

The Royal Horticultural Society

The Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group



Bulletin 76 ~ April 2001

Forthcoming Events

13 March	Executive Committee Meeting, Westminster	22 May	Executive Committee Meeting, Westminster
13-14 March	Early Camellia & Rhododendron Competition	18 Sept.	Executive Committee Meeting, Westminster
10-11 April	Main Camellia Competition, Westminster	11-14 Oct.	Autumn Weekend with ICS, W. Wales
28-29 April	Main Rhododendron Competition Saturday and Sunday, Westminster	20-23 Oct.	N.Z. Rhododendron Association Annual Conference
6-11 May	Spring Tour, Devon and Dorset	20 Nov.	Executive Committee Meeting, Westminster

Chairman's Notes.

I very much regret to report that our former Chairman, John Bond LVO,VMH, died on February 11, at the age of 68. Friends and colleagues from the Group attended John's funeral service in Virginia Water and a donation of £50 was made on behalf of the Group to the Gardeners' Benevolent Fund, one of the charities nominated by John's family.

An obituary and tribute to John will be published in the next issue of the Yearbook.

John will be greatly missed throughout the world of horticulture. His immense knowledge of a vast range of plants and his enthusiasm for growing them meant he enjoyed a unique authority and affection among plants men everywhere and not least among members of this Group, where he made many new friends during his chairmanship. Under his guidance the Group prospered and the plant collections he established in our name will be a fitting and lasting tribute to his work. We will miss him.

All members are invited to attend a memorial service for John which will be held on Tuesday, April 10 at 1.30 pm at St Stephen's Church, Rochester Row, London SW, near Vincent Square.



A number of interesting letters are published in this bulletin on which I would like to comment and above all invite further views from members. Do let us have your thoughts on how we may improve the operation of the Group.

Among other issues, John Bodenham reflects, as do many other members, on the lack of coverage for the Group in *The Garden*. I think this has been the case, but we have to be aware that it takes two to tango, and we need to do some work on our side to earn some exposure. With this in mind, I am delighted to say that Alastair Stevenson has taken on a new role of publicity officer with the objective of ensuring a timely supply of useful and relevant information.

The Yearbook was featured in the news pages of the March issue of *The Garden*. In addition, I wrote to the editor on January 5 on the general question of coverage and with two suggestions for consideration as possible Group rhododendron features. I have had an acknowledgment and my letter has been passed to the features editor. I am looking forward to a reply.

As new UK members for the Group are drawn exclusively from the existing membership of the Society, *The Garden* is by far the most effective - indeed at present the only - means of getting across news of our activities and genera to many members of the Society who are simply unaware that we exist. It is something we need to work at and I am hopeful that we may see more space devoted to our activities during the year.

We are also looking at other opportunities to promote the Group. My view remains that our best recruiting sergeant is an enthusiastic existing member who knows that the range of benefits we now offer is excellent value.

The thorny question of the remorseless decline in participation in the London rhododendron shows is again raised. Brian Wright addressed it in the December 1995 Bulletin and revisited it in the current Yearbook. London is clearly a problem, pointed up by the relative success of the local South East and Wessex shows which generally overcome the logistical problems of travel, parking, accommodation, time and cost. Perhaps more regional shows should be organised? The notion of a survey of members to establish reasons for the decline at Vincent Square has also been advanced again. The cost and feasibility of a poll warrant consideration by the Executive Committee.

Margaret Miles also puts forward some constructive suggestions. On the subject of better coverage of camellias and magnolias, we are in fact gradually creating a balance between the three genera in the Yearbook, attempting to reflect the broadening interests of members. The regional programmes now tend to show the relative popularity of camellias and magnolias and the autumn meeting is jointly organised with the ICS. Though I must admit that when the light enters the eye

of the true rhododendron lover, one should always proceed with a degree of caution.

So far as magnolias in the seed list is concerned, there are a few included this year. Magnolias do not always set viable seed in our climate and some purists object to raising seedlings from hybrids although some of our best named magnolias have been raised from open pollinated seed (see 1998 Yearbook P 50). Raising magnolias from seed is very easy, provided certain basic requirements are met (see 1998 Yearbook P 53).

