



# RCMG SW Branch News

May 2020

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

As I sit here writing this, the sun is slowly burning through the morning mist to reveal what will prove to be yet another glorious spring day. It still remains terribly sad that people are not able to enjoy the long spring spectacle that the garden has offered up this year. I on the other hand, have continued to be amazed at what I come across each day. With the camellias going over, a continual treat of rhododendrons keeps me excited about the seasonal changes in the garden, such as *Rhododendron* 'Tally Ho' (left). Although many plants are named, there are many unnamed rhododendrons in the garden here at Greenway. This alone has me looking forward to next spring when I hope to spend some time on identification.



As spring progresses, I have also been spellbound by the meadows across the garden. Carpets of bluebells and ramsons have quite literally stopped me in my tracks as I came across them sweeping up the hillside. Whilst I do not want to wish the time away, I am looking forward to seeing how they develop over the coming weeks.

I am not the only living creature that has had the opportunity to enjoy the garden. Quite regularly as I go about my work, I disturb wildlife that has taken advantage of the peace and tranquility of the site. Many deer and many different birds have been startled by my presence but perhaps the best experience so far was following a cheerful young fox along the river path. The wind masked my scent and the fox was preoccupied with the grey squirrel it was carting off for its breakfast.

With lockdown rules already eased for the first time, I sincerely hope that it won't be too much longer before we can start to visit at least some gardens, if not all.

Ashley Brent

## Branch Chairman's Foreword

Here we are nearing the end of May and eight weeks into lockdown, although now with some easing. In the South West, the weather has been fluctuating wildly between heat and cool. Our genera are coping well, but it has become very dry with only the occasional sharp shower.

The garden here is looking lovely, but with tragically no visitors to enjoy it. It is ironic that the extra time I have spent in the garden, like many of you, means that it is looking unusually tidy! There are a few rhododendrons out; large plants of hardy hybrids like *Rhododendron* 'Grenadier' and *R.* 'Ebony Pearl', and some more waiting in the wings and biding their time like *R. crassum* and the even later *R. diaprepes* and *R. glanduliferum*.

The camellias have had a surprisingly long season this year, and the late flowering *Camellia* 'Hawaii' is still going strong. The later magnolias have been starring and the photo (right) shows the lovely scented flower of a cross between *Magnolia sieboldii* and *M. obovata* which I had from



Kevin Hughes. Missing the gardenia scent of *M. maudiae* which has been long over, I now enjoy the same scent with magnolia hybrid *M. 'Touch of Pink'*.

I am so pleased that some of our members have risen to the challenge and produced videos of their gardens for the rest of us to enjoy, as well as the informative 'vlogs' from Caerhays, links to which have been emailed to members by Pam Hayward.

With sadness we record the death of Brother Vincent, a dedicated member of the group and creator of a remarkable woodland garden at his Friary in Dorset. His obituary follows this foreword.

As spring turns to summer, I hope that the restrictions on movement are eased sufficiently that our Branch can get together again in some way. We have two dates still in the diary; the Away Day here at Upper Gorwell House, Barnstaple on Saturday 25 July, and the Autumn Meeting & AGM on Saturday 24 October. The two events could even be combined in some way. We shall have to see how things are nearer the time and keep you informed. Similarly, our Rosemoor Show dates for 2021 have been decided and are:

Spring Show and competitions: 13 & 14 March

Rhododendron Competition with Branch competitions: 24 & 25 April.

Keep enjoying the abundance of nature which this year seems all the more amazing because of the intensity of the situation we find ourselves in and the quiet of the outside world. Please do share your experiences with the rest of our branch members through either myself, or Pam Hayward. This gives me an opportunity to thank Pam for doing such a fantastic job keeping us all informed and linking us to interesting sites. We are very grateful. *John Marston*

## Obituary - Brother Vincent SSF May 2020

Brother Vincent who died on 18 May, a few days before his 87th birthday, was a familiar figure in his brown Friar's habit attending and supporting the RHS Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group and especially the South West Branch at Rosemoor shows, garden visits and open days. He had no means of transport from his home at Hilfield Friary in Dorset, but this did not seem to hinder him; on the train and hitching lifts with supportive friends got him around.

