. I am hoping for a Branch visit to Werrington next Spring. Congratulations to Mary; well deserved

John Marston

¹Photo credit: *Stephen Haywood*

²Photo credit: *RHS*

³Photo credit: *Sally Hayward*



Rhododendron ‘Tiger’



Around forty years ago I acquired a specimen of this plant from Reuthe’s nursery who were the breeders of this hybrid. It was, at that time, the first hybrid with flowers a mixture of orange and red (*left*). Thirty years later the original plant, whilst having survived a move from Hampshire to Cornwall, was starting to be sickly. Nobody seemed to be propagating it and Reuthe’s had at that time closed.

Normal cuttings would not strike so I therefore sent some buds to the Duchy Micropropagation unit with whom the group has a relationship to see what they could do. In late June after 8 years of endeavour I received back a small 6 inch specimen that they had managed to produce (*right*).

Whilst there may be examples of this plant in gardens, they are not known to us and therefore this is the only known example in existence at the current time although the Duchy has others coming along.

Graham Mills

Splendid serratas

I’ve been collecting *Hydrangea serrata* varieties for some years now; I love them. Their virtues are many, not least that they fill the gap as the last of the rhododendrons fade. They are so much more refined than the bigger *H. macrophylla* varieties – of which, nevertheless, I also have a burgeoning (in every sense) collection!

My all-time favourite *H. serrata* is a variety called *H. ‘Grayswood’* (*right*) which I am sure you all know. It’s worth every letter of its AGM award and ticks all the boxes. I have three plants of it in different parts of my garden and two of those have sported the usual white bracts with contrasting blue flowers but the third has been especially enchanting this year, probably due to its exposed location facing south. Although the white of the bracts always tends to fade and shade as time goes on,



from the start the bracts this year have been blessed with a gorgeous smoke-blue haze which gives the whole plant a different look, really cool and classy. But *H. 'Grayswood'* is a biggish grower for its species and now a very different variety is challenging its top position in my chart.



Having recently wrestled with a 'bent on world domination' *H. 'Ayesha'* of truly monumental proportions and threatening to block a pathway with her 'She who must be obeyed' attitude, diminutive and oh so sweet *H. serrata* 'Spreading Beauty' (*left*) has captured my heart. Barely taller than the top of my wellies, growing in a perfectly shaped low mound, with bracts of that indescribable chalk-blue, *H. 'Spreading Beauty'* is exactly that and would surely be the perfect choice for smaller gardens and narrow borders in a shaded position.

If you too love these hydrangeas, I urge you to look out for this variety or if you fancy raising your own from a cutting, I would be very happy to send a few to you to try – spreading *H. 'Spreading Beauty'* as it were!

By the way, don't get the impression I don't like *H. 'Ayesha'* – far from it, I am forever under her spell!

Pam Hayward

Garden Visits Spring 2025

Ian Gillbard had organised for us to visit five gardens this spring and we started on 22 April with two gardens belonging to the National Trust in fairly close proximity; Coleton Fishacre and Greenway on the Dart. At Coleton Fishacre we had been tasked with identifying some of the rhododendrons missing from their database (*right*), which we attempted to do with varying success, gardener Gary Prescod making notes. Many maddenia rhododendrons were flowering and were mostly of the 'Lady Alice Fitzwilliam'/'Fragrantissimum' persuasion which can be difficult to separate



out. Many other rhododendrons were still flowering and the garden was looking great. It has a wonderful situation looking over to the sea. At nearby Greenway (*left*), holiday home of Agatha Christie, we were led round by Head Gardener (and SW Branch Treasurer) Ashley Brent. It is a wonderful garden and since our last visit some years ago, much work on clearing and tree felling has taken place, which is still going on, and which will make a tremendous difference.

We ventured further southwest on 7 May to Falmouth in order to visit two rather contrasting gardens; Penjerrick and Penwarne. Penjerrick is a historic garden with historic rhododendrons of some

fame, and home to the Penjerrick and Barclayi hybrids. Nature has been allowed to take over, so that in some parts it was difficult to pass along the paths (*right*). Near the entrance was the most massive *Podocarpus salignus* I have ever seen and tree ferns were abundant, both enormous and seeding around. Many scented rhododendrons were out but as it was getting late in the season for this part of the world; most of the rhododendrons were going over. There were still some in flower but we had to find our own way round with a map, so identification was not really possible.





After a buffet lunch on the terrace of a neighbouring hotel with fabulous views across the bay, we drove to Penwarne nearby. A complete contrast from Penjerrick. A beautifully kept garden which we were shown around by Head Gardener Simon Lawson (*left*). There were still some rhododendrons in flower, some of which were old hybrids like a very large shrub of *R. 'Mrs Furnivall'*. Some scented maddenias as well were still out. There were very large early magnolias and a very large 'Loderi' rhododendron whose trunk we admired.

