



# RCMG SW Branch News

February 2021

## Editor's welcome – Notes from a Devon Garden

Welcome to the latest edition of the regional newsletter. It's rather a dank and miserable here in south Devon. After such a fabulous spell of cold, dry weather it feels like we're now being punished somewhat. The weather hasn't hampered progress in the garden here at Greenway where we continue to forge ahead with winter work. My own garden is suffering slightly as it seems whenever I am at home and am able to dedicate time to tackling conifer hedge removal, the weather has different ideas.

Despite the inclement weather, I am finding great joy in the slow unravelling of spring. Snowdrops are starting to carpet areas of the garden, winter aconites provide a splash of vibrant yellow and spring flowering shrubs are really starting to come into their own.

Walking back to my car the other day, wet and smeared in mud and algae, *Camellia sasanqua* 'Crimson King' (right) shone vividly through the mizzle that was cloaking the estuary slopes; a real pick-me-up at the end of a tiring day. This camellia is not alone in brightening up the garden. Many *C. japonica* and *C. x williamsii* cultivars are now coming into full bloom as are other species such as *C. cuspidata*, whose simple single flowers are a particular favourite of mine.

Rhododendrons have been trying to flower for a few weeks now. *Rhododendron arboreum* in particular keeps having a tentative attempt at opening its buds but never seems to fully commit. Thankfully, the magnolias have kept their flower buds firmly tight and so avoiding the frosty nights.

*Lonicera x purpusii*, *Sarcococca ruscifolia* and *Chimonanthus praecox* are all filling the air with scent that lifts the soul. I make no apology for admitting that I am finding this current lockdown particularly difficult. Being allowed out to work is a lifeline. I look forward to a summer of fewer restrictions and being able to enjoy gardens, our three genera and more again.

Despite my struggles with the impact of restrictions, there are some huge positives to come out of this year. If you would indulge me, I wanted to share one of these with you now. Whilst the team at Greenway has been impacted by the changes the National Trust, like so many other organisations, has been forced to make in order to survive the effects of the pandemic, it is hard to believe that we have been able to achieve so much in the latter half of the year when we were allowed to return to work fully. Renovation projects have happened, the backlog of maintenance is almost complete, reviews of priorities have been completed and accepted by all concerned and even the less creative compliance side of public gardens has never been so up-to-date (for me at least!). The list goes on.

Credit is very much due to our band of fantastic volunteers who have adapted to necessary changes in ways of working and faced the challenge head on. Together we've managed to turn a potentially very problematic year into a success. Although we've had to pause volunteering again for this current lockdown, their tenacity and optimism makes me optimistic myself for what we will achieve together in 2021 and beyond. So if anyone reading this is a volunteer, for the National Trust or otherwise, a heartfelt thank you for everything you do, have done and will do. And also for your understanding and considered feedback on the ever changing situation that we all find ourselves in.

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

We have made it to a new year but with more restrictions on our movements and activities. In March last year, who would have thought things would turn out like this. We have been lucky here in the South West to have been spared the worst of the epidemic; so far at least.

January has turned colder and many places have been frosty, especially the moors with a snow covering. Nevertheless, here in my garden in Barnstaple, many shrubs and bulbs are bravely flowering, including the last of the winter-flowering camellias like *Camellia* 'Winter's Charm' which is truly gorgeous. It is now joined by *C. tunganica* (left), collected in south west China by Maurice Foster. It has an exceptionally sweet smelling flower and is not put off in the least by the weather. The white flowers maintain their pristine whiteness and drop off neatly. My old *Rhododendron* 'Nobleanum' has been flowering in the part of garden we sold when we moved out of the old house. Magnolias have not yet started here except I see petals under *Magnolia* 'Maryland' which I planted in 1984 and which has been flowering non-stop since April.



As you are aware, we decided not to go ahead with our own Branch Competitions in early March at Rosemoor due to the uncertainty about what restrictions would still be in place; the RHS event has now also been cancelled. On present evidence, we may only just be beginning our long journey out of the pandemic by Easter at the earliest. How this will translate into allowing gatherings and meetings to take place is anyone's guess.

