



RCMG SW Branch News

April 2020

Editor's welcome – Notes from a Devon Garden

The world has changed somewhat since this newsletter launched not even a full two months ago. It is hard to fully comprehend the effect that this pandemic will have on our lives for the foreseeable future. But nature continues and is flourishing in what is now turning into a glorious spring. Whilst we can't be there in person, we can certainly join forces and share the joy amongst our group.

For me personally, this is the first spring I would have spent working at Greenway. It is the first time that I would have been able to see the garden in its full spring glory. And whilst I am fortunate in that I will still be able to appreciate the garden with its carpets of *Primula vulgaris*, it is desperately sad that the gardens are empty and devoid of visitors sharing in the delights on offer at this time of year. One of the greatest aspects of working in gardens that are open to the public is in revelling in the love and passion of what we as current custodians and our many predecessors throughout history have created for ourselves and for visitors to enjoy.



I, like my colleagues across the National Trust, have had to place on hold our plans for the year ahead. For me, this included renovation of the historic Camellia Garden on the lower slopes of the garden. It will now likely be another year before we repair the historic pathways and carry out restorative pruning. Only time will tell.

One of the most striking plants in the garden at the moment is *Rhododendron* 'Boddaertianum' (above left). Against the backdrop of the beech trees it makes a real statement on the way down the drive. Slightly further down the drive is another plant I have a new found love for - *Magnolia doltsopa* with its abundant scented white flowers. Whilst it cannot be enjoyed by visitors this year, it will be around next year for us all to appreciate. *Ashley Brent*

Branch Chairman's Foreword

I write this in early April when the first flush of magnolias is going over and the later varieties are starting to come into flower. It has mainly been a wonderful flowering year, but the high winds here in North Devon have reduced the flowering on a few magnolias such as *Magnolia* 'Merrill' which is normally covered. I had this from Jimmy Smart in the 1980s having admired the specimen growing beside his house. Most of the others have been superabundant.

The tragedy is that with the lockdown and, in my case, the National Gardens Scheme ordering a closing of gardens, one is unable to share the garden with others except virtually; but at least there is that possibility nowadays. Much of the joy of gardening is not only in the doing of it, but also being able to walk around with like-minded people, discussing the plants and enjoying the abundance and generosity of nature, especially in spring. To this end, I have produced three videos for YouTube of



M. 'Milky Way'

walks around my garden (links below) and intend to produce more from time to time – so much is happening at this time of year that I am dying to share with you. I am also hoping that you too will share what is happening in your gardens with us with a few lines and a photo which you can send to Ashley for the newsletter, or to Pam Hayward for email distribution to our Branch members. You may remember we used to send out invitations at short notice when we thought our gardens were looking particularly good to visit. Now we can share photos instead.

Please let us know how you are getting on, and I look forward to hearing from you and eventually, actually seeing you all again. *John Marston*

Links: [Marais les Voix Humaines - Harpsichord Piece](#)

[Gorwell Garden Walk March pt1](#) [Gorwell Garden Walk March pt2](#) [Gorwell Garden Walk April](#)

Rosemoor Shows, March 2020

It is strange to be writing about the early Rosemoor show in the knowledge that this is it for 2020: there will be no more shows this year, for reasons which will be abundantly clear to all readers. This show therefore took on a special importance. A week later, and probably this show too would have been cancelled. Going ahead was a finely balanced decision and I think all who attended will have been grateful and thrilled to take part.

There were many old friends present but, understandably, some of our older members decided to stay away. Many of our most regular exhibitors took part, but it was particularly pleasing to see some new exhibitors and an increased presence from gardens which have only recently put a toe in the water.

Most of us do not need reminding that two years ago this show was almost destroyed by the “Beast from the East”, but this year the climate worked very much in our favour. In the south west, at least, although we have had a very wet and windy time, the winter has been largely frost-free and most exhibitors agreed that the season was about two weeks ahead of normal. The main consequence of this was that there were many exhibits, notably in the rhododendrons and magnolias, which we do not often see in mid-March. In my opinion, though I have no empirical evidence for it, the display of magnolias at this show has rarely been surpassed, and I think visitors will have been astonished by the spectacle.

We shared the Garden Room with the RHS Rosemoor Daffodil Competition which, though perhaps a little depleted compared with previous years, created a comprehensive spring feeling to the whole event, particularly as our Spring Ornamental Plants competition (which has gone from strength to strength since it was expanded in 2018) presented a fascinating and colourful range of spring shrubs, trees and other plants outside our traditional trio of genera.

