Woodland gardens

On 5 and 6 May 2022, a weekend was held in the north of England to study the planting and management of woodland gardens. AUDE DE LIEDEKERKE writes about the lectures and garden visits that took place at Gresgarth Hall and Holker Hall, both locations with exceptional dendrological collections.

We met on a rainy spring morning in front of **Gresgarth Hall** to grab our name tags before making our way to inaugurate the first lecture in Arabella Lennox-Boyd's studio. Arabella welcomed us and gave us a quick overview of the development, topography and climatic conditions prevalent in the gardens before handing over to John Grimshaw for an introduction on the general principles of a woodland garden, which can be summarised as follows:

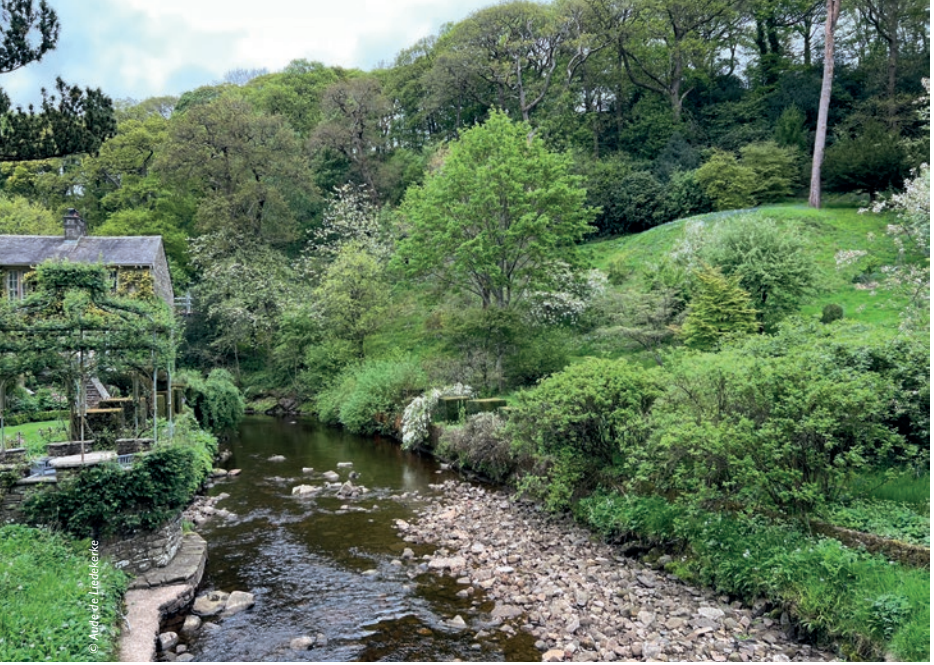
Set amongst a rich canopy of trees with multiple layers of plants forming the understorey, the characteristics of a woodland garden are complexity, diversity and texture.

If traditional woodland gardens are planted on acid soil, it is now accepted that there are fine examples on alkaline soil with a long season of interest throughout the year. The aesthetic is naturalistic and the pathways, an important ecological feature along which choice groundcover can be grown, need to blend with the landscape.

Choose wisely the large trees that form the canopy (and protect the plants below from frost and sun) according to their root systems and the density of their crown. Stay away from large-leaved specimens to ensure that enough light filters through and, reaches all strata of planting. The biggest challenge to develop a successful woodland garden is to create a mosaic between light and shade; therefore, it requires constant management and editing. When starting from scratch, birches make excellent candidates as they grow fast, have light foliage and attractive bark. *Betula ermanii* 'Grayswood Hill' is one of the loveliest of all birch trees with a creamy-white bark, pinkish elongated lenticels, good autumn colour and one of the best peeling winter barks once established. Treat birches for what they are, a pioneer species, and don't be afraid to reach for the chainsaw once they have outgrown their space. It is much wiser to discard them than give them a bad haircut!

Evergreen trees and shrubs, including conifers, act as windbreaks and provide structure and interest in the winter. Great consideration needs to be given to their rate of growth and density to ensure that they don't block the light.

