

# the Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia group

Patron: HRH The former Prince of Wales

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## CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

I started to write about the unusual weather that we have had in 2023 but then realised that I always seem to write about the weather being unusual, recently especially. Perhaps I need to accept that we live in a country with a temperate climate where the weather does vary on a regular basis. Luckily the variations I am thinking of are quite minor and not like the hurricanes and other extreme climatic events that are becoming increasingly common in some countries.

## Events

Covid shut down our face-to-face events but we are now well past that time and the branches have organised a number of interesting events this year with more to come in 2024. Wessex Branch has organised a weekend event this November. This may be a route forward that other branches might consider since it gives members a longer opportunity to have meaningful conversations than a shorter meeting does. It may even get more general notice by the public, which may bring in new members. Not that long ago, the Autumn Weekend was an annual event and a much enjoyed get-together with our friends in the International Camellia Society.

Thinking of branches made me realise that we only have six to cover the whole of England & Wales – a small number covering a very wide area and concentrated in the south of course. If anyone would like to establish a branch in an area where there is no coverage at the moment then the committee will be very happy to give advice and help. Just contact me in the first instance.

## Volunteers

We still have vacancies for Yearbook Lead Editor and Events Co-ordinator. All the evidence is that the lack of volunteers will get worse in the future and this is very concerning. Without volunteers we will probably have to start paying for certain functions. So we are likely to be stuck between lowering services or increasing subscriptions to pay for them. Neither option is attractive so can I make a plea that if you do have any time that you could offer to the Group, please make contact with me.

## Emails

The world is progressively switching to electronic communications and we are part of that world. We will be sending you more information in this form in the future. We therefore want to ensure that we have the correct email address information for you. We have email addresses for all but a few members. However, we have no idea whether these have changed and we have not been notified. It matters! So on December 18th we will be sending a test message to everyone and if you do not receive it please contact Pam Hayward

*If anyone would like to establish a new branch we will be very happy to help.*



*Magnolia* 'Black Beauty' × *M.* 'Red Baron' at Hergest Croft.  
(See the historical note on Magnolias at Hergest Croft p2)  
Photo: Rowan Griffiths

[pam@woodtown.net](mailto:pam@woodtown.net) with your current email address. Obviously please feel free to let us know your current address at any time.

Graham Mills (01326 280382 [chairman@rhodogroup-rhs.org](mailto:chairman@rhodogroup-rhs.org))

## EDITOR'S NOTES

Here in Herefordshire we have enjoyed a mild and damp autumn – thankfully not as wet as other parts of the UK. Several rhododendrons are in bloom unseasonably and the *Sasanqua* camellias are just starting to flower.

If you are driven indoors by the rain or to seek warmth would you consider writing a piece for this publication? The *Bulletin* depends on your contributions: short or longer pieces on your own gardens or visits you have made. Looking at photo collections on your computer or ancient boxes of transparencies could stir your memories. Share these with our other readers by emailing [bulletin@rhodogroup-rhs.org](mailto:bulletin@rhodogroup-rhs.org). The copy date for the March *Bulletin* No 144 is Jan 31st 2024.

Peter Furneaux

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## Subscription Renewals

The Group's membership year commences on 1 November and those members who pay by Direct Debit may need to be reminded that the unfamiliar EAZYCOLLECT entry on their bank statement relates to their renewal payment. (Easy Collect Services Ltd are the company we have used to manage our Direct Debit collections since we first offered this payment method.)

If your subscription is due for renewal by any other method you will have already received an email notification along with the relevant forms and details of the various ways of making your renewal payment.

If you have decided to take up Joint Membership and pay by Direct Debit DO remember to cancel your single payment.

Thank you for your continued support for the Group.

## Introduce a friend or a garden for a Christmas Membership Present

Have you considered joining a friend or a family member, or even a local garden that might appreciate an annual RCMG membership – as a Christmas Present? Individual membership starts from £20.00 a year if paying by Direct Debit and Garden Membership is only £30.00 per year.

Surely someone who has a passion for rhododendrons, camellias or magnolias would really appreciate the gift of membership for Christmas – please do consider this and help support our RCMG! Thank you!

Philip Eastell

## MEMBERS' NOTES

### Historical note on Magnolias at Hergest Croft

As I put pen to paper (today is the 4th of March) Hergest Croft has undergone something of a transformation. As one approaches the garden, suddenly sugar pinks pop out, from tall *Magnolia campbellii* over 18m tall, the white of *M. salicifolia* 'Windsor Beauty' and *M. kobus*, and parchment *M. denudata* emerging through the treescape. Rounding the corner, a deeper pink, bordering that shade Magnoliaphiles call red, from a recent hybrid of *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta* x *M. campbellii*, greets the eye and beyond this the first purple-red stains of 'Galaxy' and the deeper claret of 'Black Tulip' begin to appear ... and on and on. Strange to imagine that fifty years ago all one was likely to apprehend from beyond the garden fence this early in the year were the many shades and textures of conifers, which now serve as an excellent foil to the multiplicity of magnolias.

How did this change come about then? It was thought by Lawrence Banks that his grandfather Will (Willie) Hartland Banks had presumed the garden too cold for many Asiatic species. His magnolia legacy in the garden at Hergest Croft is largely reduced to two mature *M. x soulangeana*, both recorded by Bruce Jackson in 1930, and though no planting dates for these are given it is likely they were planted between 1900 and 1920. One grows on the south wall of the house, and given Dorothy and Willie's propensity for gardening (the rockery was being laid out before the house was complete),



*Magnolia kobus*

it is suggestive that this would have been a very early acquisition. Another early *M. x soulangeana* is our old and rather gnarled 'Lennei' which was bought in 1912 from 'Smith', likely to be the Daisy Hill Nursery set up by Thomas Smith of Newry. It was improved by the removal of a nearby tall conifer in 1980 and has flowered regularly ever since. *Magnolia x soulangeana* has a claim to be the most iconic of the genus, a shorthand for 'magnolia in the public consciousness'. Lawrence's view was that '*Magnolias have been the single most important addition to English gardens since the Chevalier Étienne de Soulange-Bodin made his famous cross of M. denudata x M. liliiflora, in around 1817. You can barely drive along any English town road without seeing their floriferous but elegant flowers.*' John Guille Millais observed '*hundreds in English gardens scattered all over the Home Counties and the south-west*'. The Chevalier, an officer in Napoleon's army, gave this arresting account of his interest in gardening, writing in 1819:

