



RCMG SW Branch News

Summer 2020

Editor's welcome – Notes from a Devon Garden

Since I last wrote, Greenway, like many other gardens, has opened its doors again to visitors. A huge amount of effort has gone into making gardens safe places for people to visit and also in keeping them looking great despite significantly lower staffing levels and no volunteer work. I've visited several gardens recently during a much needed week off and was amazed at how good many of our fine gardens in the southwest are looking. Much credit is owed to those teams who have worked exceptionally hard to achieve fantastic results with little resource.

On a personal level, it was a real pleasure to visit a garden and not be looking around making mental and written notes of what needs doing only to be then forced to choose between those tasks that get done and those that will just have to wait another year.

It is also worthy to note that, as a gardener in a public garden, it has been simply wonderful to see people back in the garden enjoying what Greenway has to offer whatever the weather. Visitors have been exceedingly generous in their praise which makes me realise again that we are all our own worst critics.



One of my favourite places in the garden during summer is the Fernery - a gem of a sunken, shady dell with a Coalbrookdale fountain that remains blessedly cool as temperatures soar.

Over lockdown, I used some of my extra time to file years of photos and came across this snapshot from 2003 that I think evokes the calming coolness of this spot.

Whilst the garden doesn't offer much from our three genera at this time of year, it

is features like the Fernery that really help make it a garden of all seasons. Dahlias, hydrangeas and other herbaceous plantings provide interest throughout the garden, the former two being favourites of Agatha Christie. Perhaps the most impactful trees at this time of year are the many flowering dogwoods, the fruits of which never cease to enthrall our visitors. *Ashley Brent (Photo credit: NT archives)*

Branch Chairman's Foreword

I write this as we are on the cusp of August. Who would have thought we would have lasted so long with so many restrictions. Those of us lucky enough to have a garden have had the opportunity for improvements, cultivation and the sheer contemplation of nature, which has helped the time pass. Now we are able to visit other gardens and I went to Minterne for the first time. Please do support the National Gardens Scheme open gardens as the income for grants to nursing and cancer charities are right down. It is a pleasant way to support these good causes.

We had planned to produce only three newsletters a year, but in these exceptional circumstances we will continue to produce more to keep our Branch Members in touch. Feedback has been positive and we would like to hear from all our members who can contribute pieces about anything that interests them.

Some members have attempted videos of their own gardens but have not been able to share these, most likely because the files are so big. The beauty of YouTube is that one can put up large files easily; I do hope they will continue to try. I

will continue my forays into the garden here, and Pam has been great at letting us know of other members' blogs and vlogs. Jim Stephens produces very informative ruminations and there are links to others.

We had a socially distanced and rather pared down Away Day at our house (Gorwell). We had to stay outside

throughout, but there were 13 of us plus dogs. Folding chairs and picnics were set up on the lawn below the studio. I am most grateful to those who brought plant material to talk about (everyone) and plants to sell for Branch Funds.

We do not know how things will turn out by the time we are due our AGM and Autumn Meeting at Rosemoor on the last Saturday of October; we will keep you informed.

In the meantime, have a happy summer. I shall leave you with a shot of the wonderfully scented *Rhododendron glanduliferum* (left) which starts flowering at the end of July and carries on well into August.

John Marston



Pam's musings

This is the first of what I hope will be a regular series of contributions, not just from me but by other members taken by a sudden muse. Off-the-wall to downright controversial, let's take advantage of our regional 'off-grid' status to put our views out there and get the debate going without frightening the main Group horses!

And of course, if you disagree with my musings, or indeed those of another contributor then this is a great place to argue your viewpoint and convince us all of the errors of our ways!

Random thoughts on... AGM rhododendrons

Over the last weeks, nay months, I have been tasked with stewarding the Group's Centenary Cup Photo Competition. As part of the exercise, along with checking names and ensuring entries were in the correct classes, I decided to add RHS plant awards to image captions where appropriate. I reckoned that the extra information would help potential growers weigh up their choices and introduce folk to varieties held in esteem by those more advanced in our art. I'm not sure I caught them all but it has been really interesting to do this and has led me to question the rationale behind some of the AGMs currently held by rhododendrons. The full list of AGM rhododendrons can be seen on our website (www.rhodogroup-rhs.org).

You will of course be aware that AGMs are not forever whereas other awards such as the FCC (First Class Certificate) are permanent whether the plant continues to deserve it or not and are recorded in the Register in the case of rhododendrons.

