



RCMG SW Branch News

Spring 2021

Editor's welcome – Notes from a Devon Garden

Welcome to the latest edition of the regional newsletter. I'm sure most of you are glad to have had some welcome rain over the past few days. Both at home and at Greenway, I'm very pleased to have had a couple of wet days – even if I did unexpectedly get soaked to the skin at the end of last week.

I need to confess to feeling rather smug this month. Whilst the frosty nights appear to have wreaked havoc with the more delicate blooms of our three genera across much of the country, we at Greenway have been blessed with the most fantastic magnolia season. The frosts held off and the dry, calm spell of weather has meant that blooms have held on far longer than in previous years. I've particularly been enjoying the scent that permeates the air as the sun hits the trees of a morning. Of course, this would have to be the year in which we have no shows, so you'll just have to take my word for it.

This is also the first year that I have had a normal spring at Greenway. I started in the summer of 2019 and with the events of last year, I was denied the opportunity to really appreciate the garden in its spring glory as my time on site was spent in a blur carrying out essential tasks. The spring weather last year also knocked many of the earlier rhododendrons meaning flowering displays were not as good as they ought to have been.

This year however, I am spending far more time in the garden and noticing plants that I hadn't appreciated the previous year. This is also partly due to us having thinned out certain areas to open them up. Similarly, the weather that so greatly benefited the magnolias also benefited everything else. One of my favourite discoveries has been a large rhododendron erroneously labelled as *Rhododendron fortunei* (right). Clearly this is not the case. Our database tells me that other possibilities in this area are *R. falconeri*, *R. hemsleyanum* and *R. sinogrande*, none of which match this specimen. Given that there is only one rhododendron in this pocket of planting, the only thing that is definite is that I have a lot of work to do on our plant database and surveying the garden.

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.

Perhaps you have a particular plant that has struck a chord with you this spring or a surprising success (or failure!) that is worthy of sharing. You can contact either me, Pam Hayward or John Marston with any contributions or if you want to talk through an idea before putting words down on paper.



Ashley Brent

Branch Chairman's Foreword

What a difficult Spring it has been compared with last year. The cold and drying easterly winds in February managed to penetrate the protective coverings of the early flowering magnolia buds so that there were fewer flowers and more damage. This affected my *Magnolia campbellii* 'Darjeeling' as a case in point. The ground below is scattered with barely opened buds that have fallen off although some flowers have bravely opened.

However, the magnolias which are slightly later to flower have been wonderful; the *M. x loebneri* hybrids, *M. x loebneri* 'Merrill' and *M. x loebneri* 'Leonard Messel' especially. My favourite of the favourites, *M. 'Athene'* (right) from the wonderful Jury family in New Zealand is spectacular in flower, with a spicy scent redolent of wintergreen.



The fairly new *M. 'Sunrise'* (left) has been flowering well and increasing year on year with its characteristic red flash under the cream flowers.

We have also had a better than usual show on the small growing *Rhododendron scabrifolium* var. *spiciferum* and more of our genera are recovering and flowering well. My Loderi Group rhododendron is pouring out its perfume as I write, so all is not lost.

We are very pleased that Ashley Brent our Newsletter editor has agreed to be our new SW Branch Treasurer, but we need to find an events organiser for visits etc next year. Volunteers?

On the subject of events, we are looking for a venue for our Summer Away Day in July, and we have booked the Peter Buckley Learning Centre at Rosemoor for our Autumn Meeting and AGM on Saturday 30th October. More information will follow.

Enjoy the Spring.

John Marston

Magnolias at Overbeck's Garden

Greetings all. I'm a relatively new addition to the RCMG membership. I've met a few of you at the past couple of Rosemoor Early Spring Shows and I look forward to meeting more of you in due course. I hope you'll forgive me for the following newsletter entry, which shamelessly promotes the garden I am fortunate to work at and for singling out magnolias, which is my favoured genus of our three. I suspect this preference is borne out of my own ignorance for the other two genera. Joining the RCM Group is my attempt to rectify this and to learn from your shared experience and knowledge, which has already proved beneficial, so thank you!