*'It is to this that I cheerfully devote the remainder of my life. It must be confessed that for the last thirty years great obstacles have presented themselves to the simple care which the earth demands. I shall not retrace the sad picture of the past-alike by the beaters and the beaten, the statues of Flora and Pomona were quickly thrown down and substituted by that of Bellona. The Germans have encamped in my garden. I have encamped in the gardens of the Germans; and it was with sword in hand that I visited the botanical collection of Schönbrunn (Vienna), Schauenburg (near Minden), Stuttgart and Petrowski (Moscow). I have said of others as they have said of me: Barbarus per segetes! It had doubtless been better for both parties to have staid at home and planted their Cabbages. We are returned there, and the rising taste for gardening becomes one of the most agreeable guarantees of the repose of the world.'*

Millais was compelled to include this passage in *Magnolias* published in Britain in 1927, and with the shadow of the Great War still hanging heavily, wrote elsewhere in that volume '*To some it is a sinister and dreadful world because too lately we have passed through a period of anger, hatred, misery and oppression.*' The poignancy of these words, separated by almost a century of two pioneering Magnoliaphiles, is felt more acutely from our contemporary perspective when conflict once again stains Europe. The succour that all whom practise the simple act of growing and tending a garden is no small comfort to be overlooked.



Other species recorded by Jackson in the garden include *M. acuminata* from Hillier planted in 1921 and measured as 60' x 10'2" in 1930. Unfortunately, Lawrence's father Richard 'Dick' Alford Banks notes 'Cut down to relieve *Acer griseum* 1969'. The *A. griseum* later succumbed to honey fungus in the 1990s. Oh, how much easier gardening is with hindsight. Willie also planted *M. tripetala* nearby in 1903, which survived until around 1980, coming through the years of 'Care and Maintenance' from Dorothy's death in 1937 to Dick's taking up permanent residence here in 1953. We are now on the third generation of seedlings raised from Willie's *M. sieboldii* which have never proved to possess great longevity here. Recorded by Jackson under *M. parviflora*, seedlings were raised from the original plant on the lawn in 1980 and planted out in 1986; we then raised another batch in 2010 to replace those. Perhaps the greatest survivor in the garden is a small and rather ugly shaped *M. stellata* bought from Veitch and planted in 1913. After two original plants were badly damaged by snow, one was scrapped in 1970 and the other which very nearly received a death sentence (after successful cuttings were growing elsewhere) was given a reprieve by Elizabeth Banks. Later the RHS Committee B confirmed that High Beeches has the same plant from Veitch, as does Caerhays.



*Magnolia campbellii* bought from Reuthe in 1926

Investigations of WHB's 'Fat green notebook' illuminate that after his purchase of the 29-acre Park Wood in 1912 he was becoming more adventurous regarding the presumed hardiness of species. In 1924 he planted two *M. obovata* from Reuthe's Nursery, and from Veitch in October of 1926 he added *M. delavayi* and *M. salicifolia*; this order also contained the tender pineapple guava *Feijoa sellowiana*. Perhaps most evident of his ambition with these tender plants are his attempts to grow *Rhododendron sinonuttallii* (now a synonym of *R. nuttallii*). One of these – Forrest's 20388 from Hillier in 1924 – bears the unsurprising note 'planted out 1927 – killed same winter'. Willie's frustration compelled him to contact J C Williams in 1929 asking if he would consider selling Olde Tretheake Mill, West Portholland, Tregony, in order that he 'might be able to raise shrub seedlings there as Herefordshire winters were too cold' to avoid losses. Willie died in 1930. Although none of the above plants are still extant in the garden, Dick recorded one of the *M. obovata* surviving in 1984, as well as *M. x wieseneri* bought as *M. watsonii* from E J P Magor of Lamellen in 1924. A few trees were more successful. He bought from Hillier in 1926 the American species *M. macrophylla*, which although overcrowded has survived to the present day. Another *M.*

*campbellii* from Reuthe similarly overcrowded was also planted in 1926. It had never been known to flower until at least 1984.



*Magnolia x veitchii* 'Peter Veitch'

I asked Lawrence about this, noticing it in flower (I suspect not its first time) in 2020; he could not recall seeing it in flower before. I only wish I could report that it was worth the 94-year wait but I don't think it is especially remarkable. The most spectacular remnant from this early period is *M. x veitchii* 'Peter Veitch', now some 17m and 133cm in girth and flowers profusely.

In a previous article I made much of the Leon Chenault–Ernest Wilson connection which was greatly to our benefit in the 1920s. One of the genera Wilson singled out for Chenault's attention were his magnolias. We were puzzled that there did not seem to be any Wilson magnolias amongst our Chenault accessions and made a happy discovery to find in Willie's 'green book' that he did indeed receive *M. dawsoniana* and *M. wilsonii* in 1925; sadly neither survive, though Jackson recorded *M. wilsonii* in his catalogue after 1930. Perhaps Wilson's concerns for their hardiness in Massachusetts were more justified than current wisdom would have us believe of these hardier species. Younger plants of *M. wilsonii* have thrived here: a stand of trees planted in 1977 on a bank show off the hanging blooms to their best effect from the path below. Though originally these were seedlings of the elusive *M. sinensis* from the Countess d'Orlandes

*Continued overleaf*



*Magnolia wilsonii*



around 1970 they became inextricably mixed up with *M. wilsonii* from David Evans of Ffwydgrech (Breconshire). I now believe they are all in fact *M. wilsonii*.

Dick contributed significant magnolia specimens both to Park Wood and the garden. It was Dr Jimmy Smart of Marwood Hill who encouraged him to try camellias outside and the success of these may well have emboldened him with other plants previously considered too tender. In 1966 a seedling of *M. campbellii* 'Alba' was brought home from Caerhays, a gift from Julian Williams. It was found a sheltered spot in the garden and now exceeds 19 metres; the beetles had clearly been to work however as it bears loose pink blooms and flowers slightly later than our other *M. campbellii*, leading Lawrence to the judgement that it may be a Raffillii Group hybrid. Another plant of *M. 'Charles Raffill'* was bought from Treseder's in 1970, however when it flowered in 1982 the flowers were in Dick's words '*disappointing in that the tepals are nearly white with purple base*' I feel this was perhaps a little harsh, and when this tree was badly damaged, standing on only half its trunk, it looked as though its demise was inevitable. Elizabeth came to the rescue again advocating inertia, an approach Dick was wont to follow in gardening matters. As we will encounter repeatedly, we've discovered all magnolias are masochists. The tree is still with us and is always the first into bloom, those first flowers signify the earliest herald of spring, although it is often a false prophet.