We will be looking at how to manage garden visits later this spring and summer, most likely initially on a more local basis to minimise travel distances and restrict numbers. Later this month, your Branch Committee will be discussing these matters as well as how best to hold a later show and competitions.

Meanwhile, I wish you as happy a New Year as possible and continue to cherish your gardens and the optimism of nature pushing forward as spring approaches.

*John Marston*

## Sarah Leadbetter (Chesters)

It is with great sadness that I report that our SW Branch Treasurer and Visits Organiser, Sarah Leadbetter, passed away peacefully at home on 28 January 2021 at the age of 60.



Sarah had been Education and Learning Manager at RHS Rosemoor for many years, and had fairly recently retired in order to continue doing freelance work and look after her new garden. Sadly, it was not to be for very long as she was



diagnosed with advanced lung cancer last year. Although she had had a last stint in hospital before Christmas, she was able to be at home with her family at the end.

Sarah grew up in a wooded valley in north Cornwall and after school she went to London to train as a dressmaker. She made theatre and film costumes including for the first Hollywood Superman movie and the West End stage version of 'The King and I' before moving to French fashion houses on Bond Street.

She missed the green of the countryside and had become rather disillusioned with her London career. To compensate, she joined the Chelsea Physic Garden as a volunteer on her days off and soon became hooked on horticulture. After three months she sought a consultation with a horticultural consultant who said she could still work with colour, texture and design but using plants instead. She became apprenticed at Chelsea and studied Biology at 'A'-level which allowed her to attend and obtain a certificate in Horticulture at Askham Bryan College near York. This then led to the intensive three year Kew Diploma Course. She also had a broadcasting slot on LBC answering gardening queries; a task she found both nerve-wracking and very enjoyable.

Having left London, she worked as a head gardener, lecturer, and garden designer before joining the staff at RHS Rosemoor as Education and Learning Manager, dealing with 6,000 school children a year, teaching a wide ranging plant based curriculum. She also had a slot on BBC Radio Devon answering gardening questions and made a few local TV gardening programmes. She interviewed Roy Lancaster for our RCM Group Centenary in 2016.

She was a born teacher and loved to impart knowledge to the next generation. She contributed greatly to our South West Branch committee and it was excellent to have a Rosemoor insider with us. She was efficient and conscientious and was always willing to take on any tasks asked of her, making a great contribution to the Branch. We will miss her, and I know that she will be sadly missed by a great many people whose lives she touched.

