



RCMG SW Branch News

Autumn 2020

Editor's welcome – Notes from a Devon Garden

Welcome to the latest edition of the regional newsletter. Already camellias are starting to bloom at Greenway with one notoriously early *Camellia sasanqua* (below) in full bloom. There are signs of colour in the buds of some rather confused



rhododendrons as well. Combined with some brilliant autumn colour from deciduous trees across the garden, Greenway is certainly offering up a treat for both gardeners and visitors this season.

Recently, I was reminded by a friend whilst running across the moor that by this time last year, we had received an absolute deluge of rain. I must have blocked it from my memory but it did drag up recollections of a particularly damp and soggy autumn that made gardening that extra bit challenging. This year, the challenge comes in the form of a pandemic. As I write this the week before the furlough scheme ends, I am greatly looking forward to the return of those team members who are still off.

For those of you that know me, you'll be aware that I am also developing my own garden at home. I think it is fair to say that it

has been a rather organic approach to garden development. I'm a real sucker for obtaining plants that pique my interest. I have such a collection sat on my patio in pots awaiting planting that I now actively avoid nurseries. One plant that did make it into the ground, a couple of years back now, is one of my all-time-favourite trees, *Stewartia pseudocamellia* (right). It struggled a little last year but has thrived this year in its new location. And whilst I'm fully aware that it falls outside of the genera of this group (does the 'camellia' part of its name count?), I have been bowled over by the autumn colour from this gem of a tree.



In this edition, we meet a new committee member, look at some rhododendron variations, hear from our regular contributors and also take a trip to Wood House. I would also like to thank members who have offered up plants for distribution. Wonderful specimens have gone to Abbotsbury, Rosemoor, Killerton and Greenway as well as many private collections. Thank you to the generosity of those donor members whose love of our genera made this possible.

If you would like to contribute to the newsletter, no matter how short or long your thoughts, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me, Pam Hayward or John Marston.

Ashley Brent

Branch Chairman's Foreword

Autumn is setting in and the colours are an ever-changing symphony of reds and oranges with the occasional bright yellow. We may be looking forward to our spring awakening, but all is not lost as October means the start of the display of autumn and winter flowering camellias. Here at Gorwell, I notice the first flowers are appearing, but I know some of you have many of these bushes in flower already.

Autumn and winter camellias have sometimes been reputed to be difficult to grow, requiring warmth and sun to flower well. Strangely, I understand the great camellia expert, Dr. Jimmy Smart, shared this view. Completely wrong in my opinion, at least in my garden, as I have a large group with fantastic displays of flower and scent under the deep shade of a wide-spreading cedar tree and in shade elsewhere.

I have an especially enormous wide-spreading bush (more wide-spreading after a cedar branch fell on top of it) of *Camellia sasanqua* 'Hugh Evans' whose single, pink flowers are here produced in abundance from the end of October to December. In spite of the smallish, short-lasting, individual flowers they make a great effect en masse and of course have the same wonderful scent. The one drawback is the fact that when you spot a beautiful flowering branch of almost any autumn-flowering camellias, even the doubles, they see you coming and as you reach to cut them for display, most of the petals drop off! The rest then scatter along your path back to the house. They are best admired on the bush. I show here a photograph of *C.* 'Snow Flurry' (right) in my garden.

Jess Evans has had to step down as a member of our South West Branch committee and we all thank her for her contribution over the last few years. I am happy to announce that her place will be taken by Ben Probert, a professional gardener and designer who lives near Launceston and who has written a short piece for this newsletter by way of introducing himself.

This month we welcome two new members to our South West Branch and I hope they will enjoy being with us and take part in our activities when they resume next year. In the meanwhile we can all enjoy this newsletter, our wonderful yearbook and the Group Facebook page. I am mindful that a few of our branch members are not so computer savvy, but I hope that they have a (usually much younger!) person who can guide them to our communications, for which we must thank Pam Hayward who distributes many most interesting and informative snippets in our direction.

