

RHS Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia Group



WESSEX BRANCH NEWSLETTER – AUGUST 2015

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This is my first Newsletter for 2015 and it is proving to be a successful year. We have five new members since June, bringing our total to 71. I believe we have more pending.

The lack of rain has proven to be a worry to all us gardeners and if you have been like Jenny & I, you have spent most of your days watering to keep your plants alive!

Members who have received this newsletter by post, I would be very grateful if you could email me your email address if you have one. This will help to keep costs down.

Spring Events

Garden Visit to Merton Place Dunsfold – 5th May 2015

It was agreed that this was an excellent visit by all who could attend and it was refreshing to see more members. I will not add any more as an excellent appraisal of the visit is shown below which was prepared by **Brian Long**: -

VISIT TO MERTON PLACE, 5 MAY 2015

This spring, the Wessex Branch was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit Merton Place at Dunsfold. This is the home of Peter Winkworth, who has established an outstanding collection of rhododendrons in recent years; and we were the first party to visit the collection.

For many of us the specialist Hydon nursery of Arthur and Anne George did much to excite our interest in rhododendrons during the second half of the last century. For Peter, his enthusiasm came rather later and is still increasing. A gift of rhododendrons on his retirement from a career in merchant banking was followed by purchase of a great many semi-mature plants from Hydon at the time Arthur George was himself downsizing surplus stock. This formed the nucleus of the collection.

A further happy co-incidence has been a partnership with Rodney Longhurst, for many years the head nurseryman at Hydon. He agreed to come out of retirement to help Peter establish the collection at Merton Place and now spends three days each week there. Rodney's expertise and knowledge of Hydon has been invaluable. Sadly, following the death of Arthur George, Hydon trade declined and has now ceased. However, Rodney arranged for many plants to be transported to Merton Place; and, where only stock plants existed, he undertook propagation of these. As a result, almost all of the Hydon plants now have offspring growing safely at Merton Place. Peter and Rodney both kindly guided us around the collection on the day.

Merton Place has extensive grounds and the collection is sited on a hill some distance from the house. This has the shelter of ancient oak woodland which combines with an adjoining small lake to provide an

ideal micro-climate. However, the soil is neutral heavy clay and far from ideal. Considerable quantities of acidic topsoil have been imported to meet the growing requirements of rhododendrons.

The plants at Merton Place are by no means limited to those of Hydon origin. Peter also grows the best of the traditional British varieties, together with a selection of recent American imports. Indeed, some of the most eye-catching flowers on the day were on plants of R. 'Horizon Monarch' scattered at intervals on the slope leading from the lake to the woodland. These flowers were enormous and quite perfect on the day. The subtle green, yellow and bronze tones seemed especially strong and we all agreed they were of show-winning quality.

Arthur George is most famous for his creation of many *R.yakushmanum* hybrids and these are all represented at Merton Place. Particular outstanding for foliage as well as flowers were several fine plants of R. Hydon Velvet (*R. yakushmanum* x *R. bureavii*). This combines the best qualities of these two wonderful species and is possibly my favourite rhododendron of all. In effect for garden purposes it can be regarded as a free-flowering and compact form of *R. bureavii*.

Although most of the planting had been carried out during the last decade, the conditions seemed to particularly suit *R. augustinii*, which had established quickly with several groups of various forms providing a sense of maturity as well as clouds of blue flowers. Also colourful at the time of our visit were many 'dwarf blue' hybrids. Among these, one group of plants stood out with a particularly distinct colour. These were *R. 'Amethyst'*, which also proved to be the identity of a fine plant growing at Ramster gardens. It is very similar to the well known *R. 'St Tudy'* and has the same parentage (*russatum* x Blue Diamond), but has a strong reddish-purple shade which makes a pleasant contrast to the usual blue-purple. I am puzzled as to why *R. 'Amethyst'* is not grown more widely.

Unusually, both of our hosts were able to show us plants named after them. *R. 'Hydon Rodney'* is a dwarf blue with particularly fine flowers. *R. 'Peter Winkworth'* was one of the last hybrids named by Arthur George and is *R. fortunei* x *R. pseudochrysanthum*. Peter amusingly described the colour as 'Barbara Cartland pink'!

Towards the centre of the garden I was pleased to come across a group of the *R.yakushmanum* hybrid 'Lady Adam Gordon' named after the past chairman of the Wessex Branch. This has proved disappointing in cultivation and now rarely grown. It was good to find some still growing well in a good home, although sadly there were no flowers.

Some of the plants in this extensive collection are very rare indeed. There are single plants of the Hydon form of *R. campanulatum aeruginosum* and *R. cerasinum* 'Cherry Brandy'. I well remember being stunned when I first saw the stock plant of the latter in full flower at Hydon many years ago.

This must be one of the most extensive private collection of rhododendrons in the country and now includes over 800 different varieties. Peter told us the collection covered around three acres, but several of us were confident the area in fact far exceeded this; and most of this was intensively planted but interspersed with grassy rides and paths. Somewhat astonishingly, there are further plans for development and planting. We were shown polytunnels full of cuttings and grafts of choice rhododendrons and camellias.

After this very memorable and happy visit which lasted a full two hours we expressed heartfelt thanks to Peter and to Rodney. The visit was rounded off nicely when we were each offered a gift of a Rodney

propagated 'dwarf blue' rhododendron as a memento of our visit. I was delighted to find R. 'Amethyst' among the selection of plants offered.

This was a most enjoyable and memorable day, which we hope to be able to repeat a few years on. The collection has been entirely established over the past dozen years and is already amazing and it will be interesting to see what extra maturity a few more years will bring.

Several stalwart members of the Wessex Group were unable to attend on this occasion due to work and other commitment. However, we were delighted to welcome several new faces, including some from neighbouring Groups who had travelled considerable distances from Dorset and Kent.

Wessex Branch Flower Show – 10th May 2015

Our annual show was held at Ramster which is a splendid venue with the bonus of a walk round the beautiful grounds during judging. We would like to thank Miranda for allowing us to continue our shows there and for Graham Rankin for judging the show with Richard Thornton being an excellent steward.

The turnout was good and we were delighted to see John Talbot who has returned from France and Paul Strike the head gardener at the Malthouse.

Jenny & I were delighted to see that we won Best in Show with our Rh. Apricot Fantasy. Please, we do need more members attending!



We finished off the day with a delicious tea at prize giving time. A lovely day with good company and of course delicious Ramster cakes!

I feel the show is now growing in strength thanks to Miranda's brainwave of holding it outside in her marquee. This was erected to help seat the overflow of people during the summer when the tea room is full. People coming to see her garden on the show day can admire the blooms that were entered. I believe we are gaining further interest to our membership with the interaction with the public.

Forthcoming Events

Nymans, Handcross, West Sussex RH17 6EB – 24th October 2015 at 2pm

This will be a guided tour by the head gardener Stephen Herrington or his assistant Philip Holmes. The tour will be £2.50 per head plus entrance fee to Nymans. If you are a National Trust member you only pay

£2.50 for the tour. Maximum group attendance will be 20. So if you are interested please let me know as soon as possible.

**Talk & Slide Show on Daffodils by Dr. John David – ~~21st November 2015 at 8pm~~ 21st November 2015
10.30am for coffee, talk to start at 11am.**

John is going to give us a talk on daffodils plus a slide show. I bet we find out how little we really know on this subject, yours truly especially! His knowledge will no doubt make this a very interesting and fun evening.

This will be held in the tea rooms at Ramster, Chiddingfold, Surrey GU8 4SN.

Hope to see you!

Andy Fly – Chairman

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