



RCMG SW Branch News

Autumn 2025

Editor's Welcome

Welcome to the latest edition of the regional newsletter. Every time I sit down to write this introduction, it feels as though the main topic on my mind is the weather and its impact on our three genera and the garden as a whole. The wet weather is a blessing after another long dry summer that will have taken its toll on some of our more mature trees, already stressed from similar years previous. The array and range of fungi has been impressive, as has the number of rhododendron snow in flower – I hope not at the detriment of spring displays.

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.

Ashley Brent

Branch Chairman's Foreword

It's pouring with rain as I write this, but actually it's very welcome as we have had a very dry few weeks again and one cannot water everything in a garden of this size. I have noticed over this year, that of our three genera, camellias seem to be best able to cope with drought and rhododendrons the least capable. Magnolias also seem reasonably able to manage with some dryness. Anyway, we are all learning some different ways of gardening in the new, changing climate; certainly noticeable since I started the garden here in 1977.

On a more positive note, there is still flower colour about and the autumn camellias have started up. I illustrate the massed effect of a skirt of *Camellia 'Hugh Evans'* (right) around the upright shrubs of *C. 'Sparkling Burgundy'* and *C. 'Narumigata'* further round the corner. They are now in the shade of the large cedar of Lebanon which has spread over them and this rather puts paid to the notion that they need sun to flower. Of course, scent is the added bonus as one stands looking on admiringly. There has been a rogue late flower on *Rhododendron auriculatum* and an old large shrub of *R. 'Blue Tit'* is having a second go at flowering. *Rhododendron 'Yellow Hammer'* of course is well known for having a second flush of flowers in the autumn. Russet colours and even scarlet and orange are predominating as autumn settles in; perhaps a melancholy season presaging winter ahead, but beyond this (and early in our part of the world) spring will be with us again. The seasons are so important to give a rhythm to the year.

John Marston



Notes from a Dorset Garden

In the hope that members of the branch might be interested to hear something from the eastern reaches of the region, I am offering a few seasonal observations from my small garden near Poole.

It has been the most difficult year I can remember in the 20 years or so we have been here – I expect many others feel the same following a really dry summer with little relief. I have learnt that some members in parts of the southwest had some helpful amounts of rain in July and August, but these largely passed us by over here and, despite many hours spent with hose and watering can, I have suffered many losses of rhododendrons, though camellias and magnolias have largely withstood the serious drought conditions here.

The main losses have been of recently planted specimens, as might be expected, but I have been shocked to see even a few large, mature shrubs drooping and dying. Others seem to have revived after some welcome rain in September, but I fear in some cases this may be misleading. For instance, a large *Rhododendron auriculatum*, which I would normally expect to flower in late July or August and to produce its new growth immediately afterwards, just sat there and did nothing until mid-September, at which point I thought it was moribund. Then, after a little rain, I saw some signs of life, but flower buds quickly shrivelled without opening. I was then encouraged to see growth buds producing new foliage in early October. However, I fear this may be too late and an early frost could wipe the whole lot out. We shall see!

Rhododendrons in pots have fared less badly, as I have managed to keep them watered, though young seedlings and rooted cuttings have been challenging to keep alive. I have many mature tender-ish rhododendrons in large pots and tubs, and have found them quite difficult to keep healthy when they have reached a large size. The compost becomes very compacted and rock-like, and tends to repel water. In these cases, I have found that it helps to take rather drastic action to improve the drainage. I achieve this by taking a long steel peg and hammering it into the top of the rootball in several places, so that holes are driven right down to the bottom of the container. This seems to make watering more efficient and prevents a sump forming at the bottom.

Autumn is the main season for repotting rhododendrons here and I thought it might be of interest to talk about potting composts for rhododendrons (and camellias). I have had no success with the peat-free retail ericaceous composts I have seen, and this year I am experimenting with a partly home-made concoction. A complete ban on retail peat-based composts has been proposed, but it has not yet been implemented, so some are still available. I have been buying a peat-based ericaceous compost under the *Growmoor* brand, which is reasonable but rather fine in texture, so I am now using a mixture of equal parts of this compost, pine duff (collected with permission from local woodland) and composted bracken (available from Macpenny's Nursery in the New Forest). I like the feel of this mixture and the old bracken stems and pine needles give it good drainage. I think it will do the job.