In 1819 Abraham Hawkins suggested that 'of all the spots in the British islands' Salcombe may have been 'the very first for climate and shelter'. Salcombe's mild and sheltered climate was well recognised by keen gardeners and horticulturists for its potential to grow tender and exotic plants. Overbeck's, then called 'Sharpitor', was laid out by the Hopkins family from 1895 and reflected the aspirations of the new upper middle classes. Plants were sourced from well-known reputable nurseries such as Veitch and Treseder. The sheltered position and largely frost-free conditions made magnolia growing less of a risky endeavour. Despite Overbeck's being relatively small for a National Trust garden (3.5 acres), magnolias are well represented.

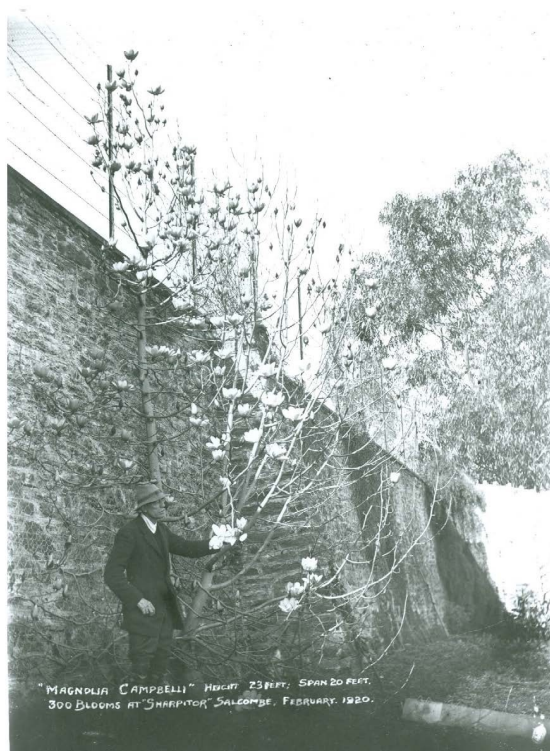
One of the earliest recorded plantings is of *Magnolia campbellii* in 1901. It was sited in one of the most sheltered parts of the garden against an east facing retaining wall. Here it thrived and was photographed flowering in February 1920 with

over 300 blooms and reaching 23ft tall (*right*). Even now it is quite typical for the first flowers on this tree to appear in January and peak in mid-February. It became a notably large and fine specimen, visible from the other side of the Salcombe estuary, until December 1999 when, following a period of wet weather, it fell onto its side (*below*). The tree survived and



although it has reduced in stature, it retains character and continues to regrow as a phoenix tree. Its deep pink flowers are distinct, and many trees have been grafted by the National Trust Plant Conservation Centre in order to retain this

strain. The name *Magnolia campbellii* 'Overbeck's' is tentatively accepted by the RHS. One of the real benefits in the positioning of this tree is that you can effectively stand in its crown by viewing it from the terrace above (*left*), giving you a real appreciation of the size of the flowers (and avoid getting the crick in the neck that Magnolia admirers often suffer from!).



Another tree with great presence is *Magnolia x veitchii*. Records indicate it was planted in 1910, not long after it was bred by Peter Veitch in 1907. This cross is well known for its vigour and size, and while the one at Overbeck's may not have reached the dimensions of other examples, it is an excellent specimen, partly thanks to the open position in which it grows. The soft pink flowers indicate that it should probably be more specifically named *Magnolia x veitchii* 'Peter Veitch'. The true beauty of this tree can be best appreciated from the upper parts of the garden, where the Salcombe estuary and rolling Devon hills provide a stunning background to the blossom covered crown (*right*).



The Woodland Garden is peppered with a good mix of species including *M. dawsoniana*, *M. sprengeri* and cultivars like *M. 'Iolanthe'*. A small grassed area at the end of the Woodland Garden is affectionately known by the gardeners as the 'Magnolia Lawn' and contains a number of smaller specimens including *M. salicifolia* 'Wada's Memory', *M. x loebneri* 'Leonard Messel' and *M. 'Heaven Scent'*. Here the trees blossom together, and this coincides with the snake's head fritillaries (*Fritillaria meleagris*) that colonise the grass below, all of which combine to create a magical atmosphere.

I hope this small snippet provides an insight to Overbeck's at springtime, happy gardening everyone!