The suggestion that the Group could organise a clearing house for the exchange of seedlings and scions is an excellent one - a 'propagators circle' for contact and trade. Sowing seed, especially of rhododendrons, either yields none or too many seedlings and those who enjoy propagation are often at pains to dispose of surplus to people who would really value them. If anyone has thoughts about how such a scheme might most effectively be organised, or indeed is prepared to take it on, do let us hear from you. I, for one, would be happy to participate.

I was a little disappointed at the response to my invitation to nominate the top ten magnolias. I am trying very hard to discount lack of interest as the reason, preferring diffidence born of modesty as to knowledge, or the natural tendency to do tomorrow what it is not essential to do today, a syndrome that affects many of us leading busy lives.

I understand that Mike Robinson's analysis (which at the time of writing I have not seen) shows Leonard Messel to be holding most of the cards. Reliable, easy, accommodating, of modest dimensions with a colourful and attractive display -and of course, a string of awards and some 50 years on its side. What gave it pre-eminence? Did the public demand it or the growers promote it? Its concatenation of awards -PC, AM, FCC and AGM - if the growers knew about them, might have provided the incentive to stock it. And with almost half a century under its belt, perhaps patience may be the ultimate answer to the public's lack of choice in the garden centres.

Incidentally, it is still not too late to vote - I'm sure those who have not yet got round to it will be strong-minded enough not to be influenced by Dr Robinson's account. As I said before, if we had a big enough response, we might be able to secure some coverage to create better awareness of the Group.

Finally, may I wish all members a most enjoyable and successful spring season. At present rough winds, snow and frost do shake the darling buds of March but the bullfinches seem to have left the flower buds on the *Forsythia ovata*. There is always something to look forward to and one would not be a gardener unless one were an optimist.

Maurice Foster.

Editors Notes

I would like to record my sadness at the death of our ex-Chairman, John Bond. Although seriously ill he presided over our Committee meetings with flair and efficiency, made great efforts to join in the Spring and Autumn Tours where he was so much appreciated, and was generally a fountain of wisdom for us, both on the plant world and on the plants person world. His efforts on behalf of the Group and on rhododendrons will be recorded elsewhere, I shall miss him a lot.

I am asked to mention that a new edition of the book *Shrubs for the Milder Counties* by W. Arnold-Forster has now been issued ISBN 0 906720 28 1 Price £25. A classic in its field the new edition has an addendum of plant name changes by Peter Clough and new colour photographs.

I would also like to note that County Wicklow is running its renowned Gardens Festival from May 18 - June 21. This is its twelfth year and would be well worth a visit. Details from Bairbre Curley, Wicklow County Tourism, St. Manntan's House, Kilmantin Hill Wicklow Ireland. Tel. 0404 66058 Fax 66057, e-mail wctr@iol.ie

Year Book Editor's Notes

Year Book 2001

The Hon. Editor would like to draw member's attention to an error in the Executive Committee details as printed in the current Year Book. Tony Weston is incorrectly shown as being the Membership Secretary, whereas, of course, he retired during 2000 and was succeeded by Miranda Gunn. This entry should therefore have read-

Hon Membership Secretary: Mrs. Miranda Gunn, Ramster, Petworth Road, Chiddingfold, Surrey GU8 4SN Tel. 01428 644422 e-mail, miranda@ramster.free-online.co.uk

The Photographic Competition 2001

The Competition will again be held this year, the winning three to be printed in the 2002 Year Book. It has also been decided to establish a special category for the best photograph taken by a member's spouse, and this also will be printed. Otherwise the rules remain the same. A maximum of three pictures (transparencies or prints) per entrant, taken by the member. The subject matter is limited to the three genera for which the Group exists, and may be from the wild, a public or private garden, or in a vase. Entries by 30 June 2001 to - Philip Evans West Netherton Drewsteignton, Devon EX6 6RB

Combined Autumn Tour with ICS - 11-14 Oct. 2001

About 30 members have so far registered an interest in this tour, if you wish to receive details please contact David Farnes, 5 Pine View, Ashgate, Chesterfield, Derbyshire S40 4DN This will not commit you to anything.