*Magnolia campbellii* 'Charles Raffill' bought from Treseders in 1970

Dick also planted several *M. x loebneri* from Hilliers: 'Merrill' in 1969 and 'Leonard Messel' in 1974, all of which form an important part of the spring tapestry. The parent species *M. kobus* was bought from Knap Hill in 1963 and certainly appears on the willowier end of the spectrum for this species, forming a contorted tree with smaller flowers and leaves than other examples I've seen. I'm not sure where *M. kobus* ends and *M. salicifolia* begins but ours seems a little intermediate.

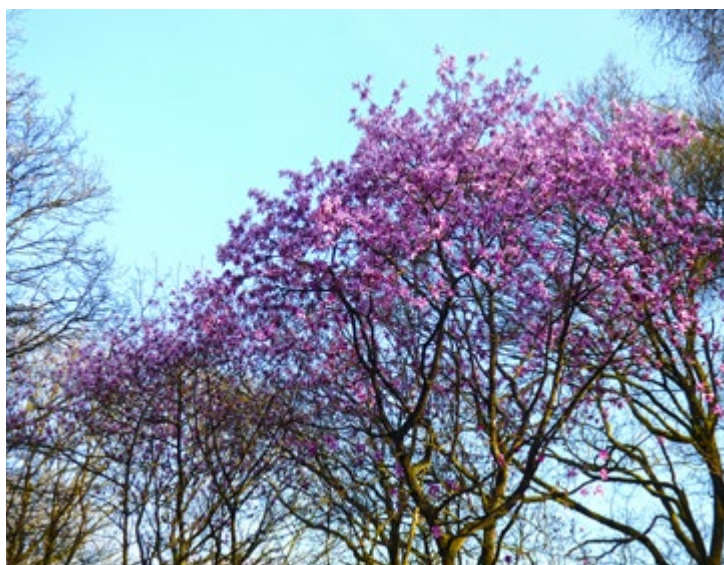
Dick's greatest devotion was to the Park Wood and it is here where his legacy is most keenly felt. Several huge Yulania members announce themselves through the tracery of leafless oaks many yards before one reaches the valley of rhododendrons. Chief amongst these is the Raffillii Group hybrid bought from Hillier's in 1973; it had not yet flowered by 1984. On April 5th, 1991, after the hot summer of 1990 it flowered for the first time profusely and without frost. The colour is a lovely clear dark blue-pink and much the same overall. Five blooms were taken to a Garden Society dinner, eighteen years after planting, Lawrence subsequently named the tree for his father *M. 'Dick Banks'*.



*Magnolia* 'Dick Banks'

It tends to flower well every other year. Upon making enquiries as to its potential origin, Harold was known to have obtained seed '*from a Cornish garden*'!? There is also a curious observation that grey squirrels have been seen eating the buds; I wonder if other members have noted this phenomenon. Growing alongside this giant ('Dick Banks' now measures over 20 metres) is a curiosity bought from Roger Grounds as *M. dawsoniana*. It had not flowered by 1995 but by 2005 was flowering well; the consensus is that it is either a hybrid or just possibly *M. sargentiana* though not var. *robusta*. It flowers now regularly and prolifically with deep red outer tepals. Our *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta* must be one of the last purchases from Reuthe's nursery in 1957. Despite being moved in 1982 because of overcrowding, and suffering in the drought of 1984, it is now a formidable tree. It is interesting that although the magnolias were some of the first trees to show early leaf drop in last year's extreme summer temperatures and drought, we have lost few as a consequence, with several showing dieback but breaking new growth all down the older wood. Magnolias appear to survive drought better than one might initially imagine, proving once again their ability to survive all manner of mistreatment.

It is not clear exactly when Willie's *M. obovata* and *M x wieseneri* met their demise after 1984, but it seems likely that it could have been during the cold winter of 1986 which was followed by the



The unlikely *Magnolia dawsoniana* flowering alongside *M. 'Dick Banks'*



'big freeze' of '87. Dick, it seems, had certainly had his magnolia ambitions checked, and the prevailing wisdom at the time was that it was too cold for many species and cultivars to grow here. Lawrence, who by this time had taken on the responsibility for the gardens at Hergest Croft, had his own ideas. On April 7th, 1988, a collection of magnolias arrived from Otto Eisenhut. Despite Elizabeth's initial perturbation (feeling at the time that a nursery full of trees ready to go out did not necessarily need bulking out with an order of magnolias) she now feels it was the best thing they could have done. Lawrence evidently picked well, with six of the initial eight surviving to form significant trees in the garden. It will take too long to enumerate their individual merits but these now well-known varieties bear mentioning as a significant starting point for the new



*Magnolia* 'Pegasus' bought from Otto Eisenhut in 1988

era of magnolia introduction to Hergest: *M.* 'Forrest's Pink' (bought erroneously as *M. denudata* 'Forrest's Pink'), *M.* 'Sayonara', *M. x soulangeana* 'Sundew' (a particularly finely proportioned tree), *M.* 'Joe McDaniel', *M.* 'Pegasus' (like many others sold as *M. cylindrica*), and *M. obovata* 'Pink Flush' (although extremely slow growing, it has flowered and continues to survive rather than thrive).

Encouraged by early success, Lawrence made another order in 1993, this time including *M.* 'Mark Jury' which proved an unsatisfactory plant here as the buds were always damaged, maybe by frost. 'Mark Jury' was used as a pollen parent by Felix Jury on many of the of the earlier Jury hybrids, which might explain our struggles with others such as 'Vulcan'. The parentage of 'Vulcan' is described as *M. liliiflora* hybrid × *M. campbellii* 'Lanarth', although 'Mark Jury' was supplied to Felix as *M. campbellii* 'Lanarth' by Hilliers – is it possible that it could be a parent of 'Vulcan'? Putting the relationship between these two Jury hybrids aside, Lawrence's struggles with both trees over the years are clear in the below extracts from his monthly newsletter.

April 2008: 'The early Jury hybrids from New Zealand such as *M.* 'Mark Jury' and *M.* 'Vulcan' that never develop proper flowers for us and as the Red Queen said, "off with their heads"; they each occupy too good a position in the garden and will not be around to irritate me next spring!'

April 2009: 'For about the last five years I have been threatening to cut down two of the newer *Magnolia* hybrids, 'Mark Jury' on the Sycamore Walk and 'Vulcan' on the east side of the lower Lawn, both products of breeding by one of the great modern *Magnolia* breeders, Felix Jury in New Zealand. They have previously proved to be bud tender and

despite huge promising buds have produced misshapen and damaged flowers. This year they have been magnificent though slightly marred by early April frosts. I thought that the cold winter would have made the bud problems worse rather than better but quite the reverse!'