Brother Vincent joined the Protestant Order, the Society of St. Francis, at the age of 21, and in the Friary at Llandudno he began to garden. Intrigued by an enormous old rhododendron there, he joined the RCM Group to discover more about these plants as well as camellias and magnolias, which he loved.

In the 1970s he moved to Hilfield Friary in the heart of the Dorset countryside and, over 40 years, developed a garden in a scrap of ancient woodland, building bridges, making paths and planting numerous trees and shrubs of all genera, but especially his favourite magnolias and camellias. He used to try to visit the Wynne-Jones at Crûg Farm in North Wales most years, filling two bags with as much as he could carry on the train. In 2003, his fellow brothers raised enough money to enable him to go on a trip of a lifetime to the International Camellia Conference in China.

In his 'secret' garden at Hilfield a *Magnolia sargentiana* var. *robusta* he planted has grown enormous. An Amos Pickard bred *M. 'Schmetterling'* was planted in memory of his sister, and *M. 'Pickard's Garnet'* to honour the Pickards, with whom he was great friends.

Because the Friary encourages bio-diversity, he had to contend with rabbits, deer and squirrels, and in spite of the teachings of St. Francis, he admitted to finding some of God's creatures harder to love than others.

In 2017, friends of his donated a Cup in his honour for our South West Branch Magnolia Competitions, given for the best single magnolia bloom in the show. This is known as the Brother Vincent SSF Cup and will serve as a lasting memorial to a kind, compassionate man and enterprising gardener.

*John Marston (Photo credit: Russell Beeson)*





## Freedom from Lockdown—Corona Gardening, Spring 2020

Unfettered by the interruptions of normal daily life, gardeners are certainly appreciating being able to really ‘get in the zone’. Living here in rural west Devon, surrounded by a veritable paradise garden, my wife Lynne and I might be considered pretty much self-isolated anyway; so not much has changed. Except, that now, after the wettest winter on record, when not much at all could be done outside (“Ruts!”), we’ve been blessed with the driest, sunny Spring and unlimited time; double boon!

So, since early March, work outside has continued apace. A few mature *Picea abies* – stragglers that once had been grown here as Christmas trees – were felled to make way for exciting new planting possibilities. Lynne, who for health reasons is unable to venture far into the wilder garden, has enjoyed being able to relax in the sunshine ‘front of house’. Correspondingly, I have relished re-potting and re-arranging the planting close to the house and driveway, that we might share time together; otherwise, I’m a vanished species – lost to the wild.

The garden here at ‘Wheal Jenny’ extends to around six and a half acres and has many salient features. I was fortunate to inherit a goodly selection of desirable trees, shrubs and perennials from the previous owners, planted over the 30 years of their tenure. This one and a half acre garden collection resides adjacent to the house; a cedar clad timber framed dwelling, built in 1963 and set on a plateau, looking down to the River Tamar in the valley below. The Calstock Viaduct and a large oak framing the view lend it the distinction of being somewhat similar to Turner’s painting ‘Crossing the Brook’.

In twelve years of gardening here, I’ve developed a variety of new features, encompassing the varied terrain ‘without’:

- ◆ A gorge-like, old railway cutting – planted with tree ferns and other exotics.
- ◆ A viewing platform, at the highest point looking out over the tree tops, up river towards Endsleigh.
- ◆ A swimming pond in the foot of the valley.
- ◆ A wild, woodland garden.

And, of course, continual planting – everywhere, at every available opportunity. Bamboos have long been a particular interest; there are in excess of 500 plants here.

Since joining the RCMG eight years ago, I rejoice in the way the extreme beauty and diversity of these three genera have enhanced my garden. Here’s a (very) small selection of current vignettes. *John Bailey*



Clockwise from top left: *Rhododendron* ‘Katharine Fortescue’ (1), ‘A bit on the side’ (2), *R. decorum* (1), Cable drums make great table tops (1), *Aesculus x neglecta* ‘Erythroblastos’ (3), *Rhododendron. sp.* (1), Mighty bamboo – *Borinda papyrifera* CS1046 (1), *Rhododendron* from Heligan (1), *Rhododendron sp.* (1).

