

Travelling for plants in the Pacific Northwest USA

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We've found in gardening that a lot of plants we particularly liked came from the Pacific Northwest of the USA. This area has a largely temperate climate similar to Britain, and on retirement we were determined to visit Oregon and Washington states and see these plants in their native habitat. This article is based on five visits at different seasons.

Our first visit was in early September, and an exceptionally late spring with a huge snowfall had made the plants later than usual. We arrived in Seattle and set off westwards around the Olympic Peninsula, taking the 50-mile side road up to Olympic National Park, which rises to the 8000ft crags and rich meadows of Hurricane Ridge from which there was a wonderful view of Mt Rainier (fig. 1) (14,410ft), south east of Seattle. Lovely specimens of *Holodiscus discolor* (fig. 2) in full flower lined the road near the coast and, as we ascended, the road was lined with *Eriophyllum lanatum* (Oregon Sunshine), *Anaphalis margaritacea*



Fig. 1 Mt Rainier

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Fig. 2 *Holodiscus discolor*Fig. 3 *Anaphalis margaritacea*Fig. 4 *Sedum spathulifolium*

(Pearly Everlasting) (fig. 3), the only *Anaphalis* in North America, and patches of *Sedum spathulifolium* (fig. 4). In the meadows were rose-purple *Allium acuminatum* and an attractive pinkish-purple *Stachys ajugoides* var. *rigida* (*S. mexicana*). Away from the road under the coniferous trees in some damp shady areas we found *Veratrum viride* (the western USA form) (fig. 5), *Trautvetteria carolinensis* (fig. 6), orange *Lilium columbianum*, yellow *Viola sempervirens*, *Polemonium carneum* and, in slightly drier places, *Lupinus latifolius*. The low-growing *Mahonia nervosa* (fig. 7) in fruit (Oregon Grape) was frequent in the roadside verges; plants raised from this seed thrive in our garden.

We continued out to the west of the Peninsula and Hoh Rainforest Park (fig. 8), which has more than 200 inches of rain per annum. This is an area of temperate rainforest found elsewhere only in New Zealand and Patagonia. It was remarkable for the epiphytes on the trees, and the dense ground cover of *Polystichum munitum* (the Western Sword Fern) (fig. 9) – a highly desirable fern with its metre-long evergreen fronds. We saw this remarkable plant frequently – down the west coast into northern California, and east over the Cascade Mountains into the dry apple-growing area of Washington State, which has just 20 inches annual rainfall. Continuing around the Peninsula we saw the bleak Pacific coast and huge logs in the sea and washed up on the beaches (fig. 10). We've never found the sea inviting here!

Crossing the Cascades east of Seattle, by Stevens Pass towards Leavenworth, we saw lovely pink *Mimulus lewisii* and black-headed *Juncus mertensianus*. One of the fine plants on the dry slopes above the irrigated apple and pear orchards was *Sambucus caerulea* (now placed

as a subspecies of *S. nigra*) (fig. 11), laden with blue fruit. This species is quite widespread in the region, both on the moist west side of the mountains and the eastern drier slope, but is very striking here where it makes small shrubs to about 4m. We collected fruit and raised seedlings, and have a plant here at Glencoe Farm which sadly has never fruited, probably because where we planted it is too shaded and moist. However, we gave a young plant to Olive Mason, who last year brought a branch laden with blue fruit to the Western Counties Group meeting, provoking a lot of interest.

Moving to the south side of Mt Rainier, we found clumps of Bear Grass, *Xerophyllum tenax*, still flowering (fig. 12); meadows filled with *Xerophyllum* occur much earlier in the season. We made our way up to northern Chinook Pass where we found alpine meadows edged with handsome specimens of *Picea engelmannii* and *Abies lasiocarpa* (fig. 13), and filled with the creamy-yellow *Pulsatilla occidentalis* intermingled with the clear-yellow *Erythronium grandiflorum*, and on the adjacent rocks was *Rhododendron albiflorum*. There were large areas of the western form of *Veratrum viride*, with its characteristic pendulous inflorescences, along with *Delphinium menziesii* (fig. 14), *Potentilla flabellifolia* and *Mertensia ciliata*. On another visit, in early June, we tried to visit this area, the pass was open but the snow very deep and there was nothing to see until descending on the east side where *Trillium ovatum* and *Erythronium grandiflorum* were the conspicuous plants in flower.

