

## Winter Interest \* 23 February

SAM HICKMOTT, Head Gardener, Lytes Cary Manor & Tintinhull Garden, UK

The day started with a cold and blustery arrival at RHS Wisley's garden room at the (relatively) new Hilltop science building. After tea and coffee everyone sat to hear a brief introduction to the site from Curator Matthew Pottage. Matthew started with a broad overview of the site at Wisley; the opportunities and challenges of gardening on acidic sand with relatively low levels of rainfall, as well as the damage in the box garden due to the cold winter, affecting a range of plants that, in the south at least, we have become used to being hardy.

Matthew also spoke about the various ways he and his team are making the garden more environmentally sustainable. A project to renovate the old apple orchard is underway, with the advice of Nick Dunn, planting a range of new trees with more space between them than the historic orchard in order to reduce pest and disease build-up without needing to use synthetic pesticides. There is also the creation of a rainwater capture lake on the site of the old trials field, now collecting rainwater run-off from the hilltop, as well as successfully using peat free growing media in the carnivorous beds.

There was also information on additional visitor engagement being implemented throughout the site. The World Food garden is top of the list, offering an excellent opportunity to encourage visitors to start growing a wider range of veg at home, particularly with the planned addition of a greater range of exotic vegetables better suited to a drier summer. There is now additional seating in the arboretum, along with more focal points to draw more people into the area, along with cut flowers growing among the heathers garden, one of the many 'moments' you can experience in the garden.

The next talk, entitled 'Unusual woody plants with winter appeal', was given by Wisley horticulturist Jack Aldridge. This was an excellent and informative talk exploring a range of lesser-known trees and shrubs for winter interest; due to the long list of plants Jack covered I've had to restrict my account to some personal favourites. First, Jack gave some context: surely to create a garden is a work of art, so a painter can make the greatest art when the full array of paints is made available to them. The same can be said of the gardener and the range of plants at their disposal.

The first group of plants discussed were those with interesting bark. The first of these was a selection of *Betula utilis* named 'Chris Lane'. It boasts a deep purple-red bark which contrasts sharply with its bright white lenticels. A similar choice would be *Prunus rufa*, comparable to *P. serrula*, though the former has darker bark and is much harder to get hold of. With peeling bark in mind, there are few better contenders than *Corylus fargesii*, the Chinese hazelnut, with extraordinary strips of nut-brown bark hanging from its branches like sheets of A4 paper. A slightly less striking but equally lovely tree is *Cornus wilsoniana*,



Curator Matthew Pottage, with *Prunus serrula*, *Salix alba* var. *vitellina* 'Britzensis', *S. alba* var. *vitellina*, *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' and *Rubus* stems (behind him), Winter Walk.

whose patchwork bark of pale grey, olive green and soft golden-brown make this an elegant specimen. Another that stirred up great interest when walking around the garden at Wisley was *Syringa reticulata* subsp. *pekinensis* 'Morton', partly because of its intriguing peeling russet bark, but largely because it did a good job of disguising itself as a cherry! It also has the added benefit of large white flowers in summer, similar to those of *Meliosma parviflora*, a small tree with a patchwork of flaking dark olive-green bark.

The second group are those with particularly impressive fruits. While this is a characteristic I personally don't find particularly endearing, there were still a couple of plants in this category that I really loved. *Idesia polycarpa*, the Chinese wonder tree, a small deciduous tree bearing long racemes of bright red grape-like fruits. Another is *Viburnum betulifolium*, a medium sized deciduous shrub bearing clusters of bright red sorbus-like fruits from the start of autumn which can persist on the plants for up to six months.

The next group were winter flowering plants. Jack started with *Cornus officinalis* 'Kintoki', a large shrub with bright yellow clusters of flowers, an improvement on the more widely grown *C. mas*. *Sassafras tzumu* is another excellent yellow flowered tree, with bright yellow corymb-like flowers throughout the winter, followed by bronze tinged leaves in summer. Next came a lovely group of camellias, starting with *C. sasanqua* 'Paradise' Belinda. While it is technically autumn flowering, this shrub is a brilliant addition to any garden, with beautiful double pink flowers; it does brilliantly growing against a warm wall. *C. cuspidata* is another winner, an elegant free-flowering shrub covered in small white cup-shaped flowers in late winter. The hybrid 'Cornish Snow' came along with it, being very similar with slightly larger and more open flowers.