Chris Groves (Photo credit: NT archives)

Notes from a Cornish Garden

Glendurgan has largely escaped the recent unseasonably cold weather. Earlier in the winter, of course, was another matter. A number of our more tender plants were caught badly, but by March we were feeling confident enough to boldly start planting as we always do. April has, therefore, been a bit of a shock to us, not only to plants adapting to their new surroundings, but also to gardeners who foolishly made the transition from trousers to shorts too early. Today, as I write in mid-April, promises to be another gloriously sunny day and I'm expecting the garden to be busy with visitors enjoying the spring blossom. This morning's light frost disappeared quickly and the garden is looking fabulous. The last of the magnolias are in full bloom, the cherries have exploded into blossom and the carpets of bluebells, which are such a feature of the season at Glendurgan, are coming out already. The garden almost seems to take care of itself at this time of year, and the team here reap the rewards of their hard work over the winter as the relentless march of spring progresses.

Last week I received an exciting visit from Chris Trimmer, who manages the National Trust's Plant Conservation Centre (PCC). For those of you who haven't heard of the PCC, it's a specialist nursery facility which propagates and distributes rare, interesting, historically significant, or endangered and threatened plants to the gardens of the National Trust. It never ceases to amaze me when I see the variety and quality of the plants they produce, and the sight of Chris's delivery van therefore never fails to fill me with excited anticipation. The process at the PCC usually begins with a request for a certain plant required at one of our sites. This often requires a great deal of forward planning; as was the case of the *Cardiocrinums* I received last week, which were grown from seed, sown over successive years, in order to provide a delivery of flowering size bulbs each spring for the past five or so years. This process has helped us to establish a fantastic naturalised collection in the garden which simply wouldn't have been possible had we purchased plants through the nursery trade or grown them on site. Other plants, such as the beautiful *Rhododendron* 'White Wings', which I also received last week, began their lives as flower buds collected at Glendurgan from a dying specimen. These buds then progressed through the micropropagation unit at Duchy College, to the PCC for growing on, and then finally back to Glendurgan for planting out. I have spoken in a previous newsletter about *R.* 'White Wings', which received an award of merit in 1939, and has since become incredibly rare in cultivation. Thanks to the PCC, we now have about 20 specimens growing strongly, and importantly, surplus plants were offered to other NT gardens, further ensuring the continuation of this fantastic historic hybrid.

One of our garden team is due to leave Glendurgan imminently, to take up a new position as Senior Gardener at nearby Trengwainton Garden. Asked at interview how she would help to conserve their historic rhododendron collection, she sagely replied that she would share them. That is, of course, exactly what we should all be doing, plant health restrictions allowing! By propagating and distributing these rare or endangered plants around our gardens, we are conserving them for the future and keeping them and their history alive. So many of these cultivars, bred by enthusiasts in the first half of the twentieth century, are now dead or in their senescence, and without action many more will certainly be lost over time. I, for one, am looking forward to having a mole inside the collection at Trengwainton and playing my part in the conservation there! All of us can play our part though, simply by recognising an important plant, layering or striking a cutting from it, and giving it to a friend.

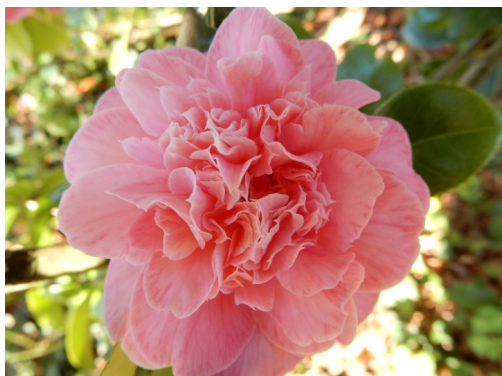
I hope your gardens are flourishing!

Ned Lomax

Travails with Sporting Ladies

Camellias keep you alert! *Camellia japonica* is famous for producing sudden flower mutations or sports, even in a completely different colour. Japonicas represent an inbred gene pool. Inbreeding took place over many centuries before they reached our shores at the end of the eighteenth century which has promoted an element of genetic instability that leads to sports, or even reversions once they have sported.