Another time, in early May, crossing the southern White Pass we found low down on the east side a magnificent stand of *Lysichiton americanus* (Western Skunk Cabbage) (fig. 15)

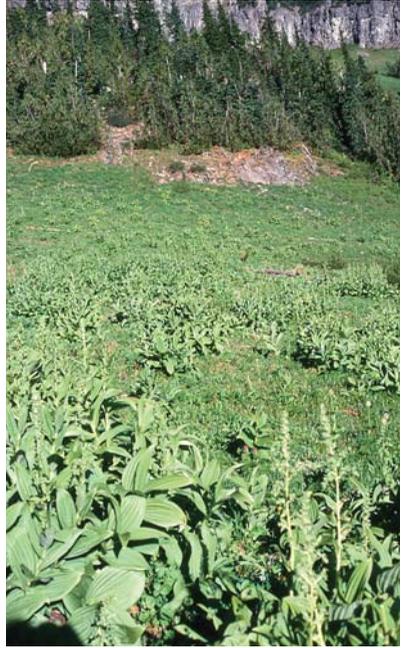


Fig. 5 *Veratrum viride*
(here at Chinook Pass)



Fig. 6 *Trautvetteria carolinensis* at Glencoe Farm



Fig. 7 *Mahonia nervosa*

in flower in swampy ground under coniferous trees; although there were 2–3 acres of it, it wasn't noticeably foetid! Here also, in drier spots, was *Trillium ovatum*, most interestingly growing as single plants, rarely if ever with two or more stems, while we found large clumps are frequent in Northern California. The woodland floor was

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Fig. 8 Hoh Rainforest

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Fig. 9 *Polystichum munitum*, the Western Sword Fern

covered with *Mahonia aquifolium* (fig. 16) with its yellow flowers and it was a delight to find *Calypso bulbosa* (fig. 17) in abundance in moist mossy areas, accompanied by the familiar Twayblade (*Listera cordata*). Huge clumps of *Corydalis scouleri*, *Dicentra formosa* (fig. 18) and specimens of the pretty *Hydrophyllum capitatum* grew with an attractive *Ribes* with tubular pink flowers – *R. howellii*.

On our first visit we went on to approach Mt St Helens from Windy Ridge so we could see into the crater; more recently, in spring, we have seen the crater covered in snow (fig. 19) and found a new visitors' centre. The lakes below were still filled with huge floating logs, an astonishing sight in view of the fact that the eruption had taken place more than 30 years before. Our first visit showed one of the first plants to colonise the devastated areas is, strangely, *Penstemon fruticosus*; in autumn it was fruiting freely, so we brought home some seed which readily germinated and has given us vigorous, free-flowering plants on a scree-style bed. It sets seed freely here too, very different from so many of the hundred-odd taxa of Pacific Northwest blue penstemons, which are generally difficult in cultivation.

As we drove south on Interstate 5 into Oregon, on a side road near Wilsonville (south of Portland) the

banks of a small river were thickly lined with *Maianthemum racemosum* and *Tellima grandiflora*, and the almost ubiquitous Western Sword Fern.

In early May, further south we saw fields blue with *Camassia quamash* (fig. 20) and *Saxifraga oregana*, which seems to withstand mowing here in what are moist meadows. *Camassia* plants raised from seed have

begun to be weeds here at Glencoe, and need immediate deadheading after flowering. The ditches adjacent to the meadows were lined with light purple *Iris tenax*, one of the many Pacific Coast Irises we were to encounter further south. A pleasing low-growing perennial, *Balsamorhiza sagittata* (fig. 21), was abundant on drier parts of the meadows and would make an interesting addition to our gardens.