John Marston



Introducing Ben Probert

I've worked in horticulture of some form or another for over 20 years, mainly in retail and production but latterly as a self-employed gardener based on the Devon/Cornwall border. I'm passionate about the idea that 'plantsmanship' isn't about how many rare and obscure plants you grow but how freely you share your love and understanding. Our energising speaker at last year's Autumn Meeting, the legendary Mr Roy Lancaster, is a perfect example of this in action, and one of the main things that drew me to the RCMG was seeing how keen members are to share their interests.

I'll confess that the botany of our three genera is currently beyond me, and I must bow to the excellent knowledge of our more botanically-minded members. For me the big attraction with rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias is how they are grown in gardens, and how to grow them to their full potential. This is of course very important for a gardener working in our lovely part of the world where most gardens seem to have at least one of the three genera represented!

I hope that I will be able to bring something useful to the South West Group's committee. I believe that the work of the RCMG is very important, not only in championing the three core genera and the various plants that we grow with them, but also as a 'plus option' to the core offering of the RHS itself. I believe that the RCMG presents an important opportunity for like-minded gardeners and plantspeople to share their ideas and knowledge, and I sincerely hope that I will be able to support the group in any way that I can.

Ben Probert

The Garden at Wood House, Lynton

My late husband Richard and I built a house in 1997 on a rocky and very steep hillside outside Lynton on the North Devon coast. It stands at about 900ft above sea level overlooking three hills and across the Bristol Channel (*left*). Richard had inherited the site, comprising woodland (mostly native ash, oak, beech and hazel) and a steep field. This land stood above the house where he was born.



As there was no flat surface on the site, a great deal of rock and stone had to be brought in for the foundations of the house. It was all sorted by size and kept in huge piles on the precipitous ground. It was then used for dry stone retaining walls (*below*), steps and filling gabions; the smaller stones were later used to surface the newly created paths.

My husband had the ingenious idea of using huge drain pipes filled with concrete in order to hold up the drive, and these were then covered with stones on edge.

Because of the woodland already there, we both wanted to create a woodland garden by keeping some native plants, thinning the trees for more air and light, and clearing the undergrowth of brambles, willow herb, nettles and other weeds.



This proved a very arduous task. There were many small seedling trees of holly, beech and yew which were too difficult to dig up and so I decided to keep them and cut them into topiary which I thought would contrast with and highlight the rest of the wild look (*left*).



The soil is acid and very free draining but with abundant moisture and a build-up of leafmould, providing an excellent basis for growing ericaceous plants. I recently joined the Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group because of my interest in these plants which do enjoy our conditions. Ferns are another love of mine, and to the existing and abundant native ferns which also do very well here, I have added a great many different and special varieties with help from fern expert Martin Rickard.

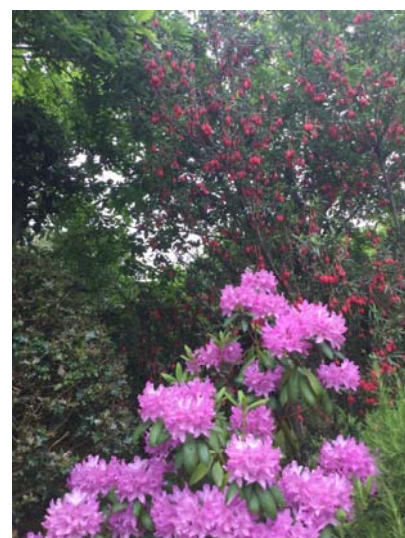
When we started the woodland garden, we planted a great many rhododendrons, camellias, azaleas and hydrangeas as well as other favourites such as *Crinodendron hookerianum* (*right*),

Cornus kousa and grevilleas. We also encouraged all manner of other woodlanders such as bluebells, daffodils, lilies of the valley, hellebores, astilbes, violets and primroses which grow well under the trees. *Alchemilla mollis* and

Erigeron karvinskianus weave in between the rocks in the sunnier parts.



