



Private passion

For more than 50 years, Maurice Foster has been amassing a collection of woody plants in his garden at White House Farm, which has grown into a precious horticultural resource

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PORTFOLIO MARIANNE MAJERUS

Lining the winding paths of the garden, vigorous, upright *Hydrangea Arborescens* has large, star-shaped flowers that blend perfectly with *Rhododendron multiflorum* and a pink *Camellia*.

Maurice Foster with an as yet unnamed *Hydrangea* cross – between *Hydrangea aspera* (Rosemary Foster (named for his late wife) and *H. aspera* a hot Chocolate (= Haep012).



To stroll around Maurice Foster's undulating hillside garden in Kent in springtime is to take a lesson not only in botany and horticulture but also in geography. Prize magnolias, rhododendrons and camellias flower at every turn of the grassy paths and this master planter can tell you a tale about any one of them. In the 52 years that he has been assembling his unrivalled collection of woody plants, Maurice has travelled widely on plant-hunting expeditions to remote areas of western China, northern Pakistan, Bhutan, Mongolia, Japan, Tasmania and Aotearoa New Zealand, and many details of these trips are fresh in his mind as he describes the provenance of particular specimens.

White House Farm lies east of Sevenoaks, on a broad ridge about 150 metres above sea level. "Wind is the enemy of woody plants," says Maurice. "So one of the first things I did was to put in a shelter belt. I'm fond of saying that there is nothing between us and the Urals except for Margate Pier and a few telegraph poles, and they're not very good protection." From its unassuming driveway, there is little indication of the horticultural treasures that lie beyond.

Maurice and his second wife Rosemary bought a house and five acres of land in 1972 and began transforming what was basically a derelict nut wood into a woodland garden. He started with a pick and shovel, plus a winch to pull out old tree stumps. "There was nothing here. Everything you see I have personally planted," he says. Centuries ago there was ragstone quarrying here, hence the uneven ground, but Maurice has turned this to

his advantage by matching plants to places, seeking out particular niches where each new shrub, tree or perennial can flourish. "I hate to see a plant suffering so I will always strive to give it what it needs. We are lucky as our basic soil is a well-drained, nice, medium loam with pockets of clay and some seams of greensand. It's already fertile but we also mulch constantly to feed the soil and contain moisture."

Despite the challenges, including honey fungus, perennial weeds, rabbits and deer, Maurice has never let adversity dent his enthusiasm for long. "After the storm of 1987, when 32 trees came down, I was in tears, but Rosemary said, 'You must treat it as an opportunity', and of course, she was right."

Maurice retired in the early 1990s, aged 58, from a career in business publishing to devote himself full time to his garden and, having run out of space for his burgeoning collections, he then bought seven acres to create an arboretum, and a further two-and-a-half acres of wood in 2010. White House Farm has become a most precious resource, sought out by students and academics for study days, so his daughter Clare has recently set up the White House Farm Arboretum Foundation to secure its future.

"We are very fortunate to have wonderful trustees: Chris Sanders VMH, Jack Aldridge, Chris Lane VMH, Rod White – all expert plantmen themselves – who take a very active hands-on interest in it," says Maurice. "Clare is mateminding the whole thing and will take it forward. She's fantastic. She organises enthusiastic parties of volunteers to tackle the weeds. I'm so > To continue, turn to page 84



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Maurice's 8 key plants

1 *Rhododendron sinrowii* A good and extremely hardy species that deserves to be more widely grown. Best in part shade. It has rose-purple flowers and handsome evergreen foliage. 1m x 1.5m. USDA 5a-8b.

2 *Magrolia Honey Tulip* (= *Jurmag5*) A new Mark Jury introduction from New Zealand; this forms a small tree with amber-yellow flowers that form before the leaves. Grows best in a sheltered spot in full sun to part shade. 4m x 3m. RHS H5.

3 *Corylopsis sinensis* A favourite from China, with dangling racemes of pale-yellow flowers that smell of cowslips. Perfect for a small garden. Incredibly floriferous and fragrant. 3.5m x 4m. AGM. RHS H5. USDA 5a-8b.

4 *Viburnum spondylioides* A desirable shrub with deeply veined, dark-purple leaves and pure-white lacecap flowers that appear in early April. A comparatively new discovery from the late Edward Needham's collection at Tregear, Cornwall. 3m x 3m.



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5 *Illicium simonsii* A rare, medium-sized shrub or small tree with long-lasting, fragrant, pale-yellow flowers and glossy evergreen leaves. 5m x 2m. RHS H4. USDA 7a-10b.

6 *Camellia x williamsii* 'Mary Pheobe Taylor' A vigorous shrub with an open, upright habit. Its large, rose-pink flowers have a loose peony form. Can be trained against a wall. 3m x 3m. RHS H5. USDA 7a-9b.