This is not the place for detailed descriptions of the exhibits, but I think all will agree that the contribution of Caerhays to the Magnolia Competition was outstanding, and was recognised by their winning both cups, while Marwood Hill’s camellias were particularly notable. Many other exhibitors, with gardens of all sizes, contributed wonderful specimens but, for now, I will mention just one exhibit which for me was worth the journey by itself: *Rhododendron fansipanensis*, a substantial spray of which was exhibited by John Lanyon. This member of the *Arborea* sub-section is a recent introduction from North Vietnam and still scarce in cultivation; the exhibited specimen had deep lavender flowers with very dark nectar pouches, and was in perfect condition – a wonderful plant and a privilege to see it.

As always, thanks are due to our exhibitors, to the staff at Rosemoor for hosting the show so well, and to Pam Hayward and Georgina Barter for the organisation of the competitions. *Russell Beeson*



Magnolia vases at Rosemoor

Ramblings of a plantsman

Those of us with a deep love of plants will have certain favourite plant families, or particular genera or just a species with all its variations. Some of us may be more interested in hybrids of one kind or another. Over the years I have worked my way through many plant groups, not necessarily following the particular fashion of the day. I remember back to my time at Inverewe where I collected all the hebes imaginable, a genus I had once disliked became an obsession with all the dwarf New Zealand species and then the more tender *Hebe speciosa* group that contained flowers other than white, with such gems as *H.* ‘Royal Purple’, ‘La Seduisante’ and ‘Simon Delaux’. Similarly the *Olearia* genus occupied a prominent role in its practical ability to withstand fierce Atlantic gales but at the same time provided such gems as *O. semidentata* or the

hybrid with *O. chatamica* 'Henry Travers'. After attending the Scottish inaugural meeting of NCCPG at Edinburgh RBG in 1976 I was inspired to set up two National collections, one of *Ourisia*, the other *Olearia*. So that by the time I returned to Devon in 1983 there were in excess of 40 different olearia in the collection. Rhododendrons were of course the main highlight of Inverewe in the springtime and many more were added to the collection.

My passion for the genus *Rhododendron* was re-awakened following a plant hunting expedition in 2010 in Arunachal Pradesh, north-east India. From this area and flowering at the moment in my cold greenhouse is a beautiful *R. mishmiense*, a member of subsection *Boothia*. It was first described by Hutchison and Ward in notes of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh Vol 16 (1931) 173. In volume 1 of the *Rhododendron Species* by H. H. Davidian he describes it as a small shrub, usually epiphytic up to 1.2m whereas Peter and Ken Cox in their *Encyclopedia of Rhododendron Species* and McQuire and Robinson in *Pocket Guide to Rhododendron Species* place it under *R. boothii* Nutt. 1853, Mishmiense Group and growing up to 3m high. The main difference apparently between the two



species being the spots on the corolla which can be seen in my photo (right). Also note the colourful young growth and hairy leaves (left).

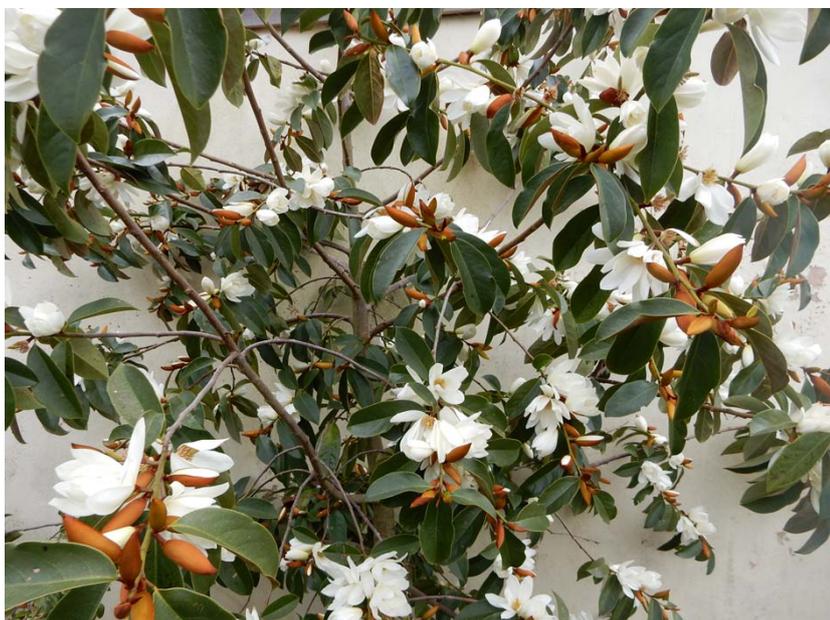
The smallish lemon yellow, campanulate flowers, 3 to 10 in number have a distinct calyx and the stigma bends downwards. I like the colour of the anthers which change from pale yellow to orange/brown and so contrast in colour. This would appear to be a rare plant in cultivation probably on account of it being tender. I raised quite a few plants in spring 2013 and some of these were circulated among members in 2014/5 at the Rosemoor show. I would be interested to know if any of you have these plants and have managed to grow them. I have planted a small group outside in the wood in the hope they make it through the next winter. *Dick Fulcher*