On 22 May, we visited Heathercombe House, near Bovey Tracey on the edge of Dartmoor, where John Pike (*right*) and his family have created a 30-acre garden, which John himself guided us around. It was full of our three genera and John is planting more magnolias in an open situation which already has some interesting trees, especially oaks. A large lake ringed with Japanese maples

in their new leaves looked stunning in the sunshine (*below*). Standing out, some of the rhododendrons were old varieties which were rather



unusual; *R. 'Mrs Charles E Pearson'* (*below left*) was a lovely pink, and the rather bizarrely named *R. 'September Song'* (*below right*) was of a strong crimson-apricot shade. Above the house across a lane, is a meandering path through fairly new plantings, mainly chosen by John's Ukrainian wife. An orchard which used to be a conifer plantation was cleared of the trees and the rather poor soil was ideal for sowing wild flowers sourced from a neighbouring farm; it has been a great success.

It was disappointing that only five members turned out for the visit to this lovely garden. I have the intention of making a short video of our garden visits as a taster for those who cannot attend for one reason or another.



However the enjoyment of these garden visits is meeting up with like-minded people and discussing and commenting as we go around.

John Marston

The ‘gall’ of it! Has it been a bumper season for these weird and wonderful fungal creations?

Back in May, Sally had an email from a member in Kent with concerns about a spooky growth on a *Camellia japonica* ‘Mathotiana’ (right)¹. We both agreed it was likely to be Camellia Gall (*Exobasidium camelliae*) but having never seen it for myself down here in the South West, I thought I would write to Jim Stephens and Caroline Bell to ask about their experiences of it. Both confirmed it has indeed appeared in our part of the world.

Jim replied: ‘I’ve seen it affect flowers and shoots and produce some great shapes, sometimes like little figures. I don’t know about its distribution, it occurs most years here and there in the Mt. Edgcumbe collection, with no particular favourites or any sign of a pattern.’

And Caroline said: ‘I had it once here on one plant and one flower – ‘Black Lace’ (below)² I think – about 10 years ago and I have not seen it again. I think I even wrote to you about it then as I did not know what it was! Jennifer Trehane has a photo in her *Encyclopaedia* and advises swift removal, not to compost them, and then no consequences. It must be tied with the weather conditions re. timing I guess, as I think it was around this time.’



In fact it was 8 June 2016 when Caroline spotted her one and only attack but a most impressive thing it was! It must have slipped my mind or was so gruesome, I deliberately forgot it!

Nevertheless, with the early season we have had this year, the timing of Caroline’s encounter is pretty consistent with the Kentish attack.

Going a little further with the research, I contacted Sara Redstone, one of the Plant Health team at the RHS, to get her take on the matter. She came back with some more information and guidance which I would like to share with fellow members:

‘It sounds like parts of the Southwest have had much more rainfall this year than the Southeast, which will have favoured the development of these galls which are caused by 2 closely-related fungal species in the genus *Exobasidium*. The galls are annual, so aren’t produced from the same tissue for more than one year but their impact on plant flowering and form can be significant.

Key to reducing reinfection is prompt removal and disposal of the galls – before they reach sporulation, indicated by a floury white “bloom”, in June and July. The spores will be spread by wind and rain and usually lodge in bud or leaf axils where they germinate and parasitise the plant. I’d suggest bagging the galls and burning them or sending them to green waste, rather than home composting.

Measures like mulching won’t help against this but will help reduce weed competition and, in the unlikely event of dry weather(!), increase moisture retention, reducing plant stress, which is beneficial. I’m not aware of any plant protection products which are effective against this fungus for use by professional or home gardeners.

There’s not much you can do about humidity levels *per se*, given where you live, though ensuring plants are well spaced and pruned so that there is reasonable air flow in and around them will help, by providing less favourable conditions for establishment and spread of the fungus.’

Well, not very long after all this, I had my very first meeting with Azalea Gall (*Exobasidium japonicum*) up here on the moor. Just two evergreen azaleas affected but hundreds of yards apart; I’m guessing the spores must have come in with the plants and lay dormant until the conditions were right. So keen was I to destroy and dispose of these strange growths that I completely forgot to photograph them.

Luckily, Polly Cooke, our Evergreen Azalea Queen, has been on the case for us and photographed both fresh (*below left*)³ and dried (*below right*)³ out Home Counties infidels for our newsletter!