Finally, and going back to the weather, the recent rain has led to something of a false spring, so much pleasure has been had recently from *R. 'Nobleanum Venustum'* (right) and *R. 'Christmas Cheer'* covering themselves with flowers in September and October – probably at the expense of their normal flowering in winter and early spring, but welcome all the same. Sasanqua camellias have also been flowering with unusual abandon, presumably as a reaction to the hot summer.

Losses will soon be forgotten, gaps will be filled with new planting and resolutions to do proper mulching at the right time will be fulfilled. All our gardens change, and so do gardeners: we both tend to get old and my plan for 2026 is to do less but to do it better.



Russell Beeson

Reports, News and Events

Southwest Branch Meeting and AGM

17 September 2025, Annexe to Garden Room at RHS Rosemoor

A report on our Autumn Meeting and AGM was sent out as an email shortly after the event.

It was very successful in the end, with many thanks for those who brought plants for sale and donated to the quiz and raffle prizes. John Lanyon gave a most interesting talk dealing first with his journey through horticulture as well as taking us through the wonderful garden at Tregye. Jenny Welsh at Rosemoor was very supportive and helpful, which was great.

We took £539 on the day, which after Lecturer and catering expenses left us with a surplus of £362.80.

The Branch bank account stands at £1,681.90p. Our intention has always been to maintain an amount of £1,000 or thereabouts; now we need to think how to spend the surplus. There are some options such as engaging a well known speaker and/or supporting young gardeners to attend our events. As an aside, the National Trust does not have a consistent approach to reimburse its staff's attendance at events or garden membership fees. The main committee is undertaking to ask the National Trust to reconsider, especially for gardens with large numbers of our genera represented. We will be discussing the options for our South West branch, but it would be good to hear your thoughts. The attendees at the meeting decided that garden visits should be continued as well as more formalised events. I feel that socialising should be a part of any group of people with similar interests and I am hoping that next year, our events will be better attended.

Events for early 2026

March (Date TBA) – Camellia study day at Bicton Gardens, also incorporating historic Veitch origin rhododendrons. Lunch will be provided.

14/15 March – Early Camellia competition, Daffodil competition and Spring flower show at Rosemoor. There will be a new cup instituted for 12 camellias called the ICS Cup, which would be equivalent to the Leonardslee Bowl at the Main Camellia competition.

21 March – Camellia Fest at Marwood Hill Gardens – all things camellia!

More anon.

News

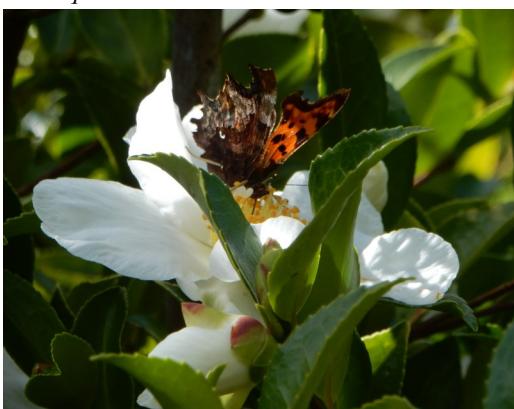
For many reasons, Dick Fulcher has had to put Nymph Wood in the Mole Valley up for sale.

This is a woodland of mainly oak and beech trees. Over the years, Dick has planted out many rhododendrons, most of which were introductions by himself and Keith Rushforth. It would be wonderful if it could be bought and maintained in the future by a fellow rhododendron enthusiast. Dick is happy to be contacted by you or anyone you know who might be interested at: lornaanddick69@gmail.com

John Marston

Autumn camellias

Autumn-flowering Sasanqua camellias are very early this year and I was sad to miss bringing some to our Branch Autumn meeting due to illness – six Sasanquas were already in flower then. It is a very good year, with larger than average flowers after having watered consistently (against bud drop which happens from water shortage), and an above average flower display, as seen in my photo of *Camellia sasanqua*



‘Sasanqua Alba’ (right). This Sasanqua has a large, wholly white flower, is scented, and was acquired from Macpenny's in Hampshire, but it is just one form using this name. I have two others.



I love the way the butterflies, both last year and this, visit the single, larger-flowered Sasanquas, especially, *C. ‘Papaver’*, *C. ‘Sasanqua Alba’* and *C. ‘Nodami-ushiro’*. The butterflies were most often Red Admirals and Commas which were still active in early October. My photo of a Comma on *C. ‘Sasanqua Alba’* (left) was taken on 7 October this year.