At Grant's Pass we left the Interstate and turned west into the Siskiyou Mountains to Cave Junction. We checked in with the local Forest Service Office, who are always helpful with maps and advice, and set off towards Babyfoot Lake some 12 miles up at 2000ft, on gravel forestry roads which are passable in Oregon, but not so well maintained in California, where a 4x4 is needed. Now on serpentine rock, we began to find a new range of interesting plants. In early spring we found clumps of another iris, *I. bracteata*, with nicely marked pale yellow falls, and the pale-lemon-flowered *Erythronium citrinum* with very striking marbled foliage. *Maianthemum racemosum* was common, and lovely dwarf



Fig. 10 Olympic Peninsula Pacific coast



Fig. 11 *Sambucus caerulea*



Fig. 12 *Xerophyllum tenax*, Bear Grass

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Fig. 13 *Picea engelmannii* and *Abies lasiocarpa*



Fig. 14 *Delphinium menziesii*



Fig. 15 *Lysichiton americanus*, the Western Skunk Cabbage

Allium falcifolium (fig. 22), with its sickle-shaped leaves and reddish-purple flowers, grew between patches of white-and-pale-mauve or white creeping *Phlox diffusa*. Among them, and frequent in similar habitats, was the small but conspicuous commonly blue-flowered annual, *Collinsia sparsiflora*. *Trillium rivale* occurred in large clumps in moist areas of the roadside banks, and up high there was a

very attractive white form of *Dicentra formosa* with red-tipped inner petals contrasting with the white outer petals, identified as subspecies *oregana*. It's apparently trickier to grow as it requires a well drained soil, but it's played an important part in breeding (see Tebbitt et al: *Bleeding Hearts, Corydalis and their relatives*, Timber Press 2008). On the rocks near a parking area the low-growing red-sepalled *Ribes lobbii* (fig. 23) was common; the fruit we brought back produced a few seedlings – those in open ground

didn't thrive, but those left in pots, though small, flowered well with their handsome red-and-white flowers. We also found the more easily cultivated and equally handsome *Ribes menziesii*, though it wasn't then in flower. It thrives for us at Glencoe Farm, and its purple sepals and white petals are a pleasant curiosity, the flowers lasting for many weeks in April and early May. Following the trail to Babyfoot Lake, the woods carpeted with *Achlys*

triphylla, we came to an open area of bare rocks where *Lewisia cotyledon*, with a range of flower colour from bright pink to bronze-yellow, was abundant, sharing the rocks with several sedums, including *S. oreganum* and *S. spathulifolium*, together with colourful lichens and some dwarf ferns.

On another forestry road we explored Whiskey Creek. This has one of the most spectacular stands of the Cobra Lily, *Darlingtonia californica* (fig. 24), growing on a large wet seep of some acres; it needs to be seen both in early summer to appreciate the flowers and again in autumn for the mature hooded foliage which gives it its name. Also abundant here is *Cypripedium californicum*. Below the seeps were a number of interesting violets, one tufted with yellow flowers (*V. nuttallii*) growing in stony ground flushed with moisture, and *V. cuneata*, with white flowers blotched purple, nearby on open grassy areas between the trees.

We travelled some 12 miles to the Californian State border where the road becomes impassable. Beside the road up we found many interesting plants both in early spring and in autumn. In early June, dotted about in open spaces among the coniferous trees, were spring-flowering *Arbutus menziesii* and fine bushes of *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* in flower. In autumn, big clumps of scarlet-flowered *Zauschneria californica* subsp. *cana* were scrabbling over the roadside scree, and here we found *Asarum marmoratum* with its fine marbled leaves and strange hairy flowers. Both male and female plants of *Garrya buxifolia* lined the banks above the road in one area; it was fascinating to see them on one visit in flower and on another visit in fruit. According to *The Jepson Manual: Higher Plants of California*, this *Garrya* is difficult in cultivation and it's not mentioned by Bean or the Hillier Manual.