April 2014: 'It looks as if it is going to be a good and early flowering year for *Magnolias*; what is exciting is that many of the new hybrids raised from seed are now reaching flowering size and it will be exciting to see how good they are; can we find anything to rival the spectacular *M.* 'Dick Banks' in Park Wood? Many of them will be all right but not that special and some will be just plain boring and will need chainsaw treatment; one that has gone is *Magnolia* 'Vulcan' which promised much but never performed here despite being a star in New Zealand where it was raised.'

As for the promise of new hybrids to equal *M.* 'Dick Banks', I'm not sure we're there just yet, but two plants from Philippe de Spoelberch's experiments in 1996 hybridising *M.* 'Purple Breeze' are certainly showing great promise. 'Purple Breeze' itself was bought by Philippe from Esveld as *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta* but was likely a seedling with some other blood, possibly *M. sprengeri*. The cross that has proved so successful here is with *M.* 'Anne Rosse' (*M. denudata* seedling originally from Nymans, the pollen parent a likely nearby *M. sargentiana*). Philippe himself had registered one of these hybrids in 2011 named 'Marguerite' for his granddaughter. Lawrence decided to finally register our plants early last year, reluctant to name any plant whose quality had not been proven over a number of years. Following Philippe's example, Lawrence named the two forms for his granddaughters.

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Two superior hybrids of *Magnolia* 'Purple Breeze' crossed with *M.* 'Anne Rosse', now registered as 'Lucy' (above) and 'Esther' (below)



'Lucy' bears quite a degree of resemblance to 'Marguerite' though is perhaps a touch darker, whereas 'Esther' is quite different for a sister seedling; although an individual flower is not quite as impressive, the overall impression of the tree is of a pink 'Wada's Memory' on steroids!

Two white hybrids of *M. 'David Clulow'* (*M. soulangeana* 'Lennei Alba' x *M. x veitchii* 'Rubra') also made by Philippe in 1996, are similarly worthy of a name. A cross made with *M. 'Anne Rosse'* has a very nice form, betraying none of its 'Lennei' parentage and the flowers have a curious green basal stain which led Lawrence to nickname it 'Green Goddess'. The original tree was badly damaged when a two hundred-year-old sycamore fell on it. However, it has shot back and is now a neat pyramidal tree which flowers reliably every year, late enough to avoid the threat of frost.

The other is a cross with *M. 'Leda'* (a seedling of *M. 'Pegasus'* probably with *M. campbellii*). Lawrence's breakdown of this complex hybrid was 40% *denudata* 25% *campbellii* 25% *cylindrica* 10% *liliflora*, entering what Nick Dunn dubbed, when describing the complexity of new *Malus* cultivars, the 'mongrel phase' of hybridisation. This tree was one of several magnolias badly damaged in the November 2007 snow and had a very ugly form but splendid, large pure white scented flowers which hang down from horizontal buds. Something of a problem child as it seems to be a sprawler and maybe bud tender (an *M. 'Leda'* legacy) but a wonderful flower resembling *M. 'Albatross'*. By 2014 the pruning work had been successful, and the tree was deemed 'a keeper', since when the flowers are borne considerably higher and have avoided the frost. Both trees are fine examples of their willingness to regenerate. Millais observed '*M. grandiflora* ... is very apt to have the branches broken in heavy falls of snow. When such a disaster occurs the plant has, like most of the Magnolias, a wonderful recuperative power and will often break away into freedom'.

At least two others at this present time are making a strong case for clonal names, both of which are something of a return to classical forms and neither look suitable for the small garden. In April 1988 Lawrence gave away the prizes at the Truro Show and visited a number of gardens, and at Trewithen he bought a seedling of *Magnolia sargentiana* var. *robusta* 'Alba' (possibly an erroneous name). This was planted in the newly established Maple Grove. One flower was produced in 2004 which had a pale pink flush, followed by a bumper crop in 2010 almost pure white. John Gallagher saw the plant in flower and thought it might be a white *M. campbellii*; Jim Gardiner thought it may be a *M. campbellii* hybrid. Lawrence thought, after it caused a stir at the Garden Society in 2016, that it may be worth naming and propagating. Unfortunately, it seems no action was taken and recent efforts to have scions grafted have so far failed. This is especially worrying as the original tree has now become cramped for room and suffered in recent droughts. Its chief attribute is the size of the flowers which are held upright as in *M. campbellii* and perhaps more significantly are very large.

The other is a plant of perhaps similar parentage but murkier origins producing large 'Red' flowers similar to that of 'Darjeeling', though a truer 'Red' so with obvious *M. campbellii* influence; it came as a seedling of *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta*. This has been successfully grafted and distributed around and the parent is in good fettle.

Some species stubbornly refused repeated attempts and are unlikely to ever do very well here. Our catalogue tells a sorry story from 1985 to 2020 of four separate occasions *M. globosa* has been lost in



The magnolia bought as *Magnolia sargentiana* var. *robusta* 'Alba' in 1988

the winter; the last of these with the assistance of a roe deer. Though such a lovely species as this surely warrants a fifth attempt. Two *M. rostrata* raised from seed in 1997 were planted out in 2000 and pronounced dead in 2004, whereas the closely related *M. officinalis* has fared somewhat better in the Park Wood since 2003.

Other less showy, newer species planted by Lawrence that appear to be perfectly hardy here include *M. biondii*, *M. zenii*, and *M. amoena*. Of this group of similar, smaller flowered Yulanias the only one I'm confident is true to type is *M. biondii* whereas we grow at least two separate forms of *M. zenii* that produce very different flowers: one has larger, almost pure white upright flowers (and I suspect is a hybrid), the other produces crumpled diminutive flowers with a pink stain which are more attractive than this description suggests, especially when produced in abundance. It was a great comfort for me to read Philippe's comment on TSO (*Trees and Shrubs Online*) that '*plants of amoena, biondii and zenii are all very mixed with 6 or 9 petaloid tepals, small and very early. Other than that, I see nothing significant to distinguish what we have in cultivation*'.

*Magnolia* previously grown as *Michelia* have also proved to be valuable garden plants. *M. laevifolia* (formerly *Michelia yunnanensis*), a well-known and extremely variable species, does well here as it does in most places; our best selection is a form introduced from Tregrehan.



