

the Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia group

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CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

Spring is just around the corner, and so far the signs are early with *Camellia* 'Donation' flowering as I write in mid-January. Bud set also looks good, so let's hope we avoid another wicked frost like we had at the end of last April, and we can have a good flowering season. Don't forget that the Seed List is entirely dependent upon donations of seed by members. Now that we can only list seed of garden origin, it would be really helpful if you could make the effort to hand pollinate some of your special species, or even try your hand at some interesting hybridizing this spring. Label the flower heads and then collect the plump seeds in the autumn and send to Julie Atkinson who looks after our seed supplies so well. See the website for more details: www.rhodogroup-rhs.org/seeds

The one certainty that we do have, is the greater uncertainty we have with the weather. I do hope that members did not suffer too much damage in the recent storm Eleanor. I understand that our friends in Northern Ireland suffered winds of up to 90mph. This has obviously caused some tree losses, and I hope they manage to tidy up without too much difficulty. I am sure that they will have everything sorted in time for our 'sold out' tour in April. Here, we lost a large eucalyptus and a birch, which was probably a blessing in disguise as they were past their best anyway, and now we have some space for re-planting. In the South East of the country, it has been a particularly dry autumn with groundwater levels far below normal. Southern Water has just applied for a drought permit with some reservoirs currently only 44% full. We now need above average rainfall to prevent a drought next summer. It's not too late to be filling ponds and water butts in preparation!

On the back cover of this Bulletin, you will find an action packed calendar of events for you to attend around the country, assembled by your Committee and Branch Chairmen. Of special mention are the two outstanding shows at RHS Rosemoor, the show at Savill Gardens Windsor, which returns on 7-8th April after its huge success last year, and the Spring Plant Weekend at RHS Harlow Carr on 5-6th May which now incorporates Daffodil and Tulip competitions as well as Rhododendrons. I do hope that you will attend as many of these events as possible, as well as your local and neighbouring branch activities.

We are pleased to announce that the Yearbook is progressing well



Camellia japonica 'Black Lace'. This photo was posted on the RCMG (forum) in Facebook last month by a contributor from Abbotabad, Pakistan and was photographed in his garden. Photo: Muhammad Fawad

Do consider joining us for our AGM on Saturday 28th April, at Westonbirt, the National Arboretum, by kind permission of the Forestry Commission. Westonbirt is rightly famous for its autumn tree colour, but perhaps less well known is the extensive collection of rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias. The arboretum was created by R S Holford (1808-1892) who financed many plant collecting trips around the world. His son Sir George Holford, was responsible for many of the original maple and rhododendron plantings, and expanded the arboretum across the valley into Silk Wood, and created three drives with wide verges and bays for ornamental trees. In 1956, the estate was handed to the Forestry Commission, and now there is an enthusiastic team of Friends who were our first corporate members a few years ago. The Friends are keen to improve the labelling of the rhododendrons and magnolias, and I hope that between us all, we can help at the time of our visit. Recently Keith Rushforth has been studying some of their plant records, and has been matching Forrest and Rock original big leaved species rhododendrons

which are recorded ex Caerhays or Tower Court, and being planted on 19th January 1934! Westonbirt is on one of those small seams of greensand in an otherwise limestone area,

and so maybe outside the regular areas visited by lovers of our genera. However, it has good access from South West, South East and Midlands, so I hope it will appeal to a good number of members from around the country. One of our members, George

Continued overleaf

Matching New Zealand colour quality in Magnolias

The overall quality and flower colour of magnolias in New Zealand is probably the best in the world. At least, when I was out there a few years ago it was constantly suggested this was the best place to grow magnolias and I should move. My only defence was that with 2000 hours of sunshine, 100 inches of rain, benign temperatures and 70 feet of mineral rich topsoil, - while trying to keep a straight face - there was no challenge. Give me the pale perfidious Albion climate any day.