In 2021 I have had two unexpected "sporting" arrivals. My 20 year old, normally 100% pink *Camellia japonica* 'Scentsation' (*below left*) bred by Nuccio's in the 1960s, has produced a creamy white flower with pink markings, as shown in the photograph (*below right*); but only one flower was produced on one sprig of a branch. It is a really pretty flower and it will be interesting to see if it does the same thing next year and if this is a stable development. Perhaps it will be worth propagating as there are no recorded sports of it in the International Camellia Register.



I have grown the well-known japonica *C. japonica* 'Lavinia Maggi' which was introduced in Italy by 1858, for about 25 years. I never felt my plant was a particularly good clone as it did not exhibit the clear well-balanced, large, formal double flower of white with crimson markings displayed in Jennifer Trehane's main book on camellias. Mine had only medium sized flowers exhibiting rather "muddy" colouring with faint pink veining and some stripes as in my photo (*below left*) but no sharp, pure white background; occasionally there was a totally red flower. I attributed it to a hidden virus although the leaves have never show signs of virus mottling (*below right*). Its history is that it grew fast but was blown over and uprooted by wind early in its life and had to be rescued. Last year I gave it a serious prune, taking off about a third of it, to improve its shape which should not be a problem for a camellia. This year, it is flowering well with healthy leaves, but the flowers are largely all red and most of these are now attractively marked silvery-white as in the photograph (*below centre*). We will see what happens next year, but it may be my plant has become mostly a *C. japonica* 'Roi des Belges', which is one of the registered sports along with *C. japonica* 'Lavinia Maggi Rosea', *C. japonica* 'Lavinia Maggi Rouge' and *C. japonica* 'Lavinia Maggi Alba'. On perusal of my Italian book *Antique Camellias of Lago Maggiore* [2003] by Hillebrand and Bertolazzi, I find *C. japonica* 'Roi des Belges' was always considered a deliberately, variably virused form of *C. japonica* 'Lavinia Maggi' from 1860, which is a helpful explanation. I think the flowers now look more attractive with their new "clear" sharp colours!



My *C. japonica* 'Strawberry Parfait' was also a casualty to wind about 3 years ago and this has had unexpected results. It snapped off near the base reducing the 22 year old, over 10 feet bush to a fraction of its former self. A stump and one side branch remained. It should have "china rose" striped crimson peony-form flowers, but for 20 years it was a disappointing, plain strawberry-red! Now it has regained some stripes! The plant has re-grown from the stump and last year this exhibited a couple of true 'Strawberry Parfait' (*below left*) flowers from there, while on the branch that was left, the flowers have stayed pure red (*below right*), as seen in my photos.



My Higo japonica *C. japonica* 'Okan' has only ever flowered as an undistinguished rather pale red; its name means 'King's Crown' or 'Diadem' because the flower should exhibit a pattern of crown-like crimson markings on white. Higos can be notoriously unstable and *C. japonica* 'Okan' is itself a sport of *C. japonica* 'Yamato-nishiki' which has produced seven other sports, one of which is *C. japonica* 'Higo-Kyo-nishiki' which I also grow, and it is faintly marked with a crimson stripe on white. The red *C. japonica* 'Okan' sported plant is a disappointment as is my *C. japonica* 'Extravaganza' which immediately became the registered sport *C. japonica* 'Extravaganza Pink' rather than the striped bicolor I thought I was purchasing. The extraordinary thing about Higo sports is that they can have a very different number of stamens to the parent plant while still staying as single flowers – so *C. japonica* 'Okan' should have apparently 160 stamens as opposed to the 200 exhibited by its parent, *C. japonica* 'Yamato-nishiki'. But this is part of the story of sports, you can get a colour change and a flower form change to an astonishing degree.

In contrast to these last two, my 24 year old *C. japonica* 'Lady Vansittart' which is also a well-known sportive lady, has actually been quite fun. She sports quite a few differently white pink-shaded blooms and the differently marked white flowers work harmoniously together, so it looks fine and I am happy. Some flowers even look like its registered sport *C. japonica* 'Yours Truly'. Its leaves show it as very healthy. The ultimate example of a sport must be the corkscrew japonica *C. japonica* 'Curly Lady' which originated from *C. japonica* 'Lady Campbell' by producing curled and twisted stems, but with the same flower.