Twenty years later, I now have a garden which is no longer in its infancy. I only regret that Richard who died in 2007 is not here to share it.



This year especially, all my shrubs and plants seem to have finally knitted together into a harmonious whole, and as I look around, I can say with some satisfaction 'I have done it'.

Random thoughts on... the maturing garden

When we came to Woodtown, 25 years ago, there were just four camellias, three magnolias and a few 'proper' rhododendrons: five of the *Rhododendron* 'Cornish Red' ilk, *R.* 'Elizabeth', *R.* 'May Day' and two wonderful big specimens of *R. luteum*. Like many wooded areas which had previously been used for shooting, ours were overrun with *R. ponticum* in all its guises. These at least gave promise that other rhododendrons would prosper and with intelligent clearing, the invaders could be harnessed to act as 'nurses' to young plantings.

So from a near-standing start I have planted with continued gusto such that I have quite a collection now, all set out in the scattered pockets of woodland I like to call my garden. I would say that this 'garden' is now at the maturing stage and that arriving at this particular state of development has brought with it so many joys along the way, joys now tempered by some nagging imminent challenges. I wonder if you have found the same experiences with your own garden journeys?

The joys come in many forms. To see birds, first perching and now nesting in my developing shrubs and trees has been such a delight. Having cleared acres of *R. ponticum* and then fretted about denying the secretive woodcock perfect places to hide, I am now seeing them again in number, using my 'proper' rhododendrons instead. Myriad bees and then butterflies feasting on pieris flowers early in the season or drunkenly blundering from rhododendron to rhododendron later on in the season – wonderful. That tantalising and long craved for first flower on a tricky species, having to crick your neck to see to the top of a magnolia laden with bloom when you planted an 18" stick years before or needing to seriously move your head from side to side to take in the splendour of an acer in autumn colour or cherry in full bloom – how rewarding is that! A *Sequoia sempervirens* grown from seed now too big to get my arms right around its bearlike trunk – bliss. And what about being able to take a punt on planting something riskily tender or precious that you would never have chanced in the early days when you were too cautious but now you have sheltered areas in which to cosset it and plenty else to enjoy if it fails or succumbs. Likewise it becomes easier to plant something requiring patience – the demand for rapid, if not instant, gratification is a curse when we set out but much less of one when there are other things to rely upon for floral satisfaction!

I do hope some of this chimes with you and your own experiences or if you are just beginning your garden journey, you can take encouragement.

But the maturing garden doesn't stop maturing! Once again, our early eagerness becomes a curse when plants carefully chosen are at first (we think) well-spaced, then attractively blending and ultimately vying for the same space. Decisions must be made. Skirts must be lifted, branches lopped Choices are difficult when it comes to selecting what has to go when you are so closely linked to your plants and their development. It can be tough. The path which at the outset is several feet across, allowing us to walk together while we admire the young plantings either side will ultimately become a 'wet leg' single file foray if we aren't careful – I should know, I'm very guilty of being reluctant to prune! And disease can rapidly set in in these congested spaces we admired for their intimacy not so long ago.

Ultimately, maturity leads to the need for rejuvenation but hopefully we've been smart (and mature enough ourselves) to stage our plantings over time and have discrete areas we can tackle whilst we enjoy the others as they move on to and through maturity.

Pam Hayward

Notes from a Cornish Garden

As I write, Glendurgan is entering its last week of opening for the 2020 season. It is always with mixed emotions that we close the gates to our visitors at the end of October; this year more so than usual given the need for open spaces and the clear benefits people gain from them during these trying times. Although in many ways I actually look forward to November. Having the garden to ourselves feels very special and it is a time of year when larger projects can be undertaken, clearance work carried out, bonfires lit and plans put in place for the following year. There's a real feeling of progress in the air and it's amazing how much can be done when tidiness isn't such a major consideration!