Lack of Support for Rhododendron Shows

The two articles (one in the Bulletin and one in the Yearbook) highlighting the lack of support for Vincent Square competitions have spawned quite a few letters, some of which are printed below. It is obvious that most members who live a long way from the SE are no longer willing to make the long slog up to "town" to compete. I would like lots more letters from you all - tell me whether you agree with the opinions voiced here and say whether you would be prepared to compete if conditions were different.

Is it now time to bring the Rhododendron Competitions out of the "closet" as it were, and out onto the road? Why not have the competition held at different venues around the country every year or even individual competitions at differing venues within the year?

Surely the genus would get more effective publicity with the added advantage that members who live so far from the present venue would be more likely to attend and possibly even compete if it were held occasionally in their area. It should also provide a platform to promote the diversity and suitability of rhododendrons and encourage newcomers in the Rhododendron Society.

Is there a danger that the Society will become more elitist if these geographical barriers are not broken down?

Glynne Jones, Machynlleth, Powys

I understand that the Society is concerned at the lack of entries for the Rhododendron Competition. I am not surprised. The difficulties of entering must put off a lot of potential entrants who might have a possible exhibit. To us the main ones are: -

Getting the schedule of classes. I was at the Show on February 13th but was unable to get one. It appears that the only way is to write for one.

Lack of knowledge of the procedure.

The timing of the judging. To get an exhibit up in time means that many in the country have either to go to London the day before or get an early train, so missing the "Daily Return" concession. It takes us 2 hours to get to Vincent Square from here.

To meet these difficulties I suggest that the schedule is sent as a loose leaf in the appropriate bulletin, together with a brief description of the procedure and hints on showing.

The judging should start at 11 am on the first day. To allow the rest of the show to start at the normal time the area should be 'roped off' until 12.

I feel that if these procedures were adopted more owners of small gardens might enter.

Denis Clarke Hall, Midhurst, Sussex

Back in 1978, having already been a RHS Member for some 14 years, I decided that somewhere within the hallowed halls of Vincent Square there must lie a Group interested in Rhododendrons per se, and wrote a letter. Information about the specialised interest Groups had never appeared within the pages of the RHS Journal. I was subsequently contacted by Major Magor and I joined the Group, but this lack of information about us has certainly been a sad state of affairs for many years. Of late I believe we are now included within the RHS web pages, but how many gardeners are connected to the internet. I suspect the percentage is minimal, whereas every member gets "The Garden".

RHS membership amounts to some 280,000 of which about 750 belong to our Group (0.3%) 60% of this overall membership 168,000 live in the South East region closest to London. A breakdown of the SE shows some 16 London addresses, 116 near to London and another 43 in Wessex. So 159 out of the 168,000 are practising rhodophiles in that area (i.e. 0.1%)

In Scotland the RHS Membership is about 1% or some 25000 of which some 59 are our Group members (2%)

Thus rhododendrons are, for example 20 times more popular to grow in Scotland than in the south east of England. In fact almost anywhere else other than London in the whole country demonstrates more interest/expertise/horticultural suitability.

I suspect the average age of our members is over 60 and infirmity quite common. Regional Groups meet three or four times each year and the gatherings tend to be predominantly social, rather than educational with probably the bonus of a speaker. Competitions tend to be poorly entered and invariably won by the same few names.

This is an attempt to explain that this is not a clientele to whom the logistics of exhibiting at a Show in London would in any way appeal. They just might have considered a venue within a 1 to 2 hour maximum driving distance (where must lie adequate free parking) but certainly not London. I don't think Londoners recognise the trepidation which besets we yokels when we realise that a visit to the metropolis has become essential. I, for one, avoid it like the plague, and car is about the only practical way to transport any quantity of blooms.