The lecture was followed by a welcome coffee break before we all crossed the fast-flowing Artle Beck through a Chinese-style footbridge to access the slopes where Arabella has planted over 7,000 trees and shrubs. The collection (mostly grown from material that she collected or received from friends and societies) is broad, well recorded and artistically displayed: a sharp eye for shape and texture paired with an excellent sense of colour adds to its value.



Gresgarth holds a collection of Styracaceae and the exquisite *Melliodendron xylocarpum* was starting to flower. This native from China is rare and tricky to grow well in the UK but my heart did not skip a beat, until further down our walk we came across *Meliosma veitchiorum* coming into leaf. This spectacular foliage plant comes late into leaf, and therefore is rarely damaged by frost, and well-suited to the British climate. In addition to good autumn features (foliage and berries) it flourishes in low light-levels, which makes it a perfect candidate to brighten a dark corner. Its only downside is that it is very palatable to deer and rabbits and, requires protection when young.

After lunch we all welcomed Mike Horn, and a St George's mushroom (*Calocybe gambosa*) he had gathered during our morning walk, for the afternoon lecture. Fungi are à la mode and everyone is trying to make sense of them. These single celled or multicellular organisms live in all possible habitats and mainly on land. Their function, like any living organism, is to reproduce; this is achieved by spreading spores. Dendrologists are mainly interested in the parasites of trees causing diseases (and sometimes death) and the beneficial association of mycorrhizal fungi that trade soil nutrients and connect multiple plants through their mycelium.

Most large fungi give little concern to gardeners. Some like the hen of the woods (*Grifola frondosa*), a light parasite often found at the base of *Quercus* is one of our finest edible mushrooms. Oak woods are affected by the weeping conk (*Pseudoinonotus dryadeus*) that lives off deadwood and causes white rot. It is occasionally found on *Fagus* and other hardwoods. Beech woods are prone to different large fungi altogether, such as the shaggy scallycap (*Pholiota squarrosa*), a weak parasite found at the base of old trees. It is often confused

Opposite, the fast-flowing Artle Beck that runs through the middle of the garden and adds romance to the landscape at Gresgarth Hall.

with honey fungus (*Armillaria mellea*) but they can be distinguished by the colour of their spores: brown and white respectively. It is sometimes found at the base of spruce stumps. After honey fungus, *Phytophthora* is the most common fungus-like organism to kill a wide range of trees and shrubs in waterlogged soils.

There is another type of fungus that creates mycorrhizal networks that connect plants together and transport water, carbon, nutrients and minerals between plants, and therefore have an important ecological role.

Most of the studies have taken place in the temperate climates where trees form relationships with a particular type of fungus, such as the beechwood sickener (*Russulea nobilis*) that plays a vital role in the woodland ecosystem. *Fagus sylvatica* relies entirely on it to take up nutrients from the soil. Despite much progress made in the past 50 years, we still don't know much about mycelial associations but a good piece of advice I will follow is not to waste

The textures, shapes and colours of the weeping katsura, flag irises and waterlily are complementing each other perfectly on the ornamental lake in front of Gresgarth Hall.

my money on the mycorrhizae available commercially. It is more efficient to look after the health of the existing soil instead. The day ended with a walk around the formal gardens, led by Arabella, where we all admired, under a light drizzle, how plants are grown to perfection in Gresgarth.

Holker Hall

The following day, we met at Holker Hall under a clear sky. With a view over Morecambe Bay, the garden and parkland are set in the South Lakeland Hills, and benefit from a mild climate thanks to the Gulf Stream's proximity.

If Gresgarth Hall is a remarkable example of what can be achieved from scratch in just over 40 years, Holker is a testimony of how time and generations of enthusiastic gardeners can transform a place. We all admired the Great Lime that was planted early in the seventeenth century; with a buttressed trunk and a girth of over eight metres, and impressive overhanging branches, it is part of the national heritage.

