

RCMG Outstanding Gardens Scheme

Criteria – a Guide for Applicants

The criteria have been developed from the International Camellia Society's Gardens of Excellence scheme, with permission, so if you have been through that process, you should already have most of what is needed here.

This document explains in more detail what we are looking for to satisfy the criteria of the scheme and will help steer you through the process. If you require further clarification of any of the criteria then please contact the OGS coordinator.

Criterion 1

The garden is well established, and the ownership and management structures are stable and perpetual as far as can be reasonably assessed.

The purpose of this criterion is to ensure that the garden has been established for a reasonable period of time, so that plants will be mostly mature, and it is managed and staffed in a way that it is likely to continue to exist, at least for the period of the OGS award.

We look for information about the current and previous ownership of the garden, along with an outline of how it is managed. Ownership for a significant period by successive generations of one family, for example, is a good sign of longevity, as is ownership by a trust or charity, or listed status.

The garden must have sufficient staff for its size and character, with an appropriate level of skill in the genus in order to be able to maintain it. In part, this will be determined by the condition of the garden and plants observed during the on-site assessment.

In the case of privately owned gardens, it is recognised that "perpetual" cannot be expected to mean the same as for a garden owned and operated by a trust. For the purposes of this scheme, it means that the owners currently have no intention of selling the garden for the period of the award, or have in place a viable succession plan, for example leaving the garden to an interested family member.

We look for information about how the garden has developed over the years: for example, does it have a significant place in the history of the introduction or development of the relevant genus?

Criterion 2

The garden is open regularly to the public, especially during the flowering season. (Admission may be free, by donation or by set fee as the garden determines for its needs.)

The purpose of the OGS is to inform the general public of good gardens where they can find out about the genera and how to use them, or simply to see them being displayed at their best: satisfying this criterion ensures that the public can actually visit, and do so at the most favourable time(s).

'Regularly' means that the garden has published times at which it is open to the general public, particularly during the flowering season. This need not be every day: a few selected days or periods during the year are sufficient.

Gardens that are only open by appointment will not satisfy this requirement and will not qualify for the Outstanding Garden award.

Criterion 3

The garden need not be devoted completely to Rhododendrons and/or Magnolias (as appropriate), but must feature them prominently. There must be a sufficiently broad and extensive collection, with the plants mostly well established.

- For Rhododendrons, a minimum of 250 cultivars or species is required.

- For Magnolias, a minimum of 50 cultivars or species is required.

The purpose of this criterion is to ensure that the collection is sufficiently broad and well established to be representative, and therefore of significant interest and educational value.

The numbers apply to cultivars/species that are in the register that the garden holds (see Criterion 7). There may be more, but if they are not properly catalogued they will not be admissible, so it is in the applicant's interest to ensure their register is up-to-date at the time of application: we will also ask for an estimate of what proportion of each genus in the garden are catalogued. Note that these minimum numbers refer to unique cultivars/species and not to individual plants.

All gardens will be adding new plants, and replacing others: the reason for requiring that plants are 'mostly well established' is to ensure that the collection does not consist largely of young plants that have not, for example, reached their normal size and flowering habits. This will be assessed mainly on the judgement of the assessment team at the garden visit.

If the garden has any particular specialisms within the genus, they should describe those briefly in the application.

Criterion 4

The collection must be maintained to a high standard, in a manner suitable to the garden and its climate.

The purpose of this criterion is to ensure that the plants in the collection are well maintained. This will give an indication of whether the garden has sufficient staff and skill to maintain the plants and the garden to a high standard.

We will be looking for a number of things, including:

- Weeding around plants
- Pruning and removal of deadwood
- Staking where necessary
- Mulching
- Space to reach full potential
- Care of young/establishing plants
- Suitable paths for visitors
- Plants are appropriate to the climate of the garden
- Plants located in appropriate places within the garden to satisfy their needs

As with a few other criteria, the assessment of this criterion will be judged by today's standards, not by those of earlier periods when availability of labour was less constrained.

Criterion 5:

The garden has some method of making cultural information available to visiting members of the public.

The purpose of this criterion is to ensure that visitors have the opportunity to learn about the genus before, during, or after their visit.

There are no specific minimum requirements here, but the expectation of the assessment team will be higher for some of the larger gardens that are a major enterprise than, for example, those who open private gardens during the flowering season only.

Examples of what we are looking for are:

- An engaging and informative website.
- Talks about anything related to Rhododendrons and/or Magnolias (as appropriate) - plant hunters, cultivation etc.
- Demonstrations on propagation, planting, pruning etc.
- Escorted walks where the head gardener/owner/somebody else with knowledge provides information and answers to questions about cultivation to groups as they are shown round the garden.
- Relevant shows.
- Printed leaflets and guidebooks, with maps and suggested routes where appropriate.

Criterion 6

The garden (or owner, or significant permanent member of staff) must be a member of the Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group and agree to display information about the Group, so that it is available for prospective members.