*Magnolia laevifolia* (formerly *Michelia yunnanensis*) from Tregrehan



Another of Tom Hudson's collections – *M. sphaerantha* TH904 – looks as though it has the potential to outshine the rest; this tree was flowering well from quite a young age, only planted in 2012.

Unfortunately the tree suffered a severe setback when a champion *Abies nephrolepis* collapsed onto it last year. Abundant summer regrowth was then cut back during the winter and I await to see if anything comes from beneath the ground. Fortunately, most of these evergreen species come readily from semi-ripe cuttings and plants are growing on in the nursery. *Magnolia lacei*, which came as *Michelia pachycarpa* (I always wondered what was so elephantine about the



*Magnolia sphaerantha* TH904

seeds) from Kunming Botanic garden seed via Tom at the same time, continues to put on huge amounts of growth but stubbornly refuses to flower. Nonetheless, so far it has not been bothered by our winters. A plant that has perhaps promised more than it delivers is *M. x foggii* 'Jack Fogg' (*M. doltsopa* x *M. figo*). Although a regular flowerer with its dusty pink blooms, I'm always frustrated that they never seem to open fully, and the scent is not as good as *M. laevifolia* or *M. sphaerantha*.

John Gallagher made many magnolia contributions to the garden, significantly through two collections of new hybrids, some of his own making in 1998 and 2014. Many of the latter group have yet to flower, however, of the former all are now significant trees, including our largest true *M. cylindrica* and a fine *M.* 'Raspberry Ice' (which could be a seedling) along with some yet unnamed trees to which John attributed numbers. One of these came here as 'White Al', a beautifully scented *M. denudata* I was happy to run to ground recently.

I believe this to either be a sister seedling or extremely early graft of *M.* 'Scented Gem', which was named by John and Kevin Hughes in the early 2000s. This was a selection from a batch of seedlings that were originally collected from a tree growing in the grounds of a Korean temple. It does very much resemble those plants Kevin grafted, one of which grows in John Marston's garden at Gorwell, bought in 2014. Though it is clear our plant must predate these, and I don't see any obvious signs of a grafting having taken place.

It is impossible to enumerate all the exciting magnolias Lawrence added to the garden; our catalogue now boasts some 223 living accessions for the genus. As so often, these things boil down to matters of taste and we were wont to argue over certain plants with regularity. I always felt underwhelmed by *M.* 'Peppermint Stick', a Gresham



*Magnolia x foggii* 'Jack Fogg'

hybrid with enough *M. liliiflora* to make it somewhat ungainly and flowers that stay a little too tightly closed. Lawrence, however, having nursed the tree through snow damage and a falling conifer in the late '90s was rather more forgiving of its flaws. Conversely our *M.* 'Charles Coates' I gave the reprieve from the chainsaw on more than one occasion because, despite its refusal to grow as a good single stemmed tree and Lawrence's scepticism that the 'crumpled' tepals were more of a curiosity than an ornament, I've always had a soft spot for the Oyama section and this hybrid of *M. sieboldii* with *M. tripetala* is for me 'a keeper'.



The beautifully scented magnolia acquired as 'White Al', which is possibly *Magnolia* 'Scented Gem'

Often, however, our opinions were aligned and the fashion for new colour breaks we both felt had produced some real monsters, none more so than a hybrid of *M.* 'Black Beauty' x *M.* 'Red Baron' we raised from Magnolia Society seed. This surprising combination of pink, yellow and green does attract favourable attention from many visitors. *De gustibus non est disputandum*.

It is fortune indeed to be gardening in such times and although I do sometimes wonder if issues of identification may not have been more cut and dried in the past. Certainly, we are faced with more choice than ever. Millais describing *M. denudata* 'is only struck with surprise that every garden in the South of England does not possess such a

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*Magnolia* 'Charles Coates' is an early summer-flowering favourite magnificent object of beauty'. Though this has yet to transpire (I'm of the opinion that this species is still too seldom seen), however it is not unusual now to see interesting and improved hybrids gaining popularity in the gardens of the nation. Yellow hybrids, once the preserve of collectors, can be seen frequently in smaller gardens. *M. 'Daphne'* bred by Philippe de Spoelberch is the best yellow here, though perhaps 'Yellow Bird' with smaller flowers betraying its *M. acuminata* parentage is an even purer yellow.



*Magnolia* 'Daphne', maybe the best yellow at Hergest Croft

Honourable mentions to *M. 'Fei Huang'* ('Yellow River') and *M. 'Elizabeth'*, the original and although no longer the best 'Yellow', it has withstood the scrutiny of time.

JC Williams is reported to have written to Collingwood Ingram when he was pensioned early from the army and needed an interest: *'You should start crossing rhododendrons. It is the greatest fun – you have 10, 15 or 20 years of joyful anticipation and only one day of disappointment – the day they open their first flowers!'* This is a quote Lawrence was fond of recalling. Magnolias are no exception to this patient approach and consequently we are still awaiting the first flowerings of many hybrids. Two which I suspect will not disappoint are *M. 'Colossus'* x *M. 'Oriental Charm'*, a hybrid of section Oyama with *Rhytidosperrum*, which promises to be a scented beauty and another cross of two now superseded genera – *Parakmeria* with a *Manglietia* – *M. yunnanensis* x *M. insignis*, which I feared might be too tender for us, is growing away well.

Some grafted plants also require a degree of patience: in 2011 we were given by Jim Gardiner some forms of wild collected *M. sprengeri* collected by Dr Erland Ejder, together with Prof. Kang Yongxiang of the Agriculture and Forestry University in Yangling, Shaanxi, China. This includes *M. sprengeri* var. *diva* 'High Haven' collected from SW Hubei, very close to the Hunan border. 'High Haven' is the name of the residence of the British Secret Service near the top of The Peak (traditionally known as Hong Kong's Olympus – as told by John le Carré in *The Honourable Schoolboy*).

Only this year a young *M. rostrata* seedling emerged from my RCM seed order to eventually find its way into the garden, hopefully with more success than those of that species that have gone before, and with this eternal optimism the garden looks forward to the next one hundred and twenty six years.

Rowan Griffiths

Photos by the author.