Rhododendrons also got a good mention. *R. dauricum* 'Hokkaido' is one of the nicest, a medium shrub covered in beautiful small white flowers. *R. roxieanum* has white flowers spotted pink, with fine slender leaves, while *R. mallosum* is a large shrub bearing impressive crimson flowers.

The final and arguably most important characteristic is foliage. It was great to see mahonias (*Berberis*) being given the attention they deserve, both *Berberis oiwakensis* (syn. *Mahonia lomariifolia*) and the more unusual *Berberis napaulensis* var. *napaulensis* (syn. *M. acanthifolia*), the latter bearing leaves up to 75 cm long. *Pinus eremitana* is a beautiful blue pine from Vietnam, hard to find but well worth it if you do! *Microbiota decussata* is another lovely conifer, a low spreading shrub with fabulous bronze foliage, enchanting in the cold winter sun.

Jack finished his talk with a special mention for bulbs and perennials: in his words, "you wouldn't decorate a room without the carpet". As a fan of hardwood floors I disagree with the specifics, but I completely agree with the point that perennials and bulbs not only extend the season of interest, but also highlight and contrast with the shrubs and trees used in a winter garden.



Left: *Tilia cordata* 'Winter Orange'; right: *Prunus serrula* with *Hamamelis* × *intermedia* 'Rubin'

After Jack's talk, I joined the garden tour group to Battleston Hill, Wisley's 20-acre woodland garden, led by horticulturist Dave Blackwell. Before setting off Dave gave a brief history of the area, explaining how it was donated to the RHS by Francis Hanger in the 1930s with most of its development happening post WW2 with an emphasis on camellias and rhododendrons, as well



Left: *Daphne bholua* 'Peter Smithers', Battleston Hill; right: *Pinus nigra* 'Moseri', Winter Walk

as a range of original introductions. After the storm of 1987 there came an opportunity for redevelopment, with the wind taking out several over-mature trees, creating open glides ripe for underplanting with flowering shrubs.

At the start of the tour Dave pointed out a grouping of several winter flowering shrubs: *Cornus officinalis* (superior in flower to the more common *C. mas*); *Hamamelis* 'Orange Peel' which had recently finished flowering but two weeks earlier formed a striking combination next to the dogwood; and *Lonicera* × *purpurii*, a winter honeysuckle flowering earlier than *L. fragrantissima* (though not as prolifically).

From there we moved along a shady path flanked by *Daphne bholua* cultivars, going first to *D.* 'Spring Beauty', a fast-growing variety with lovely buds and flowers as well as good leaf retention. Because of this the team at Wisley elected to plant several benches with groups of 'Spring Beauty', before realising that in fact the flowers have almost no scent, the one downfall of an otherwise ideal cultivar. *D.* 'Peter Smithers' and *D.* 'Limpsfield' were the next *bholua* cultivars on the tour. Both had fairly good leaf retention despite the hoar frost in the weeks prior, with the former (Dave's favourite of the *bholuas*) selected for its gorgeous deep purple buds that cover the near 3m specimen every January.

Camellias were next on the itinerary, with two in particular catching my eye. The first was *Camellia japonica* 'Sea Foam', a tall shrub with large flowers which drop quickly once finished, the clear white petals contrasting well with the dark glossy foliage. The second was *C. grisjii*, a graceful Chinese specimen covered in dainty white flowers, which exuded a warm, spicy scent. 'Sea foam' had been crown raised to create a nicer shape and to allow the *Hydrangea quercifolia*





*Camellia japonica* 'Sea Foam', Battleston Hill

beneath to live up to its full potential. The pruning had been carried out before flowering rather than after as is more conventional (so often the way in gardens).

In between all these delightful finds was a smattering of particularly beautiful rhododendrons. Now I am often the first to admit my knowledge of rhododendrons (and camellias frankly) is little to none, however even a rhododendron novice such as myself had to stop and admire the individuals on Battleston. First was a pair of *R. mucronulatum*, the first being var. *albiflorum* and the second 'Cornell Pink'. Both were small shrubs no more than 1.2m high, but were covered in small trumpet blooms that caught the dappled sunlight brilliantly. Either form has the potential to be used as a striking and unusual informal hedge. Possibly

my favourite of all the plants on Battleston that day was the breathtaking *R. racemosum*, a large shrub (this one was roughly 5m tall and wide, with an approximate age of 60–80 years) smothered in small white to blush pink flowers branching out from the axils of the small dark green leaves. This shrub had been crown raised to show off the gnarled, twisted trunks beneath.