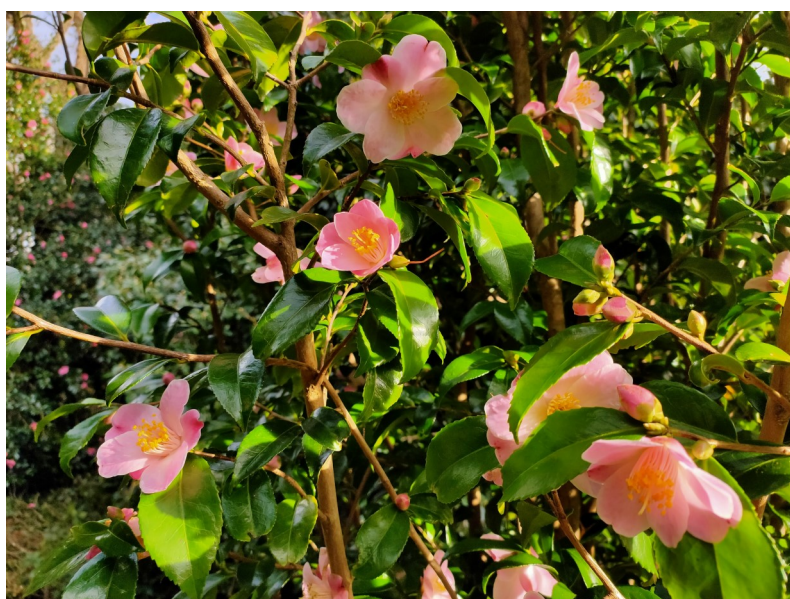
John Marston

IMAGE Sarah Leadbetter Facebook

## Notes from a Cornish Garden

Last week, (as I write on 15 January), was the coldest of the winter so far here in south west Cornwall. There was a frost on the ground most mornings culminating in a particularly cold morning of around -2°C. 'Only -2°C?' I can hear you say and of course I know that that still counts as a mild winter week in most people's books. For us however it was enough to kill off some of our more tender herbaceous plants and to leave others looking very sorry and squidgy. In my own small garden, a beautiful clump of bronzy metallic coloured *Elatostema rugosum* is now decidedly oxidised and my trials with so called 'hardy' begonias could perhaps be better described as 'foolhardy'. Other plants such as bananas and cannas are brown and limp, but will ultimately grow back to their previous splendour as soon as spring kicks in properly, and the tree ferns, even the more delicate *Cyathea*, have weathered the cold with no damage, so I can't really complain too much. Still, it's a shame all the same as every winter without significant damage feels like a small victory and it had seemed as though we might even get away with it again. Winter isn't over yet of course!

In a typical year, excepting the *Camellia sasanqua*, the first camellia to flower here at Glendurgan is the perennial favourite, *C. 'Cornish Snow'*. Reliably out in full flower by Christmas, it marks the start of the new season for us and the promise of more to come. By the end of December last year however there were a number of camellias flowering uncharacteristically early. *Camellia 'St Ewe'* was in full flower by mid-December, *C. 'Inspiration'* had opened its first few blooms and there were even a few flowers of *C. lutchuensis* on show.



sunny and open position, whilst the other is some way behind in a shadier spot. It's definitely a plant which should be grown more widely.

*Rhododendron 'Cornish Red'*, usually the first of our rhododendrons to flower, also got a little carried away and had put

out a few trusses before it was checked by the cold. Others of its genus seem a little more cautious. The magnolias haven't started their display yet this year at Glendurgan. Whilst other Cornish gardens vie to have the first *Magnolia campbellii* or *M. dawsoniana* out by the end of January, we are happy to wait for a rather poor form of *M. campbellii* ssp. *mollicomata* which tends to be the earliest bloomer of the collection here. Following the slightly disappointing magnolia season last year, I'm hopeful of a better show this spring. It often seems the case with us that our trees flower best on alternate years. Is there any science behind this phenomenon? Whilst flowers may yet be some weeks away, the garden paths are now littered with furry bud casings; a sure sign that things are at least happening!

Ned Lomax

## Three Woolly Ones

*Rhododendron lanatum*, *R. tsariense* and *R. flinckii* are the ones in question. All have the most gorgeous, warm, foxy indumentum on the undersides of their leaves as well as being woolly all over on the new shoots. The RHS Colour Chart describes the colour of *R. lanatum* and *R. flinckii* as coming within the range of apricot-buff and that's not a bad description. The more intensely coloured wool of *R. tsariense* is closer to the colour of a very ripe apricot.

I first met *R. lanatum* (right) in 1983 as one of the most abundant species between 3500m and 4500m in the Sikkim Himalaya. In mid-June the trusses of 4.5cm long, yellow corollas coloured much of the mountainside, borne on shrubs in thickets at the lower elevation and well-formed compact plants of up to 1.5m in height higher up. On the lower shrubs the colour was a pale primrose speckled with red spots inside the corolla, while the uppermost were a much stronger yellow. Plants raised from seed of these took 15 years to flower but have flowered each year since. Curiously, their flower colour in cultivation has been paler than that of the higher altitude parent plant that the seed was collected from. In the wild, the monsoon rain falls throughout the growing season and in the garden *R. lanatum* is one of the first to show signs of drought stress in a dry summer. The *RHS Rhododendron Handbook* states 'a difficult species to cultivate, apparently liking a dry site'. Well of course it will be difficult if plunged into a dry situation – that's why it chooses to grow in wet, wet, wet Sikkim!



In a dry year the plant will, at the end of summer, have shed all but the current year's leaves. Though perhaps not the easiest of shrubs to please, its opulent yellow blooms, woolly new shoots and colourful under-surface to the foliage justify every effort to please.