It is also a fantastic year for seed! Camellia seedpods can be surprisingly ornamental and some are attractively red such as on *C. sasanqua* 'Papaver' (above left) or *C. japonica* 'Scented Red'. *Camellia yunnanensis* ex Trehane (above right) has larger pods looking almost like little apples with a 14-15cm circumference. The seed on all these is fertile and I have so much seed on camellias this year, I am giving it away.



Older camellias of any species sometimes sport and often you can find it has happened elsewhere. *Camellia sasanqua* 'Plantation Pink' AGM with a large light pink flower and sprawling branches was bred by Professor EG Waterhouse in Australia and introduced in 1948. Last week I found a sported white flower on a small branch of a plant I have been growing for 21 years. The flower was almost an anemone form and approximately two thirds of the size of the normal flower. Looking at the Register, I find a sport like this was identified in SW France and was named and registered as *C. 'Plantation Pink Blanc'* (left) in 2009. My sport looks similar to the photo provided by Chateau Trevarez, home of the French National Camellia Collection.



I am pleased that *C. sasanqua* 'Plantation Pink Variegated' (right) is flowering for the first time this year after a wait of seven years. It may flower inconsistently anyway, but the hot summer has been good news for it. Its foliage is variegated differently from *C. 'Sasanqua Variegata'* and although it likes shelter, it also seems to stand up better to the winter weather than *C. 'Sasanqua Variegata'* and has easily become a bushy, attractive plant. The flower is like the parent, but smaller.



I am excited that *C. granthamiana* (right) has set buds for the first time. I moved it last spring and it is much happier in a sunny spot but still with shelter from a wall: I did so after seeing it growing in sun in two northern Italian gardens, both *Camellia Gardens of Excellence*. I had previously believed that as its native habitat is the Hong Kong jungle, it must prefer shade. So far, I can only proffer a photo of its extraordinary papery dark brown to

black buds similar to those seen in northern Italy in November 2023, because they have not opened yet.

The other species looking good at present is a seed-raised *C. parviflora* (right) from our seedlist. It flowered last year but this year it is making a better display of its approximately 1.5cm flowers. The leaves are bleaching in full sun, it seems hardy and has good pink to burgundy new growth colour and small leaves.



Caroline Bell

Off Piste!

Sorry to veer away from the subject of rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias, but I am literally going 'off piste' to encourage you to think about the understory to your plants at this time of year. Did you know that there are autumn-flowering snowdrops, the *Galanthus* equivalent of *Camellia sasanqua*? I have been growing this gem, appropriately named *Galanthus 'Autumn Belle'* (right) for some years. Starting with one bulb, it has gradually bulked up, and this year is putting on a lovely show surrounded by self-sown *Cyclamen coum* which will bring the next treat of colour to take my understory through the winter months.

Galanthus 'Autumn Belle' was a chance seedling that appeared at the former Cambridge Alpines nursery, so little more is known about it. If you do decide to investigate autumn-flowering snowdrops look for *G. reginae-olgae* cultivars.

This piece does however carry a 'wealth warning' – becoming a galanthophile is very addictive and, if you have no self-control, expensive, as I know to my cost!

Sally Hayward



Polyspora speciosa - A Camellia Relative from China

I have noticed that my tree of *Polyspora speciosa* (below), from Guizhou in southwest China, is covered in buds this year which are beginning to open. Although not strictly a camellia, it is a member of the *Theaceae* family and the flowers are just like enormous single camellias. It has lush evergreen foliage of large size making the whole plant impressive.



cultivation. Some are hardier than others. Only time will tell which (like *Polyspora speciosa* and probably *P. longicarpa*) are reasonably hardy. Those from tropical areas will not be hardy of course.

Many *Polyspora* species are very similar to each other in flower, but differ slightly in their seed capsules. *Polyspora longicarpa* has elongated seed capsules as compared to *P. speciosa* for example. This has caused confusion, even among botanists and the whole genus will no doubt be under further review as more are introduced into cultivation and subjected to further botanical scrutiny.

Many white camellias (especially the doubles) outstay their welcome by remaining on the bush and turning brown. This becomes very unsightly and they need to be removed. This is avoided with polysporas, as the flowers fall off the tree after only a few days and lie on the ground, still pristine. Some have unkindly likened them to fried eggs. The polysporas have a drawback, which is that since they have a long season of flowering – from mid- to late autumn and into winter – the later flowers and buds can be caught by the frosts, although the foliage remains untouched. Nevertheless, we can enjoy these wonderful plants in a sheltered position in our gardens in the Southwest, where the climate seems to be very conducive to their growth and cultivation. I hope that more of us will start experimenting with and growing these imposing tropical looking trees.

