

# In his element

Maurice Foster – described as ‘the plantsman’s plantsman’ – has a passion for woody plants that has resulted in a remarkable plant collection and superb plant introductions

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Maurice Foster

Maurice Foster VMH first developed an interest in woody plants when, aged 7, he cultivated white-, red- and blackcurrants on a plot in his grandmother’s garden. No-one could have guessed that he would go on to become one of the country’s leading plantsmen. His passion for plants became dormant during his teens and 20s when sport, the Army and university intervened. It re-emerged in 1962 when he bought his first house and a 1,350sq m (½ acre) garden in Petts Wood, Kent.

Maurice is renowned among his peers for having a remarkable eye for a good plant, and is widely respected for his plant knowledge. His garden and arboretum contain around 3,000 different plants, including a quarter-mile of paths edged with selections of *Hydrangea serrata* – one of the groups of plants for which he has a particular passion. He is an Honorary member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee, a Trustee of the Tree Register, past Chairman of the Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group and a life member of the Magnolia Society and International Dendrology Society.

At Petts Wood, Maurice began to grow rhododendron species from seed and exchanged plants with nurseryman Walther Reuthe, who owned a rhododendron nursery nearby. ‘I began hybridizing colour-unstable and unreliably hardy Satsuki azaleas,’ he says, ‘with robust dwarf types such as *Rhododendron* ‘Vida Brown’ in a quest to combine



flower quality and hardiness. But although I had a few nice seedlings none were named or registered.’

## Beginnings of a garden

On moving in 1972 to White House Farm, east of Sevenoaks with 2ha (5 acres) of land, Maurice began creating his first major garden with his wife, Rosemary. Friends began offering plants and plant material, so he mastered all aspects of propagation, including grafting. Norfolk farmer Maurice Mason, who held a deep interest in exotic tender plants, became an encouraging mentor. A day with >>

Maurice Foster (left) has planted 3,000 different plants in his garden and arboretum at White House Farm in Kent (above); hydrangeas (below) are among his favourites.



*Hydrangea macrophylla* ‘Merveille Sanguine’



*H. arborescens* Pink Annabelle (‘Ncha’)



Un-named *H. aspera* seedling





*Hydrangea aspera* Hot Chocolate ('Hpopr012')



*H. macrophylla* 'Générale Vicomtesse de Vibraye' AGM



*H. macrophylla* 'Bläuling' AGM



*H. serrata* 'Tiara' AGM



*H. paniculata* Sundae Fraise ('Rensun')



*H. serrata* 'Odoriko-amacha'



*H. aspera* 'Peter Chappell' AGM

political, diplomat and legendary plantsman Sir Peter Smithers (1913–2006), whose garden at Vico Morcote in Switzerland was full of rarities, ended when Sir Peter provided Maurice and Rosemary with a trug, bags, secateurs and elastic bands, and an invitation 'to take whatever scions or cuttings you want – but take care as the watering system comes on at 5.30pm'. It took Maurice a week to drive home during a heat wave. 'I bought an insulated "chilly bin", renewed the ice blocks at hotels, and still managed an 80 percent success rate in propagation.'

Most cool temperate tree genera are represented in Maurice's collection, including rarities such as *Pterocarya macroptera* var. *insignis*, with magnificent 72cm (28in) long 'catkins'. They are underplanted with an eclectic range of shrubs including deutzias,

philadelphus, berberis and cotoneasters, with many of recorded wild origin. Spring is perhaps the most spectacular season in the gardens and arboretum at White House, with dramatic magnolias, rhododendrons and camellias weighed down by blooms at almost every turn. Later on, Maurice's vast collection of hydrangeas provides late-summer colour following on from roses, including vigorous ramblers and climbers that cascade with flowers from boundary trees. Elsewhere acers, *Prunus* and countless others provide fiery autumn colour. Among Maurice's favourite trees are hornbeams (*Carpinus*); he has a fine collection and is searching for rare species such as *C. mengshanensis* and *C. kweichowensis*.

Maurice has travelled worldwide in search of plants, visiting China, Japan, Bhutan, northern Pakistan, Mongolia, USA and Australasia, and introduced one plant that was new to science: golden-flowered *Hypericum fosteri*, from evergreen forest in Yunnan. His whole garden is burgeoning with such interesting and beautiful plants.

#### Hydrangeas to impress

Walking through the arboretum, it is exciting to see Maurice's meandering *Hydrangea serrata* walk, planted mostly with Maurice's own seedlings of this small-growing, variable but charming species. His interest in hydrangeas can be traced back to 1956, during a university vacation, when Maurice worked in the garden of Michael Haworth-Booth (1896–1986), a leading authority on hydrangeas. Haworth-Booth had a large collection and had written a popular book on the genus. Maurice was impressed by their long flowering period from midsummer onwards, their versatility and the wide range of rich colours,

notably deep blues. He now has some 400 different plants in his collection, including a multitude of un-named seedlings. With a focus on *H. aspera* – a wonderful species with velvety foliage and domed heads of flowers in late summer – and *H. serrata*, he has named and introduced several garden-worthy cultivars. One such is *H. serrata* 'Tiara' AGM, which was a seedling from Haworth-Booth. Maurice admired how its flowerheads were an attractive tone of blue, it was compact, free flowering and hardy, and it boasted foliage that coloured well in sun. He gave 'Tiara' to a nurseryman in Brittany and it became hugely popular in France.

Another beauty, *H. aspera* 'Peter Chappell' AGM, was named after the owner of Spinners Nursery in Hampshire, who passed it to Maurice as a 'miserable little twig', on the understanding it would be propagated. It revealed itself to be a true albino with pink buds, white florets and fertile flowers. Exciting too, is bushy *H. aspera* Hot Chocolate ('Hpopr012') with bluish purple inner flowers surrounded by florets of soft pink, and leaves flushed with dark purple when young, their undersides maroon-red.

'The appeal of woody plants is not just their relative permanence, but how their personality develops as they age and the bond you form with them over the years,' says Maurice. 'Some old rhododendrons develop a style and character that only comes with age, and it is marvellous to climb a tree you raised many years before from a tiny seed.'

Despite his long-term achievements and the size of his collection, Maurice's continuing curiosity, thirst for knowledge and irrepressible passion for woody plants know no bounds. ○

#### Magnolias for spring drama

Maurice has also introduced several outstanding magnolias. *Magnolia* 'Theodora', an intense dark purple, named after a granddaughter, can be seen on Battleston Hill at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey, while *M.* 'Premier Cru', with dark rose flowers, is proving to be popular with visitors to his home. Fragrant *M.* 'Summer Solstice' (so called because it received an Award of Merit on June 21 1995) was selected by Maurice from a line of *M. globosa* seedlings at The Savill Garden, Windsor. With rose-pink outer tepals, and cream inside, it is invaluable in the garden as it flowers after the last frosts. 'I put a single flower in the guest bedroom when a friend came to stay and the following morning the vase was outside the door – she had been overpowered by the fragrance,' Maurice says.



*Magnolia* 'Theodora', introduced by Maurice, is in full flower in early to mid-spring.

#### Resources

Most plants mentioned here are listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2019*, and online at [rhs.org.uk/findaplant](https://rhs.org.uk/findaplant)

Guided group tours are available at White House Farm by prior arrangement.