Gardens are encouraged to have a Corporate Membership of the RCMG, as this confers a number of benefits to them, including access for a number of members of staff to the RCMG, but the minimum requirement is that either the owner or a significant member of the permanent staff is a member.

The garden must agree to display information about the Group: they will place the award plaque(s) prominently, usually at the entrance to the garden, and have RCMG leaflets available and on display.

Criterion 7

The garden maintains a register of its Rhododendrons and/or Magnolias and their location in the garden. This register should be accessible to visitors in some form.

The purpose of this criterion is to ensure that the garden keeps proper records of the plants in their collection(s), and it is possible to find plants in the garden from the records, and conversely to find the record for a particular plant in the garden.

It does not matter what form the records are kept in, as long as they are in good order and can be linked to the plants within the garden. For example, the records can be on paper, such as in a book or card index, or they may be computerised, such as using home-grown spreadsheet or database, or using specialised software or an online service.

The purpose of establishing linkage of records to plants in the garden is twofold: the first is to be able to find a plant given its record in the database, and the second is to be able to find the record for a plant found in the garden. Typically the former is by a bed reference, a map reference or by providing a GPS location. The latter is typically done by attaching the accession number to the plant,

via a separate tag or on a plant label, but other methods, such as map references or GPS locations could potentially be used, provided that it is of sufficient accuracy.

In the application we ask gardens to tell us roughly how many *plants* (not species/cultivar), of any genus, they have in their register, and how many of those are Rhododendrons/Magnolias (as appropriate): this will give the assessment team a better impression of the task the garden faces to maintain the Rhododendron/Magnolia plants and their labels.

It is important that visitors are able to access the register in some form, but it is recognised that most gardens will not be prepared to publish plant locations widely for security reasons. It is sufficient if access to information in the register is only provided, in some way, to those who visit the garden in person and identify themselves.

One final note: one of the key activities of the RCMG is in conservation, and the group would be very grateful if the garden shared its register for rhododendrons and/or magnolias (and camellias, for that matter) with the RCMG, in confidence, so that the RCMG can create and maintain as comprehensive a list of the plants in cultivation as possible.

Criterion 8

Cultivars and species have identifying labels, where known.

Labelling of plants is an important criterion because it is an indicator of the standard of curation and provides useful information to visitors.

In an ideal world, all plants would have easily readable, informative labels all to a consistent design, but the world is not ideal. Labels are expensive, time consuming to produce and attach, they get damaged, or are stolen, and in some cases plants are not labelled for security reasons to try to stop the plants themselves being stolen.

In general, the expectation under this criterion is that an *estimated 70%* of plants are clearly labelled. It is emphasised that the percentage is estimated – without an exhaustive survey of a garden, this will never be established exactly – and in most circumstances will be a somewhat subjective opinion by the assessors that it appears that well over half of the plants are satisfactorily labelled.

The following are desirable characteristics for labels:

- Clean and easily legible (clearly all must to be legible to some degree!)
- Easy to find
- Uniform design throughout the garden
- Good quality and designed to last at least 10 years
- Including useful information such as
 - the accession number (if not on the main label the accession number should be on a separate label on the plant)
 - planting year
 - provenance if wild origin (including Collector's Number where known)
 - natural habitat of species (country or continent)
 - hybrid bred in the garden

The garden will be expected to show commitment and sufficient resources to maintain and improve labelling where necessary.

We recognise that there may be good reasons for weaker labelling in some areas of a garden. We will request in your application that you provide an assessment of the labelling in your garden, identifying weaker areas, and providing reasons for those weaknesses.

Criterion 9

Non-obligatory, but desirable, features are:

- a. A programme of propagation (using suitable methods to ensure the integrity/purity of the plants) to bring on future generations of the species/hybrids on the garden's register. This may be in-house or use external services.***
 - This is of most importance in gardens with old collections where plants are coming to the end of their lives, particularly for species or cultivars that are potentially rare in cultivation in the UK.
- b. Research programmes on Rhododendron and/or Magnolia culture, heat or cold tolerance, pest or disease control, or other subjects adding to the overall knowledge of the genus.***
- c. Shows or displays during flowering times.***
- d. Demonstrations of good growing practices such as pruning, at appropriate times.***
- e. The stocking of Rhododendron and/or Magnolia literature for sale and/or publication of such literature by the garden itself.***
- f. Any other initiative by the garden which promotes enthusiasm for and better cultivation of Rhododendrons and/or Magnolias.***

While these criteria are optional, in cases where the garden is weaker in other criteria – notably labelling – they will be considered by the assessors while reaching their final judgement of whether the garden has achieved outstanding status.

Assessment

Overview

Once an application is received from a garden, a team of three people will be selected by the Plant Committee to assess the application. They will be chosen from the most respected and qualified individuals in the Group, and will evaluate the application dossier, and then, providing everything is in order, make a site visit and produce a report on their findings and recommendation. A group of moderators will review the report, to help ensure equal treatment for all applicants, and make the final recommendation to the Management Committee for ratification.