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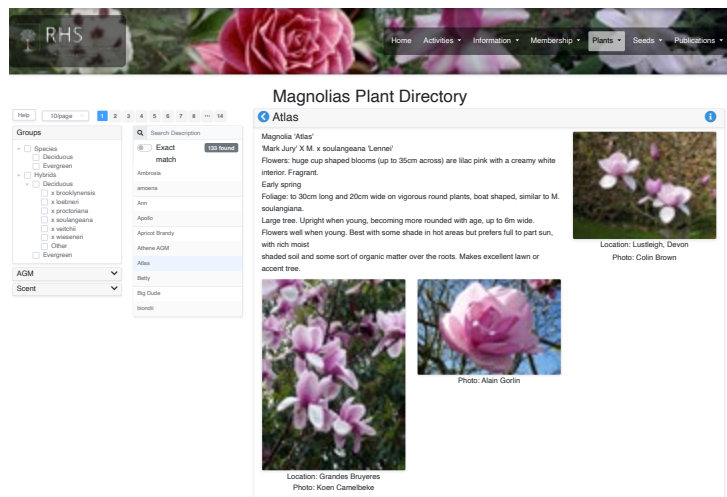


## International Branch

### a note to members from the Branch Chairman

The RCMG's Plant Directory, located on the Group's website, is an ever-expanding resource covering our three genera and providing useful information to support correct naming, identification, and plant cultivation for both our members and the wider public just getting into rhododendrons, magnolias and camellias.

The Plant Directory's development is led by the Group's Vice-Chairman, Barry Cooke, who with Polly, his wife and former Group Secretary, has been adding to and updating existing entries, particularly for rhododendrons.



Now with additional focus on increasing the number of entries for camellias and magnolias, we want to encourage any of our International Branch members who feel they may be interested in contributing their knowledge to expanding entries of any of our three genera, but particularly those on camellias and magnolias, to reach out to Barry Cooke who can provide additional details. Email: [vc@rhodogroup-rhs.org](mailto:vc@rhodogroup-rhs.org)

*Rama Lopez-Rivera*

International Branch Chairman

## New Forest Branch

### Garden visit to Sculpture by the Lakes, Dorchester 18th May 2023

Monique and Simon Gudgeon kindly invited RCMG members to a guided tour of their garden, Sculpture by the Lakes. Since acquiring the 26-acre site in 2007, they have transformed it into a setting for over 120 sculptures created by Simon and his team of makers. Not to be outdone, Monique has collected over 2,500 trees and shrubs which she has planted around the edges of the three spring-fed lakes.

It was her ambition to achieve international recognition for the living collection and the first stage was to become a Level II accredited arboretum <http://arbnet.org/morton-register/sculpture-lakes>. Whilst the collection includes interesting specimens of the three genera of interest to our group, the focus has mainly been on threatened conifers such as *Xanthocyparis vietnamensis*.

In recognition of the exemplary standard of professional care given to these, both Kew and the Edinburgh Botanic Garden have



New Forest Branch members enjoying their visit to Sculpture by the Lakes

donated plants as part of the International Conifer Conservation Programme. Shortly after our visit, it was announced that Sculpture by the Lakes had been awarded BGCI Botanic Garden Status <https://www.bgci.org/>. There are only seven other accredited botanic gardens in the UK, including Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Cambridge University Botanic Garden, the Botanical Garden of Wales and the Eden Project, so this is a remarkable achievement for one of our members.

*Emma Page*

Photos by Rosemary Legrand.



*Magnolia x wieseneri* 'William Watson'





South West Branch members paying great attention in the 'Bring and Tell' session at the Autumn Meeting at RHS Rosemoor

## South West Branch

### RCMG SW Branch Autumn Meeting, RHS Rosemoor 28th October 2023

The South West Branch held its annual Autumn Meeting and AGM in the Learning Centre at RHS Rosemoor on Saturday 28th October and over 40 branch members, affiliates and guests came along. There was a great diversity of ages and levels of experience represented which bodes well for the future of the Branch.

The day followed the usual programme of events which has been tried and tested over several years and has always proved enjoyable. The plant sales, donations to the Raffle, and prize for the quiz were all donated through the generosity of our members, for which we are most grateful. The plant sales did brisk business with three of our members setting up stalls of their own with unusual plants on offer.

The 'Bring and Tell' session always throws up a great many different subjects and this year was no different: the history behind *Rhododendron* 'Sir Charles Lemon', peat free composts, the sizes and shapes of camellia seed capsules, and the rarest plant on the planet (allegedly) – *Deppea splendens* brought by Russell Beeson.

Our guest speaker, Seamus O'Brien the Curator of the National Botanic Gardens of Ireland at Kilmacurragh, had also brought a variety of specimens to talk about, and the star of his selection was undoubtedly the wonderful Chinese conifer, *Cathaya argyrophylla*.

A good number of attendees had a go at the quiz, I was pleased to see, and the Raffle made good money for the Branch, with excellent and tempting prizes from our genera.

After lunch there was the distribution of Raffle prizes and the answers to the quiz, followed by a short AGM.

We were then joined by some Rosemoor staff, including young gardeners, for Seamus O'Brien's talk on his botanising expedition to Sikkim in the footsteps of Joseph Hooker, which combined episodes of reasonably easy plant hunting with arduous mountaineering at the end to reach the high altitude of Donkiah La where only lichens are able to survive. They were skirting around Kanchendzonga,



Russell Beeson wows the audience with rare and exotic *Deppea splendens*



the second highest mountain in the world, and visited places that Joseph Hooker had also been to in the 1850s, some of which had hardly changed.

Old sketches (many by Hooker himself) were juxtaposed with photographs taken on the expedition. One stood out for me: an enormous and distinctively shaped rock with local tribespeople sitting in a group below it. A photograph taken on the expedition showed an almost identical scene, and the descendants of those people were amazed to see the Hooker etching with their ancestors under the same rock. There are areas as yet unexplored which could hold new species waiting to be discovered.

It was a fitting end to our day and there were many expressions of enjoyment by the departing members.

We are as ever indebted to the staff at RHS Rosemoor for their hospitality and support.

*John Marston*

Photos by the author.



Seamus O'Brien describes the landscape of the Yumthang Valley, Sikkim

## POST-AGM REPORT

### Garden Visit to Pen-Y-Graig

14th May 2023



The glorious view from Colin Mugridge's garden Pen-Y-Graig

The following is a report of a garden visit made after this year's AGM and Centenary Cup Competition at Ness Botanic Gardens. We were all invited to visit Colin Mugridge and his family's garden in North Wales.

The directions to the garden, along tiny Welsh lanes, were superb, right down to the instruction to get 'to a post box on a stick and then follow the sunflower signage up a steep hill'. How they grew sunflowers for May is a well-guarded secret.

The garden is nestled in a picturesque valley with wonderful views. We all gathered in the front garden for tea and Welsh cakes, and were then taken on a guided tour. There were hidden gems at every turn and there were hundreds of those.