In fact, therefore London is the least likely venue to hold a successful competition. London itself is apparently not a centre of rhododendron excellence (or it is remaining inordinately coy)

In order to "Show", pre-booking is necessary for the RHS setting-out preparations, achieved by obtaining a Schedule and submitting one's requirements well ahead of time. In my own case,

concentrating on vireyas which have very irregular blooming times, such predictions are well-nigh impossible. Achievement of a sufficiently diverse private collection to provide plant choice to be able to show has taken a long time (over 30 years to date). I competed in a Show two years' ago and the logistics were formidable. Train from Plymouth to Paddington carrying an enormous suitcase, Underground to the nearest point; walk, set up (fortunately with much guidance from Archie Skinner); catch train home (was not there to see the actual Show). No chance of staying overnight due to cost. Little chance of winning much more than a taxi fare. BUT there was the honour. After some months the results cards and prize money were received, (didn't cover the train fare) and a report on the Show eventually appeared in our Yearbook almost 9 months later. Why don't such things receive better publicity?

It is obvious that the days of the London Show as regards rhododendrons, are history. In their stead perhaps large south-east establishments should be individually or in combination encouraged (financially?) to set up displays? Perhaps the Shows should be hosted by the Branches in turn in each general geographic location? Perhaps the Group Membership should be polled to discover their individual preferences and what it would take to get each one of them, personally, to a show bench?

How far would they be prepared to travel to compete? Locations could be discussed, some method has to be employed to decentralise the operation away from London. Perhaps there should be added financial incentives to the prizes, such as free annual membership? Free Chelsea tickets? It is no good just sitting in Vincent Square and expecting the Exhibitors to come to you. In this day and age the parent organisation has to become motivated. It cannot remain all take and no give.

John Bodenham, Devon.

More Magnolias?

I read your "Notes" with interest and agree that the availability of magnolias is poor. While I support any effort to make magnolias more widely known to the general public, I think there is a case for attempting to increase availability within the Group.

Anyone setting up a collection faces the following difficulties:-

- 1) Expense - many varieties are extremely expensive
- 2) Unreliable naming - why pay £50 for something that is not true to name?
- 3) Lack of information on propagation and lack of rootstocks for grafting/budding etc.

I think there is a lot the Group could do to encourage magnolia growing - a subject that has been neglected in the past within the Group. May I suggest we give equal emphasis on rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias in written material and Group activities. This is happening gradually -but I think there has been an over-emphasis on rhododendrons, in the past.

We should include magnolia seed in the Group seed list. In the 2000 list there is just one magnolia (*wilsonii*) yet every autumn tons of seed rots on the ground or is eaten by mice. Magnolia seed (as I am sure you know) needs to be washed refrigerated and stored damp to succeed. This can be a tedious task.

We should also try to arrange more opportunities for members to trade interesting magnolias - we have a plant sale once a year in the S.W. Branch but I feel that an exchange of small seedlings/cutting material etc. at other times, possibly by post, would help the distribution of interesting material; consider the formation of a "propagators' circle" for those enthusiasts who dabble in propagation.

Margaret Miles, St. Mawes, Cornwall

Results to Date for the Top Ten Magnolias

Magnolias at Garden Centres

Well ladies and gentlemen, we may have the beginnings of a well based campaign to persuade garden centres to stock more and better magnolias than their usual dreary selection, but only if overwhelming pressure starts from these very small beginnings.

To date I have received 20 responses from members of the group, including an especially nice camellia postcard from France, and a couple from non members - one in Sweden, so at least know that the bulletin reaches far and wide. So if your favourite plant is not mentioned here, or you made out a list, lost it, or didn't send it off then please do so now. Top ten magnolias for general cultivation in the U.K. climate ignoring availability please - the address is Mike Robinson, Hindleap Lodge, Priory Road, Forest Row, RH18 5JF, or email me on lanarth@hotmail.com

As the chairman has said in his notes the top plant was "Leonard Messel", included by no fewer than 15 respondents - and already in some garden centres. In total 92 taxa were named - showing, as we all know, that there are many very good magnolias - many not yet widely grown (which is what this is all about) out there.