Her pearls of wisdom to add to our knowledge are:

‘Normally the dried-out galls drop, so it could be a whole leaf or only part of a leaf. It’s really important to check and remove the dried ones too (*right*)³. If the gall has affected the stem, then there may be a swollen or distorted brown/black section. It is just as important to remove these as well, although you might not see them until the next season after spring leaf drop over the winter.’

You will find more information here:

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/disease/camellia-gall>

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/disease/azalea-gall>



I shall be looking at both camellias and azaleas even more closely next year! Meanwhile, it would be good to hear from other members about their experiences with these funky fungi.

Pam Hayward

¹Photo credit: *John Wotton*

²Photo credit: *Caroline Bell*

³Photo credit: *Polly Cooke*

Notes from a Cornish Garden

I have promised myself, and our editor, that I’d avoid a sprawling saga length retelling of what’s been happening at Glendurgan since I last wrote. So here goes with the best of intentions but little hope of achieving it...

Late summer and early autumn of 2024 saw us looking at our rhododendron nursery beds and making a start on getting them planted out in the garden. Many of the plants ready for planting arrived in 2021 from Ros Smith’s micropropagation unit at Duchy College and had been growing on to a size capable of holding their own on our sloped meadows. One of the more challenging planting sites is the what feels like near-vertical back side of Fish Pond valley – or “Wall of Death” as it is known to the gardeners who attempt to wield a strimmer on it twice a year. Aside from being difficult terrain to work on, it’s also challenging growing conditions for establishing shrubs and trees. But this area already had some established rhododendrons, many with Cornish connections, so it made sense to try to add to the Cornish theme and work towards filling the bank with shrubs that would over time reduce the amount of strimming needed.



We knew we needed to create some planting pockets that would help retain water on the slope and provide a wider horizontal area for root growth. So, we copied what has already been successful with some other rhododendrons on this bank and built shallow retaining walls to plant in. The less said about manhandling the stones down the slope from the path above the better! The Cornish rhododendrons planted were *Rhododendron* ‘Penjerrick’ (Group) and *R.* ‘Glory of Penjerrick’ (Beauty of Tremough Group) (*left*), and so far, all are growing on; though like many others in the garden becoming in need of some sustained rain soon.

With new space created in the stock beds it was impossible to resist lifting a batch of *R. macabeanum* that had germinated in a neighbouring tree fern (right). We have many rhododendrons growing epiphytically, but *R. macabeanum* on a tree fern might be pushing it! The thick layer of moss they were rooted in to was deceptive. Far from being a lovely soft cushion that would lift easily, it was in fact home to a thick mat of aerial fern roots that had expanded into the moist moss and entangled with the seedling roots. But eventually they were wrestled from their home and potted up. Some inevitably did not survive the rude trauma! The remaining seedlings are not yet big enough to move into the stock beds but have put on some encouraging growth.

Our Reticulata camellias on Camellia Walk were given some TLC after several were showing significant signs of decline and dieback. We were advised by our local plant health inspector to prune out all affected material as soon as possible and prune to open up any congested growth. We also pruned surrounding camellias – lifting, thinning and creating space around them as needed. We've been surprised by how well the reticulatas responded by putting on new growth this year. We're tentatively hopeful.

Over a winter of many storms, we luckily survived with almost no damage but did have the most site closed days due to high winds we think we've ever had. And like everyone else, far more rain than we cared for. But even the storms, and relentless rain, that came close to our start of season opening in February didn't stop what was possibly one of our best years for magnolias. A joy that many other gardens experienced too. Instead of our early-flowerers going over before opening, they were in full flower. In fact, they were still in flower when the next wave started to break bud, with weeks of magnolias flowering in every direction! Magnolia season seemed almost endless as wave after wave of buds opened and flowers held.



Left to right: *Magnolia campbellii* ssp. *mollicomata*; *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta alba*; *M. x veitchii* 'Peter Veitch'

Our rhododendrons, however, were slow to get going this year, leaving us wondering what we might cut for the shows. In the earliest local shows, we saw neighbouring gardens arriving with enormous trusses, while we'd been searching for any that might be ready to cut. But by the time of the Main Rhododendron Competition we'd caught up and were able to select some choice winning entries. Harri Inglis became a one-woman operation, selecting, entering and staging a range of rhododendrons and magnolia that saw "us" winning amongst others the Quicke Cup with *Magnolia laevifolia* and the McLaren Challenge Cup for *Rhododendron kesangiae* (right). Full credit to Harri for bringing the cups to Glendurgan!