John Marston

Of course the wonderful foliage is glorious all the year round for a subtropical effect, but the flowers are enormous at about 15cm (6in) across and are a source of wonder when fully out. *Polyspora* species come from wet tropical and sub-tropical biomes: India, China, South East Asia. These plants were all once in the genus *Gordonia*, but now this is only represented by the North American species; the Chinese species (about 40) were put into the genus *Polyspora* in 2004, a genus they had been in briefly in the 1930s. Some were even known as *Camellia* but they are distinguished from camellias in that they have winged seeds.

Gordonia axillaris was the only one I had known of when I started gardening, and was considered very tender, but several more have since been, and are continuing to be, introduced from Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam (*Polyspora intricata*), from where many exciting plants are now entering

Camellia at Thomas Lobb's Cottage

Among the many plants of interest to the RCM Group in the recently digitized RHS Wisley horticultural herbarium is a specimen labelled 'Camellia' (right) from a cottage known as 'Cobbler's Pool' in Devoran, Cornwall, once the home of Thomas Lobb (1817-1894). Both Thomas and his brother William (1809-64) were employed as a plant collectors by Veitch's Nursery. William collected in the Americas and is remembered for his introductions of *Araucaria araucana* and *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, while Thomas collected orchids, including the blue orchid *Vanda caerulea*, carnivorous plants and tender rhododendrons, including *Rhododendron jasminiflorum* and *R. javanicum*, collected in India, Asia and Japan.

For many years, journalist Leo Hickman and I have researched the life and collections of William Lobb but our interest in Thomas was piqued after discovering that the cottage where he retired and spent his latter years was vacant and for sale with rumours that it would be demolished – the asking price was £380 000, a considerable sum for a derelict cottage. Leo and I visited in 2010 when a highlight was standing in the lounge (below) where Thomas and William would almost certainly have met and chatted after their collecting trips. Thomas was noted as walking to the nearby parish church on Sunday in spring with a camellia as a button hole.



The cottage was cloaked in a tangle of plants (below), notably three camellias. We wrote to the Prince of Wales to ask him to buy the cottage as it was within the Duchy of Cornwall but it never passed his 'gatekeepers' and was eventually bought and restored by a private buyer.

In 2014, the summer after our first visit I returned while on a family holiday, and with permission from the new owners, secateurs and large jiffy bag and took cuttings from a camellia against the wall, which had been cut back to ground level during restoration. These were mailed to the Temperate Nursery at Kew, propagated, established then dispersed to Kew, Wisley, and Leo Hickman and other friends in 2019.

A recent conversation with Leo revealed that he also has a white cultivar, he also used his journalistic skills to discover this: <https://docs.planning.org.uk/20210427/5/QQUBAMFGLJ400/thyu224vd4zy5l6i.pdf> which shows the cottage in excellent condition and three camellia plants against the wall and this is the new owner's page on Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10228439893488098&set=pb.1404282515.-2207520000&type=3>

He seems to be involved with the local Devoran Quay Preservation Society so he may already know of the history of the cottage but I will send Peter more details. I will also ask if he minds if someone comes to take cutting material from the three plants, it would be useful to have them formally identified and grown in other gardens, if anyone would like to help. I will keep you posted on future developments.

Thank you so much.

Matthew Biggs



Notes from a Cornish Garden

As I write, the wind is swirling and leaves are falling fast. Autumn has arrived at Glendurgan with some of the best autumn colour we have seen for a while. It's almost a mirror to the start of the season, where the magnolias waited until we were open to give a fantastic and long show of flowers, so autumn colour came early and has held for a stunning show of yellows, and rich, burnt reds and oranges in time for our last week of opening. One of the first trees to turn every year is one of our *Taxodium distichum* (right), with one branch always turning orange before the rest of the tree. We like to think of it as a giant dinosaur type creature making its way up the valley with a tail swishing behind it.