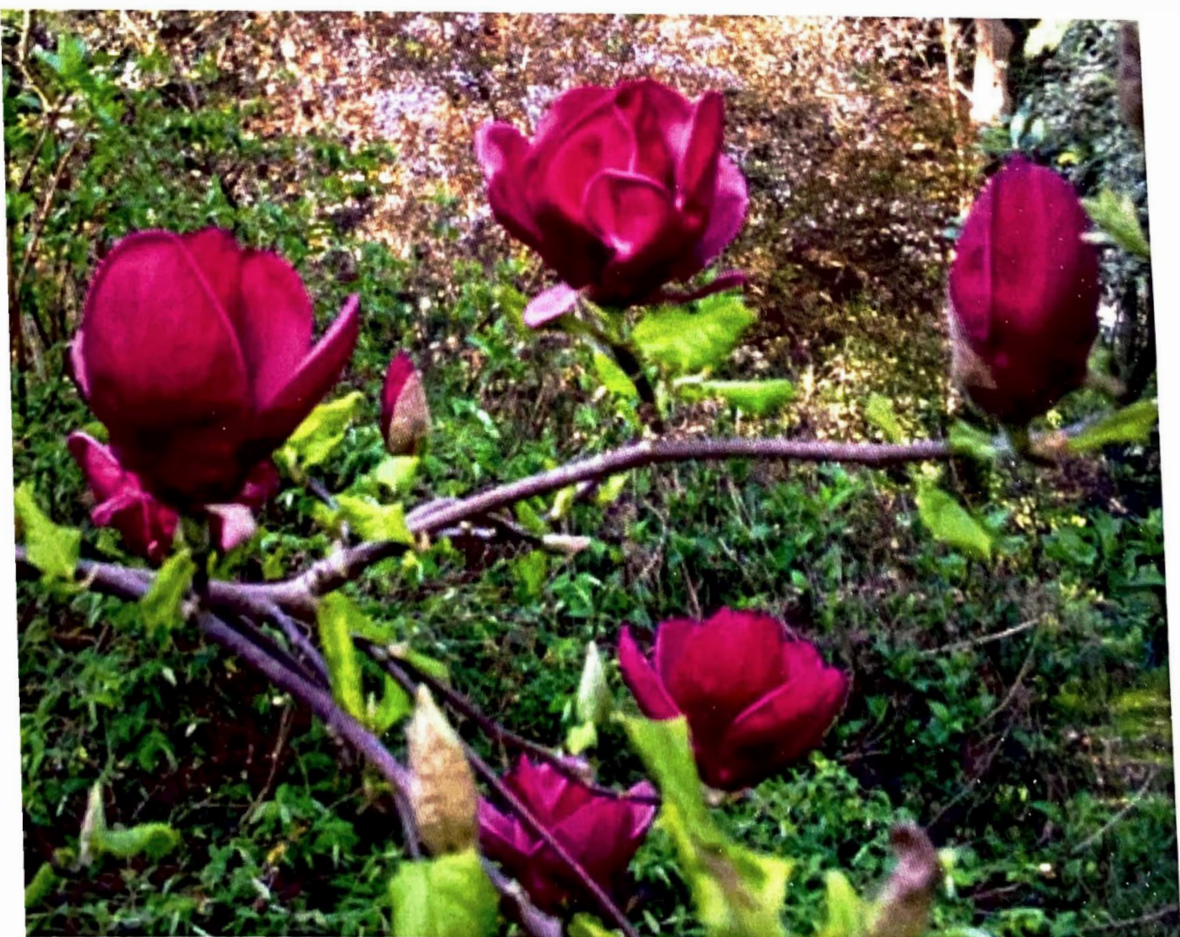
Replicating the quality and vivid colour of New Zealand magnolias is of course a challenge in UK conditions. Cold and fluctuating spring temperatures, wet and overcast with an absence of sun can affect growth and produce dull and muddy colours on selections that could stop the traffic in the North Island. Here I'm going to comment on two newish introductions to the UK, one red/purple and not quite so new, the other yellow and more recently available.

Both are performing well at White House Farm, if not to New Zealand standards, probably close.

When first introduced, **Genie** was promoted to the point where the bar was set high for it to live up to its image and several growers were disappointed. Some were critical of its performance. The Hillier Manual states 'Has not done well in a number of gardens in the British Isles, the branches dying back.'

However, this has not been my experience and having lived with it for 7 years I am happy to defend it and can see merit in a pleasing combination of features for our conditions. Maybe the dieback was due to soft imported tunnel grown plants suddenly subject to the rough and tumble of an English spring? Or jet lag after long haul travel and a change of season?

Starting as a strong 3ft graft, **Genie** has now reached about 12ft, neat and upright, but with lower branches spreading to the horizontal and displaying the shapely goblet flowers very nicely among dark slender twigs, bearing many buds.