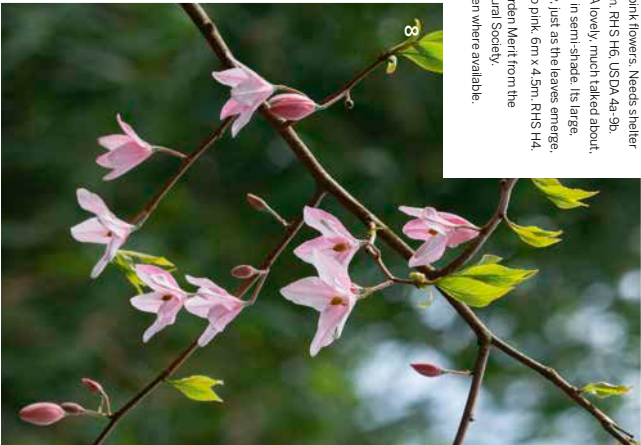
7 *Magrolia x soulangeana* 'Lombardy Rose' This is commonly known as the tulip magnolia, because of its tulip- or goblet-shaped, rose-pink flowers. Needs shelter from strong winds. 6m x 6m. RHS H5. USDA 4a-9b.

8 *Meliodendron xylocarpum* A lovely, much talked about, Chinese tree that does best in semi-shade. Its large, lantern-like flowers come early, just as the leaves emerge, and vary from white through to pink. 6m x 4.5m. RHS H4.

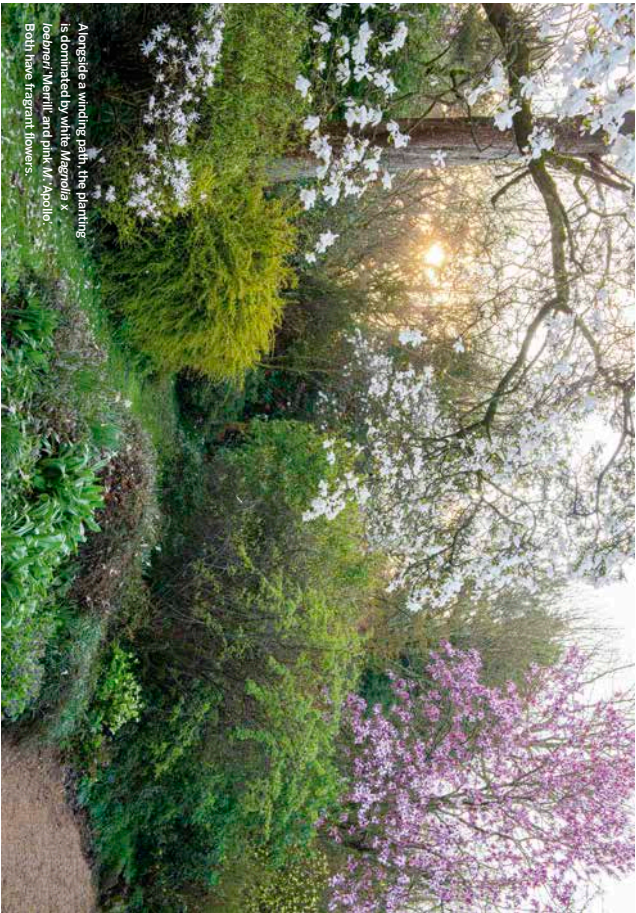
*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. Hardiness ratings given where available.



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When I started, my children thought I was quite mad. I graduated to ‘mildly eccentric’, and now they see my collection has merit

▷ grateful to her – and them. I learn a lot myself from having groups here to visit. It's stimulating."

Among the 7,000 woody plants Maurice has on his database, he has 71 Champion trees (which are the largest of their kind in Britain and Ireland), a staggering 250 different magnolias, 150 camellias and over 250 rhododendrons. Japanese acers, sorbus, carpinus species and hydrangeas are favourites too, then there are philadelphus, deutzias, roses... the list goes on.

Maurice favours what he describes as "the close book-ge system" where plants are near enough together to support each other but not so close as to suppress their individual personalities. When choosing woody plants for a garden, he recommends the 'Five F's' rule: "You're looking to score on flower, foliage, fruit, form and fragrance and if something doesn't measure up on at least two of those, then grow a rose up it!"

While the garden itself has been planted for colour and effect, the arboretum and wood feature rare and exotic specimens, 95 per cent of which are wild-collected specimens – either by Maurice himself or by other plant hunters and institutions – and via seed and plant exchange schemes. Maurice is a past master at propagation ("I could not have run this place without learning to propagate," he says), and is very well connected. He is an honorary member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee, a trustee of the Tree Register of the UK and Ireland, former chairman of the Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia

Group and a life member of the Magnolia Society and International Dendrology Society. He was awarded the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour in 2011 for services to British horticulture.

One of the great advantages of this living database is that it has become an incredible resource for anyone who is studying horticulture, as a wealth of unusual wild species can be examined together in one location and then compared with the many cultivars that Maurice and others have bred from them. Maurice's appetite for plant breeding and propagating has never waned. In particular he has been breeding hydrangeas for the past 20 years and has recently published a book *The Hydrangea: A Reappraisal* (The Crowood Press, £30). He always strives to leave offspring from his plants to share with interested parties who visit and recognises how important it is to disseminate the information he has gathered. "When I started out with all this, my children thought I was quite mad," he says, smiling. "Then I graduated to 'mildly eccentric', and now, they can see that my collection does have merit and, indeed, that it gives a great deal of pleasure to other people." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address White House Farm Arboretum Foundation, Ivy Hatch,

Kent TN15 0NN. **Web** whitehousefarmarboretum.com

Open By prior arrangement, for guided group tours of ten to 50 people, Wednesday – Saturday. See website for details.



This mature pink *Magnolia x soulangeana* Picture is now 40 years old. In front is *Camellia japonica* 'Lady Vanecliff', which has flowers often speckled with pink or red.