Fairy Wings

Magnolia x 'Fairy White' (below) was a spontaneous purchase at the Duchy Nursery 5 years ago which I worried might not survive the winters knowing only that *Michelias* as they then were, were not hardy. It was a small plant but I put it against a wall and it has turned out to be a real winner with a fabulous spring display and last year, it even produced a few flowers in the early autumn after the hot summer we had. My fears about its lack of hardiness here were unfounded and it is in a sheltered west facing position; Burncoose give its hardiness as -10°C.

It looks good in bud as the buds have a velvety texture and a russet cinnamon colour. It flowers profusely and is now a



picture, but it has been out for at least month. As it has so many buds, the display is long. It is fast growing and flowered soon after purchase as a young plant. It is now 9 feet tall by a 6 feet spread and I have had to prune its spread! The star-shaped flowers open gradually and waft a delicious deep scent which smells quite exotic. You can smell it from quite a distance.

Mark Jury has released four magnolias in the "Fairy Series" – Blush, Cream and Lime but I gather this is his preferred one, although it was pot luck for me. As you will see from the photograph, the flowers do not hang down like some species *Magnolia* and it is a hybrid plant of varied genes which have not been fully disclosed. I thoroughly recommend it as a fantastic performer and so far, easy to grow.

Caroline Bell

The Rhododendrons at Lovecombe, Buckland Monachorum

We bought Lovecombe, a house in 5 acres of garden with a 1.3 acre wild flower meadow in Buckland Monachorum, Devon in 1983. There were some large trees already, including a possible champion tree of *Magnolia sprengeri* 'Diva' and mature, mainly hybrid rhododendrons and camellias.

At the time, my husband Hugo was the Captain of *HMS Avenger* which was affiliated to the Borough of Restormel when Walter Magor of Lamellen was the High Sheriff of Cornwall. It was Major Magor who encouraged me to join the Rhododendron Group, and to start me off, he gave me plants of *Rhododendron* 'Saffron Queen', *R.* 'Fabia', *R. johnstoneanum* and *R.* 'St.Tudy' for my collection.

I also happened to be working at the Garden House on the other side of the valley from our garden when Ros and Keith Wiley were selling some of Lionel Fortescue's rhododendron hybrids. I carried home *R.* 'Katharine Fortescue', *R.* 'William Fortescue', *R.* 'Buckland Beauty', *R.* 'Buckland Constance' and *R.* 'Buckland', together with *R. griffithianum*, one of the parents of many of his hybrids, and *R.* 'Vanessa Pastel', one of the parents of *R.* 'Buckland'.

In 1990 we went to live in a Naval House outside Edinburgh, where Dr. David Chamberlain and Dr. George Argent were in charge of rhododendrons at the Royal Botanic Garden. Lord and Lady Strathcona from Colonsay came to stay with us, as Lady Strathcona was re-launching a ship in Rosyth Dockyard. Lord Strathcona had the boot of their car full of rhododendron seedlings from Colonsay, destined for the Botanic Gardens. He pulled out for me *R. calophytum*, *R. neriiflorum*, *R. orbiculare* and *R. sinogrande*, and they were brought back to Devon and planted in my garden.

More rhododendrons arrived in 1999 with the Chairman of the Group at the time, Bruce Archibold. He came to visit, and brought with him small plants he had grown from seed which included *R. asterochnoum*, *R. beesianum*, *R. bureavii*, *R. facetum*, *R. fulvum* and *R. falconeri*, which were duly planted out in my garden.

The rare *R. cinnabarinum* ssp. *xanthocodon* 'Daffodilly' (right) was brought here by a neighbour who was moving house. She had grown up at Pencarrow and it had been given to her by General Harrison.

Sadly, through disease and extreme weather, I have lost some of my precious plants, but now thankfully, Ros Smith, with her wonderful micropropagation skills, is helping to keep my collection alive. *Jo White* (Photo credit: Pam Hayward)



Hot Favourites

As flaming June approaches I look forward to the flowering of three of the hottest red rhododendrons I know, *Rhododendron griersonianum*, *R. facetum* and *R. elliotii*. Although reputed to be somewhat tender, all three have been with me for many years with only *R. elliotii* losing a little unripe late growth with the onset of severe frost.

Rhododendron griersonianum is perhaps the best known obtaining an F.C.C. in 1924 and passing on its genes to many a hybrid. Although the *Rhododendron Handbook* describes the flower colour as deep rose to scarlet the most widely grown form is pure scarlet with no trace of blue and this is its appeal to hybridists; although another useful characteristic is that it flowers at a young age from seed, as do its hybrids. For well over fifty years it has grown in my exposed gardens, first in Essex and more recently in Devon, showing total contempt for hard winters and summer droughts to flower regularly and freely during June.