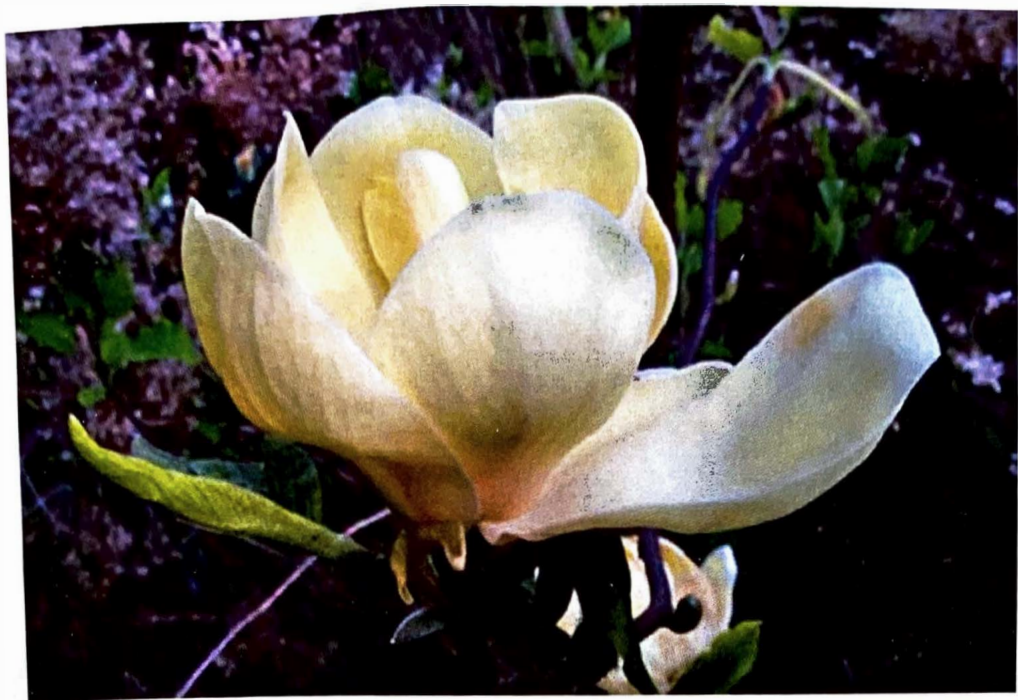
Genie – continuity of flowering is a major asset. Photo: Maurice Foster

Although the flowers are of only medium size, they are a rich unfading dark red/purple and the outer tepals curl and reflex prettily at the edges. Flowering continuity is a major asset, with flowers being produced over many weeks from April to June, the last appearing atop the unfolding leaves. For the impatient, flowers are also produced on small plants. The ultimate growth is described as being modest and containable, so it could be a considered choice for a small garden. All these characters, together with comparatively small leaves, suggest a strong *M. liliflora* influence, a good sign for UK performance.

Vance Hooper, the raiser, wrote in a Yearbook article that it was not troubled by -15C in Holland so it should be reliably cold hardy here.

In the 2017 Yearbook, Abbie Jury wrote of **Honey Tulip** 'It is still early days – ask us in another twenty years how we rate it.' Here am I having the temerity to comment on it after only three years from planting, so on her estimate you may have to take these remarks with more than a pinch of salt.

But I have been impressed in particular by the quality of the flower – and in the end it is the flower that sells the plant.



Honey Tulip – something new in yellow magnolias. Photo: Maurice Foster

Here it is not so much the tulip shape of say Black Tulip – but more an elegant, balanced, wide goblet shape, in the manner of the old *M. denudata* cultivar 'Purple Eye'. For me this gives it style and a touch of class. Above all, it is precocious, flowering before and with the first leaves, allowing it to show off the shape and colour to perfection. There are few if any signs of *M. acuminata* in its make-up, in particular of this species small gappy yellow flowers.

The term 'yellow' applied to magnolias takes in a very broad spectrum of colour and tone. 'Honey' is about right to describe the colour of this plant. It is reminiscent of a pale set honey, a colour as distinctive as its shape. It has a darker base. The tepals are of heavy texture and to date appear quite weather resistant for a pale flower and do not appear to fade with age. It flowers as a young plant. Habit and ultimate size are still to be determined. The shoots are stout and robust and on my young plant heading north by up to two feet last year. It could make a substantial tree – or not. Cold hardiness is so far so good, tested here to date to only -5C, but reputedly undamaged by -15C.

It's true, it is early days, but this is a cultivar that looks full of promise and may be blazing a new trail for the future?

Maurice Foster