Caroline Bell

Class Acts

Having a little more time than in a 'normal' flowering season, when I'm usually caught up with preparations for the shows, this year I've been able to consider what's flowering in my woodland garden more closely and select those rhododendrons which really stand up to the accolade 'class act'. Some varieties just ooze quality and, I'll say it again, 'class'. It's not just about flower power; to my mind it's also to do with poise and presence – I hope you know what I mean.

I will return to other varieties which excited my eye on another occasion but for this edition I'd like to bring to your attention two which have earned the title in my opinion, one species and one hybrid.

Rhododendron arboreum ssp. *arboreum* Stonefield Castle red clone (below)

Of the various presentations of *Rhododendron arboreum*, the blood red subspecies *arboreum* is one of the most glorious but being so early into flower it can also be one of the trickiest, with a hardiness rating of 1–3.

You will know that I garden on Dartmoor, albeit in one of the deep wooded valleys on the slopes, and we all know what a long and wicked winter it's been, with frosts day-after-day here in the last weeks. Not the most auspicious combination to generate a 'class act' you might think.

I planted my specimen of this Stonefield Castle red clone not that many years ago and it began flowering the year before last. Just one or two trusses at first but all the while the plant has been developing into something very special indeed. It's sited on a slope with perfect drainage, overhead shade but (silly me or so I thought) positioned perfectly to get the low morning sun in the first months of the year.

However, it clearly loves this site, the foliage is perfect and the stature of the plant impressive, so it matters not if it flowers or doesn't to be honest. Located between two paths, one above and one below, I can enjoy it from all angles, and this year it has come into its own with the most remarkable and long-lasting display imaginable. Almost every growth point produced a flower bud which went on to develop fully and retain those vibrant scarlet trusses in perfect condition for weeks and weeks, despite the frosts and the early morning sun upon the blooms. In fact it has only just dropped its petals as we go into May.



It's possible this selection is an original Hooker collection from Sikkim or maybe one of Campbell's; whatever its lineage, this is a stunner and well worth seeking out from Glendoick, who offer it regularly.

Rhododendron 'Else Frye' (left)



We all love the sensuous displays of the *Maddenia* hybrids at the Rosemoor shows, not least for the intoxicating scent which leaves such a lasting evocative memory – nothing quite like it. One which we don't see so often as dear *R.* 'Lady Alice Fitzwilliam' or more recently, *R.* 'Anne Teese' is *R.* 'Else Frye'. Frequently misrepresented as *R.* 'Elsie Frye' or *R.* 'Elsa Frye', this American *R. ciliicalyx* hybrid dating back to the 1940s celebrates the name of a great all-round Seattle plantswoman and rhododendron breeder.

Unlike those hybrids with more prominent *R. edgeworthii* blood, 'Else' has a good strong habit together with excellent foliage. She is a top-class performer, regularly putting on a tremendous display and with outstanding perfume which carries for yards and yards. This year, like so many other flowering plants, her blooms have been more intense in colouration, no doubt due to the chilling the buds have had. It's made her all the more lovely.

I can heartily recommend you add *R.* 'Else Frye' to your own collection and will be glad to send cuttings on request later in the year. My own plant came from the late John Bodenham and I like to think that he brought her home to England with him when he returned from his many years himself working in Seattle for Boeing.

Pam Hayward

CORRECTION

I would draw your attention to an editorial error in Caroline Bell's piece entitled 'Seasonal Curiosities' in the Winter 2020/1 edition.

I mistakenly printed 'Finally I observe that my Japanese *C. sasanqua* 'Santōzaki', meaning....'
Please note this should have read 'Finally I observe that a Japanese camellia, *C. sasanqua* 'Santōzaki'. meaning....'

Caroline has asked me to make it clear that she does not have *C. sasanqua* 'Santōzaki' in her collection.
My apologies to Caroline for my misunderstanding and subsequent error and for any frustration or inconvenience caused.

Ashley Brent

Dates for your Diary

- ♦ 8 May 2021 - National AGM (virtual event)
- ♦ 19 May 2021 - Branch away day to Botallick, Cornwall.
- ♦ 30 October 2021 - Autumn meeting at 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 benefitted 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? Or have something that you're keen to share 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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Compiled by Ashley Brent