Euan Cox, patriarch of the well known Cox family of Glendoick, Perthshire, saw *R. facetum* in Burma, describing it as the finest rhododendron species with its scorching red flowers. Kingdon Ward, in *Plant Hunting on the Edge of the World* refers to it thus "in fact the rainy season has well begun before *R. facetum* and its allies fire the hillside. In the damp gloom to come suddenly on a glowing flame such as this is a Joy; it wrings from us a shout of delight. The ground beneath is red as though strewn with hot cinders". He continues "The chubby trusses pack more than a dozen flowers which blaze out fiercely among the dark green leaves".

Similar to *R. facetum* is *R. elliotii* which the *Rhododendron Handbook* describes as rose purple in flower but then goes on to list an A.M. form K.W. 7725, deep blood red, and an F.C.C. form, another seedling from K.W. 7725, as deep scarlet with light chocolate spots. It is the K.W. A.M. form that I grow and although I have never been out after dark to look at in flower I can quite easily imagine that it glows so intense is the colour.

A hybrid of *R. facetum* x *griersonianum* is 'Whiddon Blaze' which produces its abundant scarlet flowers freely in early June. So fiery are they that the plant in my woodland from 50 metres away looks like a blazing bonfire! *Barry Starling*

Notes from a Cornish Garden

These really are very odd times we're living in. The current situation regarding the Covid-19 outbreak, as I write on 6 April, is affecting our lives in many ways and the repercussions are being felt throughout society. I'm sure many of you, like me, are retreating to our gardens and are finding solace in tending them, and of course we've been blessed with fantastic weather and a great floral display so far. Glendurgan is looking particularly lovely this spring, and whilst I would ordinarily be concerned about the wear and tear which inevitably affects the garden when good weather coincides with the Easter weekend, one of our busiest periods for visitor numbers to the property, this year it seems a great shame not to be able to share it. One positive to come out of this situation is that the garden and the wildlife which call it home are thriving in our absence!

I have a particular soft spot for historic rhododendron hybrids bred and raised in our local Cornish gardens, and whilst I have neither the space or the inclination to try to collect them all, the thought of these old plants gradually being lost over time saddens me. When I get the chance to buy or propagate something rare therefore, I usually feel the urge to take it, and last year I was able to purchase a plant of *Rhododendron* 'Lamellen', (*campanulatum* x *griffithianum*) bred by EJP Magor. It was planted last autumn, is now flowering and looking lovely, and clearly deserves to be grown more widely. One doesn't always have to look far from home for a plant or cultivar in need of rescue though. Glendurgan, with its very mild climate, has long been home to many *Maddenia* and *Edgeworthia* hybrids which thrive unprotected in our sheltered valley. Two of my favourites are *R.* 'Tyermanii' (right) and *R.* 'White Wings'. Whilst *R.* 'Tyermanii' (*nuttallii* x *formosum*) is uncommon, it couldn't be said to be in danger of extinction, but Glendurgan's collection of *R.* 'White Wings' (*edgeworthii* x *ciliicalyx*) had gradually dwindled over time. Whilst neither of these plants are Cornish in their origins, a beautiful plant is still a beautiful plant regardless of which county it was raised in. The last plant of *R.* 'White Wings' finally perished four or five years ago, but thanks to some foresight and the great work of Ros Smith at the Rosewarne micropropagation lab, replacement plants were grown and reintroduced two years ago and are once again a feature of April at Glendurgan.

Another plant making a real impact in the garden at the moment is *Magnolia doltsopa*. This evergreen Magnolia, from western China through to the eastern Himalayas, was introduced by George Forrest just over one hundred years ago and seems to very much enjoy the Cornish climate. The original introductions are now large trees at Caerhays, where it also first flowered in 1933. There are a few large specimens in the garden here, but the best one, planted in the 1960s, can be found next to the Glendurgan's iconic maze. It's currently flowering its heart out and the scent as you pass under it is delicious. Other younger plants dating from the 1990s are already 30ft tall and are putting on a similarly fine display.

Ned Lomax



Dates for your Diary

- ◆ All events, shows and trips have been cancelled until further notice. Information on the Autumn Meeting will follow in due course.

Plant Swap Shop

So as not to encourage non-essential journeys and social contact, there will be no plants advertised until restrictions are lifted by the Government. 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.

Your personal details will not be shared on the newsletter.

Submit a contribution

Feeling inspired to contribute? Please send any contributions including photographs to ashley.brent@nationaltrust.org.uk.

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