Well, looking through the current list more carefully than I have before did cause my eyebrows to raise – 'really?' I kept hearing myself saying. 'Surely not?', 'why?' and then 'why not?' when I found a gaping hole where a sure-fire rhododendron in my mind should be in place.

Now this is all my opinion of course, but over the last twenty years I've seen a lot of rhododendrons on the show bench and in gardens, grown a great many myself and talked to goodness knows how many other growers. I'm also familiar with what's genuinely been on offer from our main rhododendron suppliers and, as 'availability' is one of the criteria for making or keeping the award, that's really rather important!

Grievances commenced when I noticed some of the species given AGM status – I thoroughly applaud named forms like *Rhododendron argyrophyllum* ssp. *nankingense* 'Chinese Silver' attracting this accolade – it's a stunner, a truly cracking plant in every regard, but *R. racemosum* or *R. rubiginosum* – really? I've got a range of these two species growing here and I'm sure you'll agree, not all are superior and to be recommended; *R. racemosum* 'Rock Rose' yes, it's well behaved and tidy, but it can be a great rambling non-entity. Curiously, both *R. lutescens* and *R. yunnanense* were properly

considered and only the named *R.* 'Bagshot Sands' and *R.* 'Openwood' added. AGM Committee: More discernment of this type required I feel.

The list of hybrids also stirred the blood. I don't know what you think but is it really right to maintain *R.* 'Christmas Cheer' as an AGM plant or the likes of *R.* 'Bow Bells', *R.* 'Dopey' and *R.* 'Sneezy'? Is the Committee being sentimental here or somewhat lazy. Maybe I've got it wrong, but I wouldn't choose them or many of the older hybrids on the list like *R.* 'Cynthia' to represent the best of the best. I would however, award *R.* 'Golden Wedding', *R.* 'Phyllis Korn' and *R.* 'Queen of Hearts' without hesitation and I really cannot defend the omission of *R.* 'Alison Johnstone' and particularly *R.* 'Rubicon' which I consider absolutely peerless in every respect. Time and again it is a winner at shows and it stands perfect in my exposed Dartmoor garden through all weathers, neat, fully clothed all year round with superbly formed long-lasting trusses of the best 'arboreum' red. I'm told by the commercial nurserymen that it doesn't perform so well 'up-country'. So *R.* 'Lady Alice Fitzwilliam' qualifies because it is a good doer everywhere? Of course not. AGM Committee: Consult the growers as well as the nurserymen next time perhaps? Think harder and be prepared to knock some of these older ones off the list.

As to availability, now we are down to so few suppliers the menu becomes more and more restricted every year, probably reflecting the ease of propagation and reliability of sales. Many of the current AGM rhododendrons are now so scarce they have long left the *RHS Plant Finder* list. Well that can't be right can it. AGM Committee: Check availability next time you update and prod the nurserymen among you to propagate the missing ones if you still consider them AGM-worthy or ditch them altogether. What's the point in an AGM if you can't source it?

Now to the positives – of which there are many. I've already sung the praises of *R.* 'Chinese Silver' to which must be added the lepidote likes of *R. keiskei* var. *ozawae* 'Yaku Fairy' and *R. hippophaeoides* 'Haba Shan', and no one would argue with *R. yakushimanum* 'Koichiro Wada'. Three cheers too for many of the hybrids: *R.* 'Blewbury', *R.* 'Grace Seabrook', *R.* 'Lem's Monarch' among the elepidotes for example, all winners, and the lepidote gems such as *R.* 'Princess Anne', *R.* 'Crane' and (one of my favourites and very pleasing to see on the list) the tough Maddenia hybrid *R.* 'Dora Amateis'.



And the common-or-garden 'pick up at the supermarket' varieties on the AGM list? Well don't look down your nose at a rhododendron because it is so readily available! They don't become so widespread because they are inferior! They are usually the tough, reliable, floriferous ones and I have to tell you to my great delight that in completely separate conversations this spring, and with no prompting from me, the lovely Bodnant hybrid *R.* 'Winsome' (left) was praised and celebrated by two of our most revered growers – Russell Beeson and Seamus O'Brien. If you don't already grow it, do take advantage of its availability and price to give it a go – you'll be rewarded with a rhododendron which truly deserves its AGM!

Now take a look at the list while this rant is fresh in your mind and tell me what you think next time we meet! Meanwhile, I'll be tackling the azaleas!