The garden-worthiness of *R. tsariense* would be difficult to fault although it is unfortunate that the best form has been given the soppy cultivar name of *R. 'Yum-Yum'*. In about 15 years it has made a very compact shrub of 60cm high, 1m in diameter, producing plenty of bold blush-pink trusses of flower annually in April. Following shortly after, the heavily indumented new growth adds further interest. The thick, orange-tan coating beneath the leaf is worth getting down on hands and knees to appreciate. Here in Devon it will happily take full sun and is more drought tolerant than *R. lanatum*.

*Rhododendron flinckii* is a relative newcomer to my garden and has yet to get into its stride. However it looks promising and has produced its primrose yellow flowers for the last five years, if a little sparingly. New growth tends to be coated in white wool and some of this is retained on the upper surface of the leaf as well as a thin coating below, turning to greyed-orange, particularly on the midrib of the upper leaf blade. While the leaf of *R. lanatum* achieves 7 or 8cm in length, that of *R. flinckii* is nearer 5 or 6cm while *R. tsariense* can reach 5cm though is often quite a bit less.

Botanists cannot agree on the relationship between *R. flinckii* and *R. lanatum*, Chamberlain lumping it with the latter without even a varietal distinction, while the *RHS Rhododendron Handbook* agrees with Davidian that it should be a species in its own right.

Botanically speaking, the plant I write of as *R. tsariense* is *R. tsariense* var. *tsariense*. Two other varieties exist both of which are larger but less attractive than this type. These are *R. tsariense* var. *magnum* which may even be a form of *R. flinckii* and *R. tsariense* var. *trimoense* with paler indumentum. Both are from Bhutan or close by.

Barry Starling



## Random thoughts on... white

Anyone who knows me pretty well will have caught on to the fact that I love white flowers. Brilliant white to cream, verging on the palest pink or just touched with a smidgeon of green in the tone, I love them all and will always seek out the 'albas' as a preference. But why?

Well, purity is one thing, I guess. Purity often means perfection – just think of the first snowdrops or a pillar of *Rosa* 'Iceberg' for example, a bloom of *Camellia japonica* 'Nuccio's Gem' (right) nestled into its dark green foliage as a backdrop or a glistening truss of *Rhododendron lindleyi*. They couldn't possibly be as ravishing in any other colour.

But it's certainly not all about purity – white is a willing and able servant to the gardener, practical, flexible, retiring or boldly 'out front' according to the need. No other colour can be deployed so effectively in the armoury of the designer.

White can stand up for itself in the most prominent position and in isolation but how useful it can be to defuse and even enhance a combination that might otherwise be a strident clash or just too much. Placing a low-growing white evergreen azalea at the junction of two brightly coloured rhododendrons 'fighting' for attention perfectly calms the situation down, provided you can time it right of course!

And consider how white can intensify another colour – the happiest of coincidences is that bluebells flower at the exact time the greater stitchwort is in bloom among them, the dainty white stars rendering them even more blue. I do hope you have witnessed this for yourselves and share my joy at this annual demonstration of nature's artistry.

For lighting up a shady corner or set against evergreens, white has no equal. Imagine *Magnolia* 'Wada's Memory' in full cry framed by a tall yew hedge – then imagine the same scene with a pink variety – no comparison!

Even scent is stronger and sweeter when its origin is a white flower, it seems to me. The *Maddenia* rhododendrons that are a passion, are almost exclusively white and thrill with their generous fragrance. The intoxicating *Rhododendron maddenii* ssp. *crassum* blooms well into the summer here, its brilliant white trumpets demanding our attention from the deep shade cast by an oak tree overhead. Any other colour just couldn't make its own light in the same arresting way.

A white flower with a contrasting blotch of another colour can sometimes be an even more effective floral cue for drama. If you've encountered *Iris unguicularis* 'Peloponnese Snow' you'll know exactly what I mean. In rhododendrons, *Rhododendron* 'Sappho' comes first to mind, of course, but *R.* 'Persil' or *R.* 'Egg White', for example, with their lovely golden flashes really make a statement. In magnolias, it's very often the purple staining at the base of petals which serve to whiten the white. Here I'm thinking of varieties like *Magnolia* 'Bjuv' – blackcurrant and vanilla perfection. Variegated camellias, too, serve up a sundae for the eyes – the brilliant white and strawberry red of *Camellia* 'Anticipation Variegated' being a wonderful example of a visual feast.