Nearly every plant had a Latin name and a story to go with it. Many had been grown from seed in the garden. There were magnificent rhododendron, magnolia, and camellia plants amongst many other genera.

Colin had started the garden 25 years ago and has specialised in hybridising rhododendrons. His garden is where he grows them on and trials them, naming and registering the best, such as 'Bridgewater Beauty' named by the RHS for RHS Bridgewater and 'Ken Hulme' named by Ness Botanic Gardens for their late curator.

*Continued overleaf*



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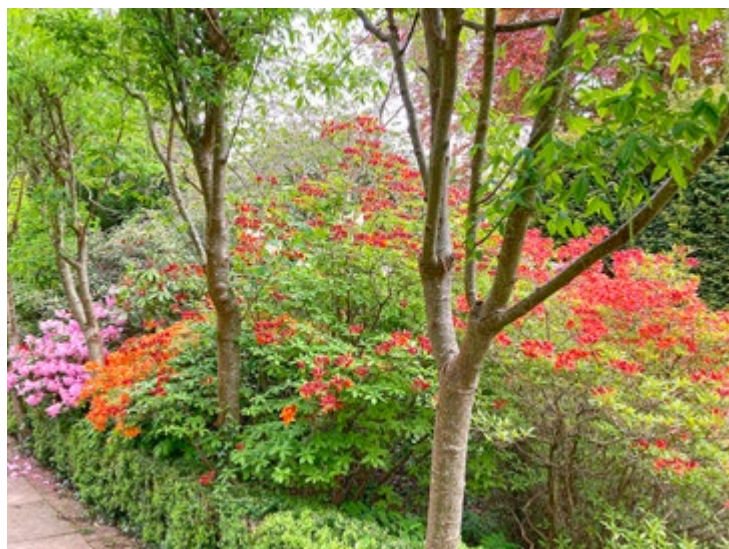
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A riot of well-tended rhododendron and azaleas, thriving in alkaline soil

This was a garden well-loved and with such history, not just of acquisitions but of the generous donations from the garden to others.

A proper garden visit doesn't just end with another cuppa but with a plant for all visitors; ours was almost too big to get into the car for the journey south. It will be treasured here at Tanglewood.

A big thank you to Colin and his family for their hospitality and time showing us their wonderful garden.

I have saved the most extraordinary part 'til last. All the hundreds, possibly thousands of flourishing rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias were as healthy as any to be seen on acid soils; all were grown in a limestone quarry. The soil is pH 7.4 with large limestone boulders and limestone scree.

The reason was explained to be a need for manganese and iron, unavailable to the plant when grown on alkaline soils. Colin has worked with Professor David Rankin on soil chemistry and adds these chemicals as a soluble feed on only very young plants that are recently planted.



Colin Mugridge stands beside a border of beautifully grown rhododendrons



Best in the Hybrid Centenary Cup Class: an unnamed Mugridge beauty

Colin had won the largest class of 68 entries in the Centenary Cup Competition with his, home-bred, unregistered rhododendron hybrid truss, pictured above.

*Barbara Sampson*

Photos by the author



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Find out more at <https://www.sculpturebythelakes.co.uk>



## *Rhododendron* 'Leonardslee Shot Silk'

Work to revive and restore the gardens at Leonardslee continues apace under the enthusiastic care of Head Gardener Jamie Harris and his rhododendron expert, Elliot Chandler.

The latest development is the registration of an outstanding variety, finally named as a mature plant, many years after its raising.

Jamie recounts the story of this rhododendron and its naming:

'This rhododendron is a hybrid between the pale pink and white-flowered *Rhododendron fortunei* ssp. *discolor* and the blood-red *Rhododendron facetum*. It is a large tree-like rhododendron, reaching around 8 metres tall, with reddish-brown smooth bark.

It flowers in June, producing abundant, large globular trusses of bell-shaped flowers that have a satin sheen and show a mix of two colours – coral-pink and fawn-orange, with speckling inside.

It was hybridised by Sir Edmund Loder (date unknown) at Leonardslee; the resulting plants were a favourite of his and he planted many of them across the estate. He called the hybrid 'Shot Silk' because the flowers have a mix of two colours, just like the fabric namesake.

The name had not been registered and the plant was never to our knowledge sold in a nursery, so it is unknown outside of Leonardslee.

By registering this plant, it now officially 'exists' and there is a record of it, making it less likely to be lost to cultivation and enabling us to conserve and propagate it to ensure that this rare and special rhododendron remains at Leonardslee for the future.'

Visitors will be able to see it in flower in June; there are individuals across the gardens, but the most accessible is a group of tree-sized plants near the wallaby enclosure, just next to the veteran Cedar of Lebanon.

Jamie Harris/Pam Hayward



The impressive tree and 'flower power' of newly registered *Rhododendron* 'Leonardslee Shot Silk' Photos: Elliot Chandler



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## An update on *Camellia* 'Felice Harris'

Some of you will be growing the hybrid *Camellia* 'Felice Harris' in your gardens and many more will have seen 'her' on the show bench. An American by birth, emanating from that well-known breeder, Howard Asper, whose other creations include 'Show Girl' and 'Eldorado', Felice's oft-questioned parentage is soon to be updated in the International Camellia Register.

When we are stewarding the various competitions, we have always gone along with the register entry for Felice which states the parentage to be *Camellia sasanqua* 'Narumigata' x *reticulata*. This means it is eligible for the *C. reticulata* hybrid classes where they exist and miscellaneous hybrid classes where they do not.

It is now the consensus of the American Camellia Society that poor Felice was mislabelled, most probably by Howard Asper himself and that she is in their terms a 'non-reticulata'. The parentage now agreed upon as being most likely and firm enough to alter the register, is that she is a *Camellia* x *williamsii* with two entirely different species held up as responsible!

So, for those of you who enter 'Felice Harris' in the competitions to come, take note that she must now take her chances with the *Camellia* x *williamsii* varieties – with her great looks, those chances are good, and probably better than they ever were sat next to those retics!

Pam Hayward



*Camellia* x *williamsii* 'Felice Harris' Photo: Sally Hayward

## Strete Gate Camellias does it again! Two RHS medals in one year!

Jeremy Wilson has done Strete Gate Camellias proud this year, topping off his Gold Medal awarded at the RHS Malvern Spring Festival in May with a Silver-Gilt Medal at the Malvern Autumn Show.

The exhibit Jeremy staged for this event was judged under the tougher Lindley rules which operate for scientific or purely educational displays and so it is especially impressive, particularly as it had been made out of flowering season with the Sasanquas only just coming into bloom. As a result of his success this year, in 2024 we shall be able to see Strete Gate Camellias exhibiting for the first time at the Chelsea Flower Show.