Fig. 16 *Mahonia aquifolium*



Fig. 17 *Calypso bulbosa*



Fig. 18 *Dicentra formosa*

Moving west to the coast at Gold Beach, we again took to forestry roads, and the route up to Woodruff Homestead yielded fine specimens of evergreen *Rhododendron macrophyllum* and huge clumps of the Giant Chain Fern, *Woodwardia fimbriata*, growing under mature specimens of Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), one of the many common conifers all down the Pacific Coast States. The real highlight of this coastal forest was the sheets of deciduous *Rhododendron occidentale* (fig. 25), with its delightful fragrance and wide range of colours, from rich pink to white with a yellow throat. The species is the source of the scent in many of the modern hybrid deciduous

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Fig. 19 Mt St Helens

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Fig. 21 *Balsamorhiza sagittata*

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Fig. 20 *Camassia quamash*



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Fig. 22 *Allium falcifolium*

Fig. 23 *Ribes lobbii*

“azaleas”, notably the Knaphill hybrids. In open meadow areas we found abundant clumps of the comparatively narrowed-leafed, yellow-flowered *Iris innominata* growing with blue-flowered and broader-leaved *Iris douglasiana*. There were some natural hybrids with lovely colour combinations. Among them were occasional plants of *Calochortus elegans* (fig. 26), a diminutive Mariposa Lily with pinkish flowers and tepals, with very hairy inner surfaces. Edging the coniferous woodland on drier slopes were a variety of shrubs including *Vaccinium ovatum*, *Ceanothus integerrimus* and *Physocarpus capitatus*, which is the western version of the commonly cultivated eastern USA *P. opulifolius*, from which it differs little. It is interesting that it is the eastern species that we grow rather than the western, which is the more usual situation. Along



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Fig. 24 *Darlingtonia californica*

Fig. 25 *Rhododendron occidentale*Fig. 26 *Calochortus elegans*Fig. 27 *Cornus nuttallii*

the edges of the track were fine specimens of *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*, clothed with foliage to the ground, and the Incense Cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*), a species now thriving in our garden. On a stony area we found a few big patches of *Thermopsis macrophylla* var. *venosa* and sheets of *Iris innominata*.

At Otter Point, north of Gold Beach, a small reserve on the beach has wind- and sea-cut native vegetation. Growing here with *Rhododendron occidentale* and prostrate blue *Ceanothus impressus* were *Maianthemum dilatatum* and *Prosartes* (syn. *Disporum*) *smithii*. Continuing north towards Port Orford there are lovely views of beaches and a less forbidding Pacific Ocean. Here were sheets of *Iris douglasiana* with a big range of flower colour, from pale to deep blue-purple. Off this road near Mt Humbug we found a sheltered, moist valley which had clumps of blue *Iris tenuissima*, *Maianthemum stellatum*, *Delphinium menziesii* and big clumps of the lovely *Fritillaria lanceolata* with its checkered tepals.

The road from Cave Junction to Williams via Dryden was lined with *Ribes sanguineum* in a range of colours, and small trees of *Cornus nuttallii* (fig. 27), the lovely Western Flowering Dogwood which we encountered frequently in southern Oregon and northern California. Its large white bracts open as the leaves unfold, in contrast with the Eastern Flowering Dogwood which flowers before the leaves start to appear.

At the end of our last trip, in 2011, we made our way back to Grant's Pass to go north and fly home, intent on visiting California again soon. 🐼

Lorna and Keith Ferguson are retired professional botanists and life-long gardeners. They now have a maturing garden, Glencoe Farm Garden, in west Gloucestershire, and travel widely looking at plants. See www.ebotany.co.uk.