In second place came "Star Wars" with 10 votes, and "Elizabeth" with 9 - both will strike from cuttings and both are magnificent freely flowering varieties - as long as you don't expect "Elizabeth" to be the colour of a King Alfred daffodil.

There followed *stellata* with 7 votes (more if all the named taxa were included, but I felt this would be unfair), and with 6 votes each - "Pegasus" (*cylandrica*), "Spectrum", *wilsonii*, x *weiseneri*, "Jane Platt" representing the pink *stellatas*, x *loebneri* "Merrill" and "David Clulow" all with 5 votes.

There were 7 taxa with 4 votes:- "Brozzonii", "Caerhays Surprise", "Heaven Sent" (not "scent"), *grandiflora* "Samuel Sommer" and the hybrid "Maryland", and *sieboldii*. A further 8 varieties had 3 votes, with numerous twos and ones.

What to make of this? Firstly it is a very small sample, but even so aren't there some surprising omissions from the "top eighteen"? There are no Jury hybrids, only one "yellow", one *soulangeana*, no Pickard's, and not a single "tree magnolia" species or named clone. Included are some not at all widely available - Jane Platt, Samuel Sommer, Caerhays Surprise and David Clulow have impressed a lot of us enthusiasts already to have got into the list.

Is your favourite magnolia missing? Does this list provoke violent disagreement, indigestion, or a rise in blood pressure? If so, or if not, do please send me your list. Perhaps we can then exert some pressure and see these glorious plants in gardens everywhere.

A wicked final thought - what would an American list look like?

Mike Robinson

Branch News

South West Branch

The Branch held its Autumn meeting on November 18, 2000, at RHS Garden Rosemoor. Some 80 plus members and guests attended. As usual the Bring and Buy plant sale was a great success, i.e. sold out. The quiz on species rhododendrons was arranged by John bodenham and won by Dick Fulcher. Our guest speaker was Jim Gardiner who is the Curator of RHS Wisley and also President of The Magnolia Soci. He gave an excellent lecture on "The Magic of Magnolias".

A programme of garden visits for the Spring has been sent out to members.

S.E. Branch

Members are much saddened at the death of Logan Edgar. A stalwart of the Group, the SE Branch committee would like to state their appreciation of all that he did for the SE branch and for camellias, and send our sympathy to Doreen. A full obituary will appear in the next Year Book.

Events for Spring 2001 :

Sat. 17th March, 6pm, Ardingly College. Mark Flanagan will talk to us about his work as Keeper of the Savill and Valley gardens at Windsor, after our usual Buffet supper.

Sat. 21st April, Ardingly College. Spring Show. Staging 11 -1, buffet lunch with video, viewing from 2.30ish. Nursery stands. Exhibitors from outside the Group are more than welcome

Sat. 28th April, 2pm. Visit to Val Fleming's garden at Stonewall Park, near Penshurst.

Sat. 14th July. Propagation day at Mike Robinson's house near East Grinstead. Practical, with help available, so suits beginners and experts alike. Cuttings and grafting. Interesting and unusual material available.

Other branches and non-members always welcome at any of these events. Ring John Hilliard, 01293 522859.

Wessex Branch

We gathered, appropriately, at Wisley on November 24 to hear Jim Gardiner talk on the developments at Wisley since 1990. Together with excellent slides he explained that Wisley is divided into various departments with superintendents overseeing all the necessary work and developments. Each section had so many new and ongoing projects and improvements that we were all amazed that so much work was being undertaken by only around 80 garden staff.

Mr. Gardiner then gave examples of projects each department had in progress, had completed or had in the pipeline. He is to be congratulated together with all the superintendents and staff on the excellent work over the last ten years. They are fully worthy of the English Tourist Council Tourist Attraction of the Year Award.

Thank you Jim for a talk which will not be bettered.

6 May Annual Branch Show

3 June Visit to members gardens details from Richard Thornton, Sandy Slopes, Honeysuckle Lane Headley Down, Hants GU35 8EH

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