Pam Hayward (Photo credit: Russell Beeson)

Notes from a Cornish Garden

August is a difficult time of year at Glendurgan. The school summer holidays, and the increased number of visitors that they bring, coincide with a period when there are far fewer plants in flower, particularly from our three genera. The garden of course remains beautiful as the views and vistas still deliver impact, as does the fantastic and diverse collection of mature trees, but the demand for 'summer colour' continues to present a challenge for the garden team.

Over the years flowering dogwoods, hoherias and eucryphias were widely planted and there have been flirtations with hypericums and hydrangeas. Even so, nothing comes close to recapturing the knockout displays of Asiatic magnolias, *Camellia reticulata*, rhododendrons or bluebells from earlier in the season. We as a garden team are always wary of introducing too many herbaceous elements into what is essentially a woodland valley garden. Flower beds tend to stick out like a sore thumb within such a natural setting and of course, as everything tends to grow so quickly in our climate, any perennial plants which we introduce have to be robust enough to withstand huge competition from grasses and wildflowers (as well as the occasional careless strimmer!).



We gardeners love a challenge though and planting cages continue to appear each autumn and spring. Last year we planted out around 150 *Hydrangea serrata* and our nursery continues to steadily churn out *H. aspera* varieties. In addition, rhododendron species such as *Rhododendron facetum*, *R. elliottii*, *R. serotinum* and *R. glanduliferum* have been introduced recently, joining old favourites such as *R. auriculatum* and a nice collection of *Maddenia* species and cultivars, extending the flowering season right into mid-summer.

It's hoped that these high impact plants will, in time, change the feeling of Glendurgan in summer quite significantly. However, not every plant has to shout to earn its place in the garden. I came across this *Magnolia figo* (left) this morning, quietly doing its thing and every bit as beautiful as a great big blue hydrangea!
Ned Lomax

Oh yes you can!

When it comes to our three genera, how many times have you heard someone say 'I would love to grow them but I have the wrong soil'?

You may consider me to be an interloper for daring to write for this Newsletter, or, as some of you might call me, 'a grockle'! Whilst I am a very keen supporter of the South West Branch and have met many of you at our meetings and shows, I actually live some 300 miles away in the middle of Canterbury in East Kent.



I am fortunate to have a fairly large town garden which is well sheltered to the north by the side wall of our B&Q Superstore! This is not as unglamorous as you might imagine – the wall is white, and the two storey building protects my garden from the worst of the damaging winds coming in off the North Sea whilst, at the same time, maintaining a good ambient temperature allowing me to succeed with over-wintering plants that are more tender. Geologically, I live on the Thanet Beds, a soil consisting of sandstone, clay and gravel, so by good fortune I have dodged by a whisker the vast area of underlying chalk that makes up much of Kent. Measuring the actual pH of the garden is a bit of a lottery since its previous existence was as a refuse tip in Victorian times resulting in an amalgamation of all sorts. Digging has rendered me an interesting collection of bottles over the years.

Whilst I cannot in any way compete with you when it comes to volumes of rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias in the garden, I can boast what for me is a pleasing selection of plants. The earliest planting, in 1988, was *Camellia x williamsii* 'Anticipation' (above left), followed by

Magnolia stellata in 1992. *M. x loebneri* 'Merrill', planted soon after, has grown into a magnificent tree, and *M.* 'Columnar Pink' began flowering last year. My camellia collection includes *C. x williamsii* 'Jury's Yellow', *C. sasanqua* 'Crimson King', *C. japonica* 'Sabiniana' and *C. japonica* 'Jack Jones Scented', and hybrids *C.* 'Michael' (*C. cuspidata* x *C. saluenensis*) and *C.* 'Winter's Interlude' (*C. oleifera* x *C. sinensis*).

However, my greatest triumph is that I can also boast two rhododendrons, *Rhododendron* 'Schneekrone' (right) and *R.* 'Sonatine'. Both of these plants were grafted on INKARHO rootstocks. Whilst *R.* 'Sonatine' grows in a large tub, with the benefit of ericaceous compost, *R.* 'Schneekrone' is planted in the ground and is thriving and flowering, proving that it really is possible to grow rhododendrons in less acidic soil. So next time someone tells you that they cannot grow our chosen genera, the answer could very well be:



'Oh yes you can!'

