

# the Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia group

Patron: HRH The Prince of Wales

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## CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

**M**any Magnolias in my garden that normally only flower once, flowered again this autumn, just as they did last year. Unfortunately, at that time the leaves are still on the plants so the blooms aren't that showy. Luckily it doesn't seem to diminish the display in spring which, looking at the number of buds, could be a good one in 2020.

As you read this, all that we will have left in flower from our three genera will be the autumn flowering Camellias, which in my garden are mainly represented by *Camellia sasanqua* and its many varieties. They do enliven the scene, along with the autumn colour from the deciduous azaleas.

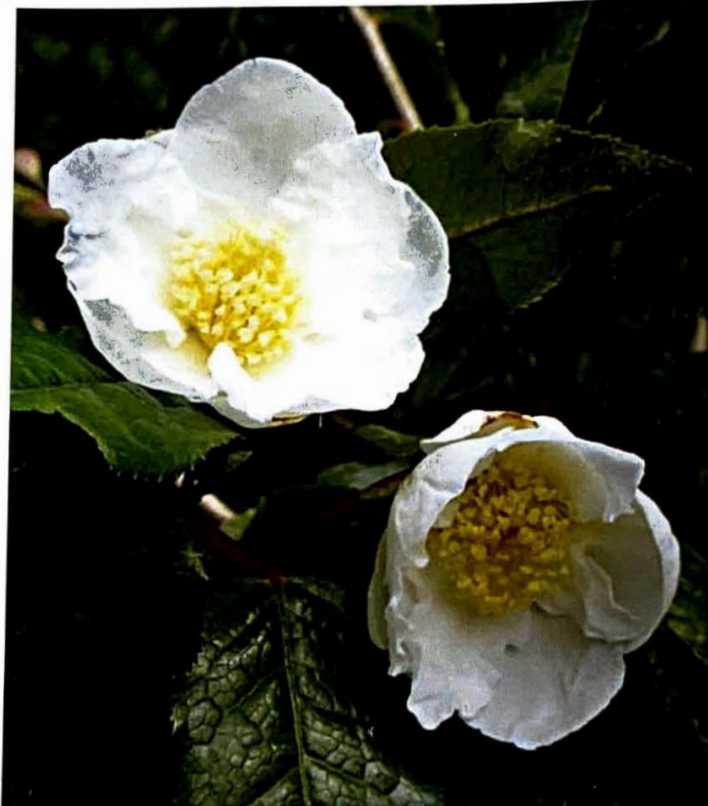
However, autumn is probably mainly a time to prepare and look forward. It is of course an ideal time to move plants and plant new ones. In addition, it is a time to collect seeds, catch up on paperwork and dream of spring.

## Conservation

One of the key things that the Group undertakes is our conservation work to save and propagate species and hybrids from our three genera. Part of this work involves the creation and ongoing support of specific Plant Collections in locations that can be visited around the country. There are currently seven of these extant with an eighth being developed. Elsewhere in this bulletin you will find information about the history and evolution of these plus the new collection that is being created.

Of the existing seven, four are of Rhododendrons, two of Magnolias and one of Camellias. Perhaps now that I am Chairman, the Magnolias and Camellias will get more attention.

Once you have read that article, you will realise that the financial cost to develop these collections is significant, as is the vast amount of time given freely by the volunteers who undertake the work. We have a Centenary Fund that was created during our Centenary year specifically to support our Conservation work and this continues today. All the money collected in the fund is ring-fenced and only used for our conservation efforts. Details can be found on our web site



*Camellia trichocarpa*. See page 10 Photo: Maurice Foster.

at [www.rhodogroup-rhs.org/current/fund/](http://www.rhodogroup-rhs.org/current/fund/) and if you wish, you may also contribute to the fund.

## Shows

This year's show season was superb, although the severe frost at the Savill Show in early April was an unwelcome surprise. It was neatly rounded off by the Centenary Cup Competition at Exbury in early June. Thanks to Pam and Sally Hayward for creating such a classy finale.

We now look to the RHS competitions at Rosemoor, Savill Garden and Harlow Carr during 2020 plus, of course, the many branch shows that often run alongside them. The Centenary Cup Competition will be at Ramster Gardens alongside the Wessex Show.

So many people give freely of their time to enable these events whether it's organising and setting up, competing or judging; all deserve our heartfelt thanks.

*The 2020 AGM will be at the Bothy  
at Bowood on 9th May*

*Continued overleaf*

I was at the Malthouse today (14th August 2019) and took note of rhododendrons with buds still to break. David Millais has now registered some of Paul's previous crosses and I am sure there will be more to follow.

Andy Fly

## MEMBERS NOTES

### In praise of *Camellia trichocarpa*

It's true that lately we have not suffered one of those damaging periods of protracted frost lasting several days where the temperature fails to rise above freezing during the day. This means that in recent years nothing of dubious hardiness has been tested to destruction. We may be living in a fool's paradise, but it also may be that we are witnessing a longer term trend to relatively warmer winters.

Having said that, last year the Beast from the East was a real trial for those plants generally described as vulnerable to low temperatures, especially wind-borne frosts. Temperatures were not excessively low, but the frost-bearing wind was a potential killer. The conventional wisdom is that vulnerable plants should be avoided, to escape disappointment and gnashing of teeth.

A favourite camellia species of rare quality, *Camellia trichocarpa* is usually described as in this vulnerable category. Our website says this species 'has prospects as a garden plant in gardens that do not experience temperatures much below freezing'. Given recent experience in Kent, not noted for its kindly winters, this advice may be rather too conservative and playing it safe. As a result, the plant may be perceived as another certain case of winterkill sooner or later, with a concomitant reluctance to plant it.

Three plants here in west Kent, outside for 8 years, unprotected and planted side by side on a well drained stony bank and from two different provenances, are almost identical in form, foliage and flower. Sheltered from the north and east by a holly screen filtering the wind, they were partially defoliated by the Beast, particularly the plant at one end which was slightly more exposed. There was no twig or bud kill and after a full season of growth there was no sign that they were at all affected. They are now full of developing flower bud. The literature generally has it that  $-5$  or  $-6^{\circ}\text{C}$  is about the limit of its cold tolerance. It has survived this



without damage in several winters though, it has to be admitted, for only short periods.



*Camellia trichocarpa*

I am labouring the point because I believe the quality of the plant is worth the risk – it has that almost indefinable touch of real class. It is a superb plant of the first rank in foliage and flower, as well as bark.

The foliage is very distinctive. Leaves are dark green, glossy and up to 13cm long with a short petiole, acuminate, rounded at the base, serrate but with a characteristic wavy edge and a rugose finish with reticulate veining. The young growth is coppery red.



Young foliage of *Camellia trichocarpa*

The flowers, opening in early spring, are held singly or in twos at the shoot tips and in the upper leaf axils and are 5–8cm across, white, slightly wavy and crinkled with 6-7 petals framing a prominent boss of deep yellow stamens.



*Camellia trichocarpa*. Photos: Maurice Foster

The bark is a further attraction as plants mature. It is a suede dun/ grey and well worth exposing by selective pruning. It features on strong stems that support a sturdy upright bush which at White House Farm has so far grown to some 2.5m. The literature claims heights of up to 9m in the wild but it is likely to need a warmer climate and higher rainfall than ours to achieve anything like this.

*Camellia trichocarpa* is scarce and not widely available but it's worth seeking it out – and I believe where soil and shelter conditions are generally in its favour, its exceptional quality is well worth the winter risk.

Maurice Foster VMH

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