Of course it's a shame not to be able to share Glendurgan through the autumn and winter as there's still so much on offer. There's a fantastic collection of trees and shrubs in the garden and they're currently a riot of colour; with the yellows of tulip trees, burnt oranges of the *Taxodium* and *Diospyros* and the reds of maples and the *Nyssa*. Late flowering herbaceous plants and bulbs such as salvias and nerines make a real impact as the season draws to a close, whilst *Hedychium* species are only now coming into full bloom, with some such as the stunning *H. maximum* still a week or two from opening. A treat in store for the family who still live in the house here as well as the few staff who will remain on site! The quieter months are also very valuable to the wildlife which calls Glendurgan home. One of the few benefits of arriving to work in the dark or half-light is the chance to see foxes and badgers returning home, and I always know winter is approaching when the pair of grey wagtails who seem to inhabit the area around our compost bays each year reappear.

Winter is a pretty brief affair in the far south west of Cornwall however and in reality our mild climate means that there is very little to separate the end of autumn and the beginning of spring. The close of this flowering season is already overlapping with the start of the next and the first of our *Camellia sasanqua* blooms are now emerging. Before we know it the magnolias and rhododendrons will be upon us and the whole cycle will start again!

Ned Lomax

A couple of variations of *Rhododendron williamsianum*

Unlike many species, *Rhododendron williamsianum* does not vary significantly in any of its characteristics over its range in the wild. However, a garden environment where, for instance, it is growing in a dry, hungry situation, can produce leaves much reduced in size. Crowding by other shrubs can push its height to 2m or more. Typically the species makes a small, compact shrub about 1m in height by 1m across with oval to rounded bright green leaves up to 4cm, cordate at the base. The 2-4 flowers of the inflorescence are most conspicuously rose-pink bells, 3-5cm across.

New shoots tend to start to emerge prior to the flower buds opening. The leaves they bear are dark chocolate in colour at first, transforming the overall aspect of the shrub for a few weeks, providing an additional, pleasing feature until they turn green. These young shoots are susceptible to frost and I have known them damaged through to late-May. However, they very quickly push out new growth but such later growth is unlikely to produce flower buds for the following year.



Over the years I have come across two variations from the type; the first being in habit of growth. This, which I call the 'prostrate' form, (*left*) came to me from an elderly couple in Scotland nearly fifty years ago. They had been given their plant by Dr. Davidian, from Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. The cuttings they gave me struck readily, a fortunate characteristic of *R. williamsianum* of which I have made use over the years to spread the plant around.

The one planted in my own garden drapes itself over a bank covering a 2m diameter circle but only achieving 50cm in height. Interestingly, Kingdon Ward in *Rhododendrons for Everyone* published in 1926 states about *R. williamsianum*: 'In this country it forms a low, sprawling, intricately-branched under-shrub, the stems rising a foot above the ground. To all intents and purposes the plant is as flat as a pancake so that it is perfectly suited both in size and shape to the rock garden'. Perhaps this low-growing form was one of the earliest introductions.

The other form came as *R. williamsianum* 'Exbury White' (*below*) - I believe I obtained it from Exbury. As the flower buds open one feels that maybe the people at Exbury got this wrong as they are quite pink. But once fully expanded they do become white and there are always plenty of them. In all other respects this is a typical *R. williamsianum*.

Rhododendron williamsianum is an undemanding plant to grow, having a useful attribute for a rhododendron in that it can be grown successfully in soils of up to pH8, a tolerance of lime that it passes on to its hybrids.

Ernest H. Wilson, who discovered and introduced the species from western China in 1908, named his find after J.C. Williams of Caerhays, Cornwall, after being very impressed with the pioneering work Williams was doing with Chinese species in British gardens.



Barry Starling

Dates for your Diary

- ◆ 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

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. Many gardens have already benefited from the generosity of members' surplus plants. Thank you!

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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