Pam Hayward



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Strete Gate Camellias' medal-winning exhibit Photo: Jeremy Wilson



## Your Favourite Camellias & Magnolias: a new Top 100 project!

**M**embers will remember our Top 100 Rhododendrons project launched in 2015 in the run-up to the Group's Centenary Celebrations.

If you weren't a member at that time, I should explain that we asked all of our members to let us know their ten favourite rhododendrons. This was a worldwide exercise and brought together the entire membership to produce an enormous list from which we were able to determine the Top 100 favourites.

You can read more on our website and download the list if it is of interest: [www.rhodogroup-rhs.org/information/centenary](http://www.rhodogroup-rhs.org/information/centenary)

We thought it was time we learned which are our favourite camellias and magnolias and so we have launched a similar exercise for both. Sally Hayward has kindly offered to manage this initiative, just as she did with the earlier project, and has set up dedicated email addresses to receive your entries.

If you did not receive forms from me by email, do send me a message, or just put the names of your ten favourites from each of the genera in an email and send them to Sally:

Camellias to **Top100camellias@outlook.com**

Magnolias to **Top100magnolias@outlook.com**

We'd also like to know if you have photographs of your favourites you'd be happy to share with us on our website – but don't send them yet – we'll ask when the time comes.

It's already proving a fascinating exercise, with lists coming in from all over the world and some real surprises in store.

Thanks to all of you who have taken part so far – Sally is really enjoying reading your responses and I'm sure an article is forthcoming in due course. We'll keep this going for a while yet to get a really good sample, so watch your inbox and the website for results in the New Year.

*Pam Hayward*

### SEED LIST

**I**t's that time again! After an amazing season, and with all that heat and then the rain, I know there is a really good seed set out there, in all of our genera and many more besides. The problem this year is likely to be getting a dry day to gather the harvest!

We'll be hoping for seed of hand-pollinated rhododendrons, especially species; camellias and magnolias as well as complimentary trees and shrubs, and suitable herbaceous companions.

Donations of seed are already arriving and our thanks to all of you who make an effort to support the Seed List every year. It does not go unnoticed that the same names appear and we do know how much effort is involved in preparing seed to send to us.

If you have seed to offer but have not yet sent it may I remind you to send packages to:

Tim Atkinson,  
143 Oldham Road,  
Sowerby Bridge,  
Yorkshire HX6 4QG

and if you have any queries or comments do email us:

[timothyatkinson@msn.com](mailto:timothyatkinson@msn.com) or [pam@woodtown.net](mailto:pam@woodtown.net)

*Pam Hayward*

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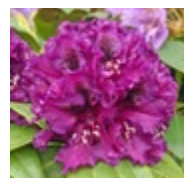


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### LETTERS

**F**urther to my letter in *Bulletin* 140 about the (very) early flowering of spring-flowering camellias, I have been amazed at the variety of rhododendrons in really quite decent flower this late summer and autumn. This is not only in my garden but apparently widespread, seen in images sent me by email. And it's not the usual suspects – the dwarf reds and blue lepidotes – it's a whole range of species and hybrids, culminating in my first encounter with the scent of a perfect *Rhododendron edgeworthii* in October! For aberrant read 'new normal'? Comments?

*Pam Hayward*

### MEMBERSHIP

**W**e welcome the following new members and hope they will enjoy all the benefits of the Rhododendron Camellia and Magnolia Group.

*Philip Eastell*

#### UK

Nick & Marilyn Lock  
Stefano Ciabo

Cornwall  
London

#### World

Philip Smith

New Zealand

#### GARDEN MEMBERSHIP

Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens

USA



# the Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia group

## Forthcoming Group & Branch Events

### JANUARY 2024

Sat 20th 2pm

#### North West Branch

Ness Botanic Gardens

Talk by Nick Lightfoot (Gardens & Collections Manager at Ness)  
'Rhododendrons at Ness through the year'

Together with  
Annual Social Event

Ted Brabin  
0151 353 1193  
angela.brabin@btinternet.com

### MARCH 2024

Sat 9th / Sun 10th

#### RHS & South West Branch

RHS Garden Rosemoor

RHS Early Camellia Competition  
and the SW Branch Magnolia,  
Rhododendron and Spring  
Ornamental Competitions

Georgina Barter  
020 7821 3142  
georginabarter@rhs.org.uk

Dr John Marston  
01271 267091  
artavianjohn@gmail.com

### APRIL 2024

Sat 6th / Sun 7th

#### RHS

RHS Garden Wisley

RHS Main Camellia, Early  
Rhododendron & Spring  
Ornamental Plant Competitions

Georgina Barter  
020 7821 3142  
georginabarter@rhs.org.uk

Sat 20th / Sun 21st

#### RHS & South West Branch

RHS Garden Rosemoor EX38 8PH

RHS Main Rhododendron  
Competition and the SW Branch  
Camellia, Magnolia and Floral  
Display Competitions

Georgina Barter  
020 7821 3142  
georginabarter@rhs.org.uk

Dr John Marston  
01271 267091  
artavianjohn@gmail.com

### MAY 2024

Sat 4th / Sun 5th

#### RHS

RHS Garden Harlow Carr

Harlow Carr Rhododendron  
Competition

Georgina Barter  
020 7821 3142  
georginabarter@rhs.org.uk

### JUNE 2024

Sat 1st / Sun 2nd

#### RCM Group

Trewithen Gardens

Group AGM & Centenary Cup  
Competition and Show

Robbie Sampson  
secretary@rhodogroup-rhs.org

### MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

#### Chairman

Graham Mills 01326 280382 chairman@rhodogroup-rhs.org

#### Vice Chairman

Barry Cooke 01932 863719 vc@rhodogroup-rhs.org

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Robbie Sampson secretary@rhodogroup-rhs.org

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Philip Eastell 07749 278992 treasurer@rhodogroup-rhs.org

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#### Plant Committee Chairman

Pam Hayward 01822 852122 plantchair@rhodogroup-rhs.org

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Vacancy. Correspondence to yearbook@rhodogroup-rhs.org

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#### Communications Officer

Mark Bobin 07776 287686 communications@rhodogroup-rhs.org

#### Convenor of Group Seed Bank

Tim Atkinson seeds@rhodogroup-rhs.org

#### Outstanding Garden Scheme Co-Ordinator

Nick Butler ogs@rhodogroup-rhs.org

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