(Photo Credits: (1) Colin Luke, (2) Lynne Bailey, (3) Andy Mott)



## Notes from a Cornish Garden

So much of the gardening year at Glendurgan is based around the spring display of wildflowers which carpet the steep slopes of the valleys, which make up the garden. I'm sure that you will all be aware that the art to managing wildflower meadows is in when, or whether, to cut the spent flowers and grasses down. The team here spend a great deal of time and resources dutifully strimming all the banks in July, before raking off the cut material and ferrying it away to be composted elsewhere. In the summer the whole process can take up to eight weeks, even with a small army of volunteers raking away day after day, and then of course, the process is repeated in December.

All in all it represents a great deal of work and you might wonder why we bother when nature often achieves similar results when left to its own devices. The answer is that the object of the maintenance programme is to progressively weaken the grass species, therefore reducing competition for the wildflowers and increasing their numbers. The results can certainly be appreciated by those of us who have been strimming and raking at Glendurgan for a number of years. Areas which were once overrun with thick, coarse grasses are now less congested and able to support a more diverse range of native wildflower species. The programme which has now been followed for over 30 years has seen the spring display improve year on year, so much so that, throughout the months of April and May in particular, we are spoilt with compliments from our visitors!

Of course, the reason we wait until July before we begin the great trim is to allow the wildflowers to set seed, and therefore the month of June is one of the most important in the whole process. The garden moves into a very different phase of beauty and whilst there are plenty of flowering trees and shrubs just beginning their own display, some people find it hard to see beyond what appears to be an overgrown hay meadow! This is the time when we make great efforts to share our methods with our visitors and to explain why there are so few manicured lawns to be seen. I must admit that it tends to be my least favourite part of the gardening year, partly for this reason. Even I struggle sometimes to see past the long brown grass. This year, however, has been like no other and I find it very sad that the spring display at Glendurgan was enjoyed by so few people. It has been such a fabulous spring after all.

The National Trust has not been standing still. A huge amount of planning has gone into how we can safely reopen our gardens and welcome in visitors again. Rest assured that as soon as the Government advice permits and we feel that we are safely able to do so, we'll be up and running again. I for one hope it will be soon as I don't fancy cutting all that grass myself! *Ned Lomax*

## Who was Harry Tagg?

I have always been curious about the people plants have been named for, especially the ones whose names appear quirky or obviously not posh. Many plants have a rather snobbish (or so they would have us believe) cachet, named as they are after 'The Countess of Somewhere' or 'Princess Somebody' etc – I note there are very few noble men among the plant names, but the men seem to have just plain down-to-earth names. This brings me to *Rhododendron* 'Harry Tagg' (right). A very floriferous scented rhododendron coming into flower around April with a plain, down-to-earth name. The rhododendron itself is a hybrid developed in the 1950s at Edinburgh Botanic Garden of a very old hybrid, the vintage dwarf *R. 'Albescens'* from Veitch of 1913, and the better known *R. ciliicalyx*. But who was Harry Tagg?

It turns out that he was Keeper of the Museum at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (RBGE) and worked at the RBGE for almost forty years, from a young man until his rather untimely death in 1933. He was at one time the only scientifically trained



botanist at RBGE and concentrated on plant diseases and the preservation of plants coming in from plant collectors. By the First World War, he had developed an interest in rhododendrons, then being introduced thick and fast, and was given leave to travel in the 1920s to see plants in the wild, ending up in New Zealand and Australia.

He jointly named species rhododendrons with George Forrest in the 1920s (*R. mimetes*, *R. dunicola*, *R. semnoides* etc) and there is a rhododendron species named after him, the rather tender *R. taggianum*. He was a contributor to the 1926 book *Species of Rhododendron*, so in his later years it turns out that he had become a great authority on rhododendrons.

From now on I shall look at this scented floriferous shrub with fresh eyes. *John Marston*

## Dates for your Diary

- ◆ 25 July – Branch Away Day to Upper Gorwell House, Barnstaple.
- ◆ 24 October – Branch AGM and Autumn Meeting at RHS Rosemoor
- ◆ 13-14 March 2021 – Spring Show and competitions at RHS Rosemoor
- ◆ 24-25 April 2021 – Rhododendron Competition and Branch competitions at RHS Rosemoor

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

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