This year we have focussed a lot of time on managing the “weeds” in our meadows to control crocosmia, hemlock and hogweed from dominating and in the case of the latter two, managing visitor safety. This has been ongoing work for many years, but this summer we hit it hard with repeated efforts to dig out crocosmia and hemlock and topped the flowering stalks from hogweed to prevent further spread. It has sometimes felt like a futile effort in previous years. The sheer scale of the number of weeds is almost overwhelming, with the crocosmia all but naturalised in some area. But this year we have started to see the impact of our work which spurred us on to push even harder.



We have, however, been concerned about the impact on pollinators that feed on the umbellifer flowers we've removed. So we collected wild carrot seed amongst others to bulk up existing populations of plants. They've been sown in cell trays (*left*) and will be planted out in the meadows next year as plugs. On the topic of additions to the meadows, we have just last month added another 7500 crocus, narcissus and *Galanthus* some of our meadows. This is the third year of adding bulbs to these areas and we have been able to do this because of generous visitor donations over the previous season.

Over the years, much work has been done on improving the infrastructure of our famous maze, from path work to drainage. And it is the latter, drainage, that has needed attention again this year. The area front left of the maze has always struggled with sitting water and has previously had extensive French drain work carried out. Over the last two years we had noticed a sharp decline in the health of the front few rows of hedging (*below left*), spreading from the outer row inwards, and found the grass in front to be increasingly boggy for more of the year. In fact, at one point, it was fully submerged! A more intensive fix from external professionals was needed. So in September, channel drains were installed along several of the lower paths within the maze (*below right*) to assist with water that was running off the impermeable paths and collecting in the lower third of the maze. Almost immediately we saw water finding its way out via the new channels, just in time for what looks like could be a soggy autumn.



Now, finally onto one of our genera. I'm pleased to report that the rhododendrons we planted last year in the walled planting pockets continued to do well for the rest of the summer and have now been in the ground for just over a year. That may not sound like much of an achievement but the survival rate on some of our more inhospitable slopes is not good! We are again in planting season with more rhododendrons from our stock beds about to find a home out in the garden. First out were some *Rhododendron arboreum* hybrids either side of our entrance drive to greet visitors with a pop of colour in spring.

In the last newsletter I wrongly proclaimed that *Rhododendron 'Polar Bear'* is our last of the year to flower. It isn't! Each year I forget about *R. kyawii* (right) sitting on our Acacia Bank flowering away in August and September. It's not yet reached what you would call 'prolific' flowering, but puts on more of a show with each passing year. As for what's flowering now? It's another rhododendron that's caught my eye. A *R. maddenii* (left) is having a second go at flowering as I type.



And although that is not particularly unusual, its surviving several days of rain and wind unblemished is! Those of us that ever show flowers will know the anguish of trying to find a clean white flower, even during a mild spring or summer, so a clean one in storm season feels pretty special.



Nicola Johnson

Small wonder!

Many of you will already know our fellow branch member John Sanders but in case you haven't met at one of the shows where he is a regular judge or at Autumn Meetings, I need to tell you that he has been a member since forever, is a previous yearbook editor of some repute, and above all else is an amazing propagator of rhododendrons. He and his much-missed friend Barry Starling, nurtured a passion for the 'tinies' in the Ericaceae especially *Rhododendron*, a flag which John carries on flying today.

What I didn't know until I received an email from him last night, is that his wife Norma, also has a passion for the miniature.

This is what he had to say:

Thought this might amuse:

Unknown to most - Norma has been a dollhouse enthusiast for some 30+ years! Everything is one-twelfth scale.

You might be interested in a commission piece that arrived this morning – namely Magnolia grandiflora alongside a one pence coin to give you an indication of size. There is a whole world out there that is a complete 'unknown' to most. I thought of entering it in the appropriate class at Rosemoor next year? Maybe test the judges as a very rare diminutive form unknown to science until only very recently discovered in a completely new habitat.

Maybe even given it a write up to see whether anyone notices it is not a 'real plant' - less the coin! Even a little blemish on one of the leaves.

Delightful!



Photo: John Sanders

Pam Hayward

Dates for your Diary

- ◆ March (Date TBA) – Camellia study day at Bicton Gardens, also incorporating historic Veitch origin rhododendrons. Lunch will be provided.
- ◆ 14/15 March – Early Camellia competition, Daffodil competition and Spring flower show at Rosemoor. There will be a new cup instituted for 12 camellias called the ICS Cup, which would be equivalent to the Leonardslee Bowl at the Main Camellia competition.
- ◆ 21 March – Camellia Fest at Marwood Hill Gardens – all things camellia!

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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