Sadly, quite a few of our rhododendrons are looking unhappy this year. We think this is possibly in part due to the delayed impact of the two very dry hot seasons we had in 2022 and 2023. We've tried to feed as many as possible this year, along with the camellias, in the hope that this will boost resilience and vigour. It does nudge the question again of how well





some rhododendrons will manage long-term in what looks like to be increasing extremes of weather. But on a positive note, *R. 'Polar Bear'* (left), one of our last to flower, was looking fantastic in a brief rain shower we had last week.

Away from our genera we've been busy creating a new planting area on a sun-baked bank near our visitor welcome and café area. The planting scheme is the continuation of a nearby Southern Hemisphere-themed bed – packed with *Prostanthera*, *Grevillea*, *Correa* and *Westringia* amongst others (right). We're excited to see it fill out over the next season or so and are hoping it will eventually become low-maintenance but high-impact planting able to withstand changing extremes of weather.



It feels strange to be writing this 7 months after the event, and after so much has already been written by so many others in our plant-loving circles, but it would just be wrong to sign off without mention of John Lanyon who retired from being our Head Gardener in December. I'm not sure what else I can add to all that has been written, so I simply leave some photos of John in his element on the last garden tour he did for us in October (below left). It was memorable for many

reasons beyond it being his last. In true John style, what was billed as an "Apple Talk" became an adventure of all things edible at Glendurgan and included some very quickfire decisive pruning demonstrations – we should have been suspect when we saw the pruning saw on John's belt (below right). But most surprisingly of all to anyone who had joined one of John's tours before, we actually got to the end destination and finished with time to spare! The legend of John's unfinished tours will always raise a smile with the team. But who can blame him when there



are just so many plants to get passionate about. John is still very kindly helping us with finishing recording our rhododendron collection.

Which leaves only to introduce Adam Carveth as the new Head Gardener for our portfolio of gardens, who like John has a love of edibles. Adam joins us from working in private estates in Ireland and before that, several public gardens in England.

Nicola Johnson



Magnolia 'Maryland'

The magnolia season is extended into June and July by the evergreen magnolias from the southern USA, most commonly by *Magnolia grandiflora*, which in the rather cooler summers of the UK is rather sporadic flowering, producing intermittently one or two blooms over the course of a couple of months in the summer. Some cultivars are more successful than others in our climate. I have found *M. grandiflora* 'Victoria' and *M. grandiflora* 'Goliath' to be quite floriferous. The hotter humid summers in the southern USA produce a quite different tree which is covered in large blooms in May, as I witnessed in Washington DC.

In 1930, a controlled cross of the two US native evergreen magnolias; *M. grandiflora* and *M. virginiana* was made at the US National Arboretum, Washington DC by Oliver Myles Freeman, who worked in the Herbarium and was supervising the development of the Arboretum, which had been established in a plot of land in northern Washington DC in 1927. His hybridising of *M. grandiflora* and *M. virginiana* were known as 'The Freeman Hybrids' and two were released commercially as cultivars: one named *M. 'Freeman'* in 1962 and another

named *M. 'Maryland'* in 1971. Of the two, *M. 'Maryland'* has been the more successful, tending towards the *M. grandiflora* parent, broader and with large flowers, whereas *M. 'Freeman'* is smaller, narrower-growing and with smaller flowers.



In my garden, in about 1986, I planted a tree of *M. 'Maryland'* within the walled garden near the bottom of a south-facing slope. It started flowering when young and has been flowering well ever since. It comes into flower in May and continues to flower into the autumn, and has been a great success, not growing very tall (c. 4m), (left) and producing several large lemon scented flowers (above right) at the same time, unlike its parents which are growing in the garden here in North Devon, and are rather sporadic in flowering. It is very hardy, reputedly surviving temperatures to -20°C provided the wood is ripened sufficiently in summer, and has proved to be an excellent small evergreen tree.

John Marston

Hot off the Press

Jeremy Wilson rounds off his RHS Show year with a Silver-Gilt Medal for his Strete Gate Camellias exhibit at the RHS Flower Show at Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire. What an amazing record he now has and what stamina and dedication to travel all over the country promoting camellias! We're even told his website is 'nearly ready' - encouraging progress, Jeremy! Now let's see it for real! I'm told he has also teamed up with the Head Gardener there to propagate the very old and so far mostly unnamed camellias gracing the restored camellia house, which will really help with identification when blooms can be looked at in other parts of the country by a range of experts as well as providing back-up plants for the collection.

Pam Hayward



Dates for your Diary

- ♦ 27 September 2025 – RCMG SW Branch AGM. Guest speaker, John Lanyon. In the Garden Room at RHS Rosemoor from 10am for a 10:30am start.
- ♦ 14 March 2026 – Early Camellia & SW Branch Competitions at RHS Rosemoor
- ♦ 25 April 2026 – Main Rhododendron & 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.

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