

BODNANT WINTER GARDEN

Gill & Keith Hallwood

On Sunday 8th February 2015, twenty-one HPS Clwyd Group members and invited friends were met by Bodnant gardener, Gemma Hayes for an exclusive garden tour. It had been foggy as we travelled to Bodnant, along the A55 towards Conwy, but we need not have worried, as it turned out to be a fine day with wonderful views of the snow-clad Snowdonia peaks against a bright blue, cloudless sky.

Gemma told us a little of the history of the gardens, including the development of the Winter Garden which opened to the public just after Christmas in 2012. She told us that the former head gardener, Troy Scott-Smith (now at Sissinghurst) had designed the garden, and it took four years to plan and two years to construct, at a cost of £35,000. It has been very popular with the public, probably because it does us all good to see so much in flower and leaf so early in the year and to find plants we may not have seen before, e.g. the small tree with beautiful deep pink flowers, *Prunus mume* 'Beni-chidori', at the main garden entry.

We heard that a new head gardener has been appointed, John Rippin, who started on 19th January this year, having previously been head gardener at Castle Drogo (National Trust), in Devon. His predecessor, Troy Scott-Smith, came to our group about two years ago, and gave us a very interesting talk about work in progress at that time at Bodnant, so this current visit renewed our link with the garden.

Gemma told us that 350 varieties of plants had been planted in the Winter Garden: 10,000 new plants, in total. It has been built on an area of the garden which had become an overgrown forest of mainly rhododendron, azalea and conifers, and had been closed to the public for some time. Some of the old plants have been retained and give height to the new area, very notably the uncommon and majestic *Cunninghamia lanceolata*. Paths have been increased and upgraded to allow more access for wheelchairs, and to make the beds more easily visible. There are also plans to open further areas of Bodnant: the 'Heather Hump' was mentioned, something to look forward to. Gemma mentioned some plants to look out for. Interestingly, one of these was *Sarcococca ruscifolia* var. *chinensis* 'Dragon Gate', originally collected in 1980 by our HPS President, Roy Lancaster, in Yunnan, China.

We then dispersed to look at the plants. Shrubs and trees with attractive bark or coloured thorny stems abounded, e.g. *Acer* 'White Tigriss', with grey and white horizontally striped bark, which was very showy. Many shrubs and trees were in flower: several hamamelis species/hybrids, also daphnes, including a great many specimens of *D. bholua* 'Jacqueline Postill', which gave us its wonderful scent throughout the garden, as well as its pink flowers and evergreen foliage.

There were a few plants of *D. bholua* 'Peter Smithers', which were younger plants and not quite in flower, but this plant had been recommended to us as superior to *D. bholua* 'Jacqueline Postill' by the late Margaret Owen, formerly an HPS Shropshire Group member. We look forward to comparing them in years to come.

There were several varieties of pittosporum with interesting foliage, e.g. *P. tenuifolium* 'Tom Thumb', with its bronze-purple leaves, height 40-60cm, which would be lovely in a small garden. There were many examples of the use of heathers, mainly *Erica x darleyensis* forms: 'Furzey' (pink), 'George Rendall' (pink), 'Ghost Hills', 'Darley Dale' and f. *albiflora* 'Silberschmelze' (white). Other ground cover was provided by swathes of bulbs, especially *Cyclamen coum* in varying shades of pink and white; *Iris danfordiae* (yellow); *Iris reticulata* 'Katherine Hodgkin' (grey-blue); 'Pauline' (deep purple); 'Clairette' (pale blue), and snowdrops: *Galanthus* 'Atkinsii', 'Blewbury Tart',

'Elfin', 'S. Arnott', 'Brenda Troyle', plus *G. nivalis* in profusion. Small clumps of bulbs also featured: a very early, yellow, mid-height *Narcissus*, 'Rijnveld's Early Sensation' in full flower, and *Fritillaria meleagris* (snakes head lily), quietly showy. The hellebores were just starting to flower, the majority of these being Ashwood hybrids.

Several forms of *Bergenia* gave good colour, even though not yet in flower, for example *B.* 'Eric Smith' with maroon leaves of the usual *Bergenia* shape, *B. purpurascens* 'Helen Dillon', again maroon-leaved, but with very upright, long oval leaves, *B. cordifolia* 'Lunar Glow', red-bronze leaf and *B.* 'Eden's Dark Margin', deep green leaf with red edges. Ferns and grasses, many unusual, also added interest.

We were very impressed with the thorough labelling of plants throughout the whole garden; without it we would not have been able to amass so much information, in order to seek out plants we particularly liked. Having explored the winter garden, members went off to other parts of the garden and then met up later in the tea room, to report on other treasures discovered and remark on what had been a memorable visit. We are sure that many of us will go back again to see this wonderfully stimulating winter garden.

~ First published in the Clwyd Group Newsletter, September 2015 ~