Often, though, it's the generosity of flower coupled with the simplicity of colour that generate stardust – *Camellia* 'Cornish Snow', *Rhododendron rigidum* or *Magnolia stellata* come to mind, clouds of simple white perfection. Bliss.

Pam Hayward

IMAGE Mike Shuttleworth



## Humorous horticulture

This is a new section of the newsletter for members to send us their horticultural quips and humorous anecdotes. This edition's offering is from John Bailey of Wheal Jenny.

### Diabotanical Latin

In 1979, Lynne and I bought a weekend cottage in Great Oakley, a little village near the Essex marshes.

Through reading an article in the *Observer*, I discovered Beth Chatto, whose garden and nursery were nearby. Over time, she became a real mentor in my gardening education. Being a garden novice, I was hopeless with plant names.

Reading every book I could lay my hands on, I would compare plant recommendations from various garden authors; when they all chimed together I would add that plant to a wish list.

I'd been taken by the description of a mallow that flowered for three months. I asked Beth where I might find ... the Laveratas 'Oh, the toilets are over there, beside the shade tunnel' she replied with a grin. 'I think you mean ... *Lavatera*'.

John Bailey

## Seasonal curiosities

It is currently mid-November as I write. I shall pass over such seasonal abnormalities such as a flowering common primrose or a *Primula* 'Miller's Crimson' also in flower. I shall even pass over the rambling *Rosa* 'American Pillar' flowering again, and instead concentrate on my mature *Camellia* 'Black Lace' which normally has a dark red formal double flower and is a *C. reticulata* hybrid seedling cross of *C. x williamsii* 'Donation' x *C. reticulata* 'Crimson Robe' (*Dataohong*).

While it is by no means in full flower, it has at least 6 flowers out now, and a couple of mis-formed flowers have gone over. However, the fact of its flowering at all in autumn is not my focus, but rather the style of these flowers. At least 4 flowers have double buds. Photographs tell the story best and they show the different growth stages of these double buds and how they evolve and flower as malformed flowers with an unopened centre. I also have one large complete flower out but exhibiting an unopened centre, and not looking like its normal self. I believe that this kind of malformation of buds is more likely to occur with a formal double flower than any other.



*Above left: double budding. Above right: malformed opening of double buds. Below: malformed single flower with unopened centre.*



Other spring *C. japonica* that have shown aseasional flowering in earlier years such as the *C. japonica* 'Aaron's Ruby' usually in July and August had flowers which were completely normal. Perhaps the very dry June this year has caused this aberrancy in *C. 'Black Lace'*, although this is speculation.

Finally I observe that my Japanese *C. sasanqua* 'Santôzaki', meaning 'three flowered' in Japanese, has three buds in one. I quote the *Camellia Register*'s description of it. 'From a single bud, sometimes three medium sized flowers, rose coloured, are formed. Some of the dark green leaves on a branch are three-notched at the apex and such branch bears the triple bloom'. I have not noticed differences in the leaves of my *C. 'Black Lace'* so far but I must keep an eye out for any changes!

*Caroline Bell*

## Dates for your Diary

- ◆ 13-14 March 2021 – Spring Show and competitions at RHS Rosemoor. NOTE: ALL COMPETITIONS CANCELLED.
- ◆ 24-25 April 2021 – Rhododendron Competition and Branch competitions at RHS Rosemoor. NOTE: This event is currently under review by the RHS and we will notify you when we have further information.

### Plant Swap Shop

Please do send in lists of plants that you wish to make available in the future to [ashley.brent@nationaltrust.org.uk](mailto:ashley.brent@nationaltrust.org.uk) and I will add them here at the first available opportunity. Many gardens have already benefited from the generosity of members' surplus plants. Thank you!

Your personal details will not be shared on the newsletter.

All submissions will be held on file until government restrictions permit travel.

## Submit a contribution

Feeling inspired to contribute? Perhaps you feel differently about AGMs? Or have something that you're keen to discuss with the group?

Please send any contributions, no matter how short or long, including photographs to [ashley.brent@nationaltrust.org.uk](mailto:ashley.brent@nationaltrust.org.uk).

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