The gardens are well related to the surrounding landscape, and it is possible to stand back and look across the textures and colours from a distance or examine closely interesting species, such as *Sassafras tzumu*, a rare tree in the UK, with its attractive bronze flush of polymorphic new leaves unfurling for our visit. A large tree in its native China, it stays small in our countries but is particularly attractive. It is surprising that it is not planted more often as it displays excellent autumn colour and provides winter interest with its stout yellow branches.

Hugh Cavendish led the morning session with Maurice Foster and gave us an idea on how the gardens have been run over the last 30 years. Income for the estate is supplemented in part from opening the garden to the public. Welcoming the public helps assess the successes in the garden and put right the failures. School visits are very beneficial, as children come back with their parents. The garden has been closely involved with education by taking in and forming hands-on independent gardeners, as well as trainees from horticultural colleges.

Keen dendrologists Hugh and Grania Cavendish have expanded the original collection

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The Great Lime at Holker Hall and gardens.

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Above, **left**, the polymorphic leaves of *Sassafras tzumu* and **right**, the new leaves of *Trochodendron aralioides* in the arboretum at Holker Hall and gardens.

by introducing many new species, but it is incomplete because they only plant species that appeal to them. It is a scientific collection with numbered species recorded on a database, and most trees are labelled; some plants are not labelled on purpose to avoid theft, which can become a problem when personnel changes and memory fades. One such plant may have been a small shrub endemic to New Zealand *Jovellana punctata*, which we saw during our afternoon walk. Several of us were attracted by its *Calceolaria*-like flowers; one of our young members helped us with the identification. Several young members, all excellent plantspeople, took advantage of the generous discount offered to the juniors, enlivening the weekend to the joy of all who attended.

After a welcome lunch, the group walked around the arboretum, each following their own interest amongst this rich dendrological collection. The combination of chartreuse new leaves with margins flushed red and racemes of lime green flowers of the monospecific *Trochodendron aralioides* caught my eye. The specimen in Holker Hall is healthy, no doubt thanks to the proximity of the Atlantic and the Gulf Stream. In its native Japan, it grows in association with *Cryptomeria japonica*, sometimes as an epiphyte. Could this be due to a shared connection with a mycorrhizal fungus? As it requires shelter from winds and tolerates shade and a wide range of soils, it makes an excellent choice as an understorey plant for the woodland garden.

The day came to a close around a well-deserved cup of tea in glorious spring sunshine and many members dispersed while a few were to meet again in the morning to visit Reginald Farrer's collection in the Yorkshire Dales.

Above, **left**, the calceolaria-like flowers of *Jovellana punctata* at Holker Hall and gardens. **Right**, the sparse bristles on the petioles of this rhododendron leaf are an indication of a hybrid of *Rhododendron barbatum* at the Ingleborough Estate.

Ingleborough

On the Sunday, a much smaller group gathered in the car park of the village of Clapham in the Yorkshire Dales, the birthplace of plant collector and writer Reginald Farrer for a visit of a section of the Ingleborough Estate Natural Trail. No one would expect *Rhododendron* to grow well in a part of the country that is renowned for its stunning limestone gorges. However, the local geology of the trail around Clapham has given rise to pockets of acid soil brought about by the Craven Fault System, and this is where Reginald Farrer decided to establish his Himalayan Garden around the time of the First World War. More planting was done in the 1920s and 1970s. We identified some hybrids of *Rhododendron barbatum*, with their characteristic scarlet flowers but less bristle on the petioles than the species. The best advice of the weekend came from Maurice Foster who encouraged us to look down at the ground, not so much to marvel at what plants grow under our feet but in order to find clues about what trees or shrubs are flowering out of sight well above our head!

Acknowledgements

The weekend was hugely successful due to Arabella Lennox-Boyd's generosity both of time and organisation and we were all most grateful to Arabella and Mark Lennox-Boyd, Hugh, Grania Cavendish and their daughter, Lucy, and to the Farrer family for their wonderful welcome and hospitality.