Sally Hayward

Account of our meeting at Upper Gorwell House, Barnstaple home of John Marston, our Branch Chairman, on 26/07/2020

Bringing our own folding chairs, 11 members and 4 well-behaved dogs arrived around 11.30am and stayed suitably distanced during our meeting which took place entirely out of doors due to the Coronavirus pandemic. We started with our usual presentations of favourite plants, then John gave us a brief history of the site to which he had moved in 1976 when he started work as a doctor in Barnstaple. By 1982 he had kicked the bullocks out of the neighbouring 4 acre field and had started to make a garden there, planting such signature trees as a tulip tree, then about 8 feet tall, moved from his lawn to the new area.

In 1997 he made a formative trip to Chile with collector friends from Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE), and in 2004 he joined a botanical expedition to Sichuan in China; what followed in both cases was gifts and seed of many unusual plants. His garden expresses his passion for all magnolias including the rare *Magnolia officinalis* var. *biloba*, as well as many unusual and often rare in cultivation flowering trees and shrubs, such as *Litsea populifolia* ex Sichuan. His site, now with its good shelter belts of trees, is largely south facing and, being about a mile from the sea, has a favoured maritime microclimate. Also, several high south-facing walls enable very tender plants to be grown. His garden is open for the National Garden Scheme (NGS) and it is quite simply an exceptional and inspiring garden.

Especially eye-catching, as we ate our picnic lunch, were *Dodonaea viscosum* f. *purpurea* with its red seedheads and purple foliage. Also, *Buddleja colvilei* 'Kewensis' a grey leaved form with rich, red flowers in the walled garden, and the very colourful display in the raised beds opposite the house (right).

Afterwards we were treated to a tour, where the list of rarities which struck us is too numerous to list. John likes the American buckeyes so we saw the last of these to flower, *Aesculus parviflora*, with its lovely scent. Also in good scented form were *Clethra barbinervis* and *Hoheria sexstylosa* 'Stardust'. A gifted, impressive *Dahlia coccinea* ex Mexico from wild collected seed was just coming into flower in the autumn border. Flowering *Grevillea williamsonii* and *Chordospartium* (*Carmichaelia*) *stevensonii* along with many other Australasian shrubs made a fabulous foliage display in the centre of the garden: the foliage contrasts throughout were enhanced by good design, involving vistas, statues and follies, and neatly clipped dividing hedges.

Many blue hydrangeas drew the eye such as *Hydrangea* 'Zorro' with its black stems, and especially the iridescent blue of *H. serrata* in several forms, including *H.* 'Blue Deckle'.



Several of us admired a purple-leaved *Styrax japonicus*. When we looked down we discovered other treasures such as *Lysimachia paridiformis* var. *paridiformis* (left), a groundcover shade plant with striking yellow flowers and excellent evergreen foliage. Echiums and other subtropical plants such as *Musa sikkimensis* enjoyed the favoured location; other *Musa* grew attractively surrounded by *Romneya coulteri* at peak flowering. Finally, we found several rhododendrons in flower, including *Rhododendron glanduliferum*, and *R. auriculatum*. The drizzling rain largely held off, and a very enjoyable time was had by all.

Caroline Bell

Stop Press!!!...Stop Press!!!...Stop Press!!!...Stop Press!!!...Stop Press!!!

Congratulations to group member Malcolm Pharoah who has just been awarded the Plant Heritage Brickell Award 2020 for his national plant collection of *Astilbe*. An outstanding and well deserved accolade for Malcolm.

Dates for your Diary

- ◆ 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

Plants available to members:

R. aberconwayi 'His Lordship' 7.5 litre Air Pot

R. augustinii 'Bowood Blue' 12.5 litre Air Pot

R. griersonianum F30392 7.5 litre Air Pot

R. irroratum 'Polka Dot' 7.5 litre Air Pot

R. soulei 7.5 litre Air Pot

R. 'Blue Pool' 12.5 litre Air Pot

R. 'Millennium Gold' 20.0 litre Air Pot

R. molle subsp. *japonicum* 4 litre traditional pot - grown from OP seed from plants which in turn were grown by the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh from seed wild collected in Japan by the Kanagawa Botanic Garden.

LOCATION: Tavistock, Devon

When collecting plants, please follow current guidelines. Do not collect plants if you are showing symptoms of Covid-19 or if you have been advised that you have come into contact with somebody who has tested positive within the last 14 days. Please sanitise your hands on arrival and maintain 2m distance from people from other households. Be aware of local restrictions that may be in place in your area or the area where plants are located.

If you are interested in the above plants, please contact Pam Hayward (pam@woodtown.net) who will advise of availability and contact.

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? Perhaps you feel differently about AGMs? Or have something that you're keen to discuss 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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