The final talk of the day came from *Hamamelis* expert Chris Lane, entitled 'A marriage made in heaven, what did Arnold promise?' Chris started by giving an overview of the genus, namely describing *Hamamelis mollis* and *H. japonica*, the parents of *H. × intermedia* (first named by Alfred Rehder at the Arnold Arboretum), the hybrid from which the bulk of the modern cultivars arise; from an aesthetic perspective they are largely similar, though *H. mollis* flowers a few weeks earlier. He also gave some advice on cultivation; witch hazels flower for longer in cold winters than milder ones and most can survive down to  $-18^{\circ}$  to  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ , though freezing winds can cause desiccation of the flowers, so a sheltered position is best. Waterlogged soils in winter and dry soils in summer won't serve them well; growing them out in a sunny position will lead them to be stockier with more flowers, though they will only live two thirds as long. They won't do well on alkaline soils, with the exception of *H. virginiana*,

which would cope with alkaline soil on a hill with sharp drainage. Chris then gave an overview of the history of the many cultivars in the genus, starting with the first intermedias. The first of these hybrids were bred at three sites, the Arnold Arboretum in the USA, Charlottenlund Arboretum in Denmark (*H.* 'Nina' is the only cultivar to come out of Denmark) and Kalmthout Arboretum in Belgium; of all three the most cultivars came out of Kalmthout.

Chris went on to talk about the great influence of Kalmthout on both him and the genus more broadly. For nearly a century, the grounds of Kalmthout were used for growing nursery plants until 1952, when it was purchased by brothers Georges and Robert de Belder. The collection grew under the care of Robert and his wife Jelena, who met when Jelena broke into their nursery. Six months later they were married – in Chris's words, "that's the power of witch hazels".

One of the first *intermedia* cultivars to be named at Kalmthout is 'Ruby Glow', which as the name suggests bears fabulous ruby flowers in winter (this is the cultivar that inspired Chris to start growing witch hazels). Then came 'Jelena' and 'Diane', the former bearing brilliant yellow-orange flowers "you can warm your hands on", the latter being a striking, almost pink-toned red. There was 'Livia', named after Jelena's granddaughter, a vibrant red flowered shrub, and 'Harry', a charming shrub sporting broad orange petals borne from deep purple calyces.

Another prolific breeder was Heinrich Bruus, a nurseryman who sold seedlings to nurseries and gardens alike. Two notable cultivars of his are 'Orange Beauty' and 'Barmstedt Gold', either of which would brighten up a dark garden corner.



*Camellia* 'Cornish Spring' with a supporting cast of snowdrops, Battleston Hill.



*Hamamelis* × *intermedia* 'Sunburst' with *H. × intermedia* 'Aphrodite', Winter Walk

Jan van Heiningen was a *Hamamelis* breeder who started all of his cultivar names with the letter a, in order to ensure they appeared at the top of nursery stock lists, including 'Ajan', a cultivar with vibrant orange flowers that he managed to name after himself whilst sticking to his marketing strategy. Some of his other notable plants are 'Alexander', a witch hazel with fierce orange-red flowers; 'Angelly' bearing striking acid yellow flowers; 'Aphrodite' has short, burnt orange petals; and 'Aurora', a cultivar with pale yellow, particularly long petals.

A more contemporary *Hamamelis* breeder is Wim van der Werf. One of his is 'Falling Stars', which according to Chris is the only true weeping witch hazel cultivar, bearing lovely yellow flowers. 'Wiero' is another, an unusual variety with yellow petals and a green calyx, and 'Twilight' bearing erect red petals "that could have been called punk rocker".

Chris went on to talk about some of the many cultivars he has raised, notably several named after Jimi Hendrix tracks. The first he named is 'Foxy Lady', which bears near-burgundy petals with very dark calyces. Another of Jimi's namesakes is 'Burning Desire', with bicolour petals starting red and fading to orange at the tips. 'Adam', named after horticulturist John Massey's gardener who sadly died at a young age, bears pale yellow flowers, similar to 'Maurice Foster', a *Hamamelis* with acid yellow petals and a pale yellow calyx.

Chris finished his talk with some questions, naturally including 'which is your favourite witch hazel?' Chris said that while there would always be twenty plants in his top ten, *H. × intermedia* 'Pallida' remains a great choice; it is a tough plant with beautiful bright flowers and great scent, "whose colour stands out even on a dull day".

All told, it was an excellent and interesting day that would be well worth running again.