



UNIQUE RHODODENDRON HYBRIDS ARE DISCOVERED AT BOWOOD

Hardy hybrids, once thought extinct, are thriving on the Marquis of Lansdowne's Wiltshire estate.

(November 2005) Some thirty hardy hybrids once thought to be extinct have recently been discovered on the Bowood estate, within the woodland rhododendron garden that covers over 60 acres and was laid out circa 1850 by the 3rd Marquess of Lansdowne.

On the gardening grapevine a rumour had started that Bowood might boast such rare hybrids and, in May 2005, Dr Mike Robinson, Chairman of the Royal Horticultural Society's 'Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group' and Miranda Gunn, Chairman of the group's Wessex branch visited the estate to investigate further. They subsequently confirmed the rumours to be true and then, a bit later in the year, Dr. Robinson revisited to take cuttings.

“There are three stages of rhododendron plantings in the UK; between 1850-60, during 1900 and in 1950,” explains Dr. Robinson who has spent 25 years growing, studying and propagating rhododendrons as well as being a prolific writer in the horticultural press. “The early stage rhododendrons were bred by companies such as Waterers and Standish & Noble and hundreds were produced. A lot of these have since died out but Bowood's hardy hybrids, dating from that period, have survived by growing on their own roots instead of being grafted – the former being a much better practice but very unusual at that time.”

Among the Bowood discoveries are: Currieum (Waterers 1851), Lucie (Noble 1862), Speculator (Standish & Noble pre 1850), Stanwellianum (Methven 1868), Dr. Hogg (1862), Jeanie Deans (Standish & Noble 1850), Pasitea (Waterers pre 1865) and Sylph (Waterers 1881)

“The find at Bowood is of significant historical interest,” continues Dr. Robinson. “We have seen similar examples on the east coast of the United States and in Germany but as yet Bowood's hybrids have not been written up in specialist rhododendron publications.”

“The Rhododendron Walks at Bowood have for many years been recognised as featuring some of the earliest known hybrids to be found in the UK,” comments Charlie Lansdowne, the 9th Marquis, “and so have been considered to be one of the most exciting gardens of its type in this country. We are tremendously thrilled about the recent discovery at Bowood of 50 varieties of rhododendron that may not exist elsewhere in the UK.”

A keen gardener himself, who gains great delight from taking cuttings, creating hybrids, making new plantings and opening up further vistas and avenues among the rhododendrons, Lord Lansdowne adds, “This is bound to add even more excitement and colour to the Rhododendron Walks when they burst into bloom for the six week season from the end of April through to early June.”

During this period, the Rhododendron Walks at Bowood are open to the public. Visitors can stroll through sun-dappled glades and marvel at the beauty and abundance of flowers, filling the air with their scent as they nestle below impressive oaks and Scots pines. Each successive generation of the Lansdowne family has added to the collection, planting more rhododendrons, camellias and azaleas.

The woodland garden covers two miles of pathways – signposted with various Lansdowne family names, such as ‘Lord Shelburne’s Walk’, ‘Lady Lansdowne’s Walk’ and the ‘Fitzmaurice Walk’. A leisurely meander - stopping along the way to sit, relax and simply while away the time here – takes at least two hours for the Rhododendron Walks to be enjoyed fully.

The Rhododendron Walks are located two miles away from Bowood House & Gardens, on a totally separate part of the estate’s 2,000-acre Grade I Listed Great Park (mapped out by Capability Brown). As they can not be approached directly from the House & Gardens, but via the A342 instead, the ‘Rhododendron Walks’ are signposted specifically and have their own dedicated entrance.

The Rhododendron Walks are open daily during the flowering season. (Visitors are recommended to telephone Bowood or visit its website beforehand to check on the progress of the flowering season.).

Entrance tickets for the Rhododendron Walks are priced from £4.45 per person (with children up to 15 being admitted free of charge). If visiting Bowood House, on the same day too, then entrance to the Rhododendron Walks is reduced by £1 per person.

Bowood House & Gardens is open to the public from Saturday 31 March – Wednesday 31st October 2007, from 11am-6pm daily – with last admissions at 5pm (closing one hour earlier after the autumn clocks go back). Individual entrance tickets start at £4 per head for children aged 2-4 and go up to £7.70 per adult. Special rates for groups and senior citizens are also available, as are individual and company Season Tickets. For further details, log on to www.bowood.org or call 01249 812102.

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