

## The Role of Rhododendrons in Cornish Gardens®

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### INTRODUCTION

For gardeners and horticulturists the words “Cornish Garden” conjure up images of places lush, green, moist, mossy, shady, mature, and dramatic. They are extraordinary collections of exotic plants flourishing in the midst of a rich native flora. The fundamental achievement of this type of West Country garden is that the planting mix is often now accepted as being natural and the intervention of the gardener is barely appreciated. But Gertrude Jekyll was always quick to point out, regarding her successful naturalistic plantings, that “they are more hap than hazard”.

The most prominent, ubiquitous, and striking plant in this “natural exotic mix” has to be *Rhododendron*. The flowering of mature specimens is expected in a spring garden and the size and splendour of many has earned them the name “lilies of the sky”. In fact, so used are we to the idea of the Cornish Garden with its integral rhododendrons that it is hard to imagine that up until the latter half of the nineteenth century very few would have been seen.

### THE PLACE OF RHODODENDRONS IN CORNISH GARDEN HISTORY

**Cornish Garden Landscape Influences.** The gardens of estates such as Cothele, Catchfrench, and Trelowarren all have Medieval origins and the parterres at Lanhydrock are Tudor. Although the great eighteenth century landscape “improvers”, William Kent and Lancelot “Capability” Brown, did not cross the Tamar, their landscape style was picked up by some of the land-owning gentry, notably at Trelissick. Landscape designer William Nesfield worked for the Boscowen family at Tregothnan and for the Carlyon family at Tregrehan. Humphrey Repton was employed at Anthony House and John Loudon of the Picturesque Movement worked at Cothele and Carclew. The West Country was following the trends but very soon it was to become the hot bed and the trend setter.

During the Victorian era the established land owners were enriched by industry and new wealth was being created by families such as the Rogers, Shilsons, and Foxes. All were infected with gardening mania. They realised the potential of Cornwall’s maritime climate, sheltered valleys, and acidic soils and spent money on embellishing existing gardens and creating new ones.

**The Introduction of Rhododendrons.** The origins of Cornish rhododendron fever can be traced back to the expedition of Joseph Hooker in Sikkim-Himalaya from 1847 to 1851. He collected 43 species, plants and seeds of which were distributed by his father William Hooker, Director of Royal Botanical Garden (RBG) Kew. The Hookers realised the potential of the West Country and consequently many first generation Hooker seedlings found their way into West Country gardens.

Recipients of Hooker’s introductions included: Sir Charles Lemon, of Carclew, who passed material on to John Tremayne of Heligan; Sir Thomas Auckland of Killerton; Messrs Veitch of Exeter Nursery; John Luscombe, Coombe Royal, Devon; the Shilson family at Tremough; Michael Williams of Burncoose and Mr Robert

Were Fox of Penjerrick, who then distributed to Glendurgan and Trebah gardens.

Notable species introduced by Joseph Hooker: *Rhododendron falconeri*, *R. griffithianum*, *R. thomsonii*, *R. cinnabarinum*, and *R. campylocarpum*. He also brought back quantities of seed from *R. arboreum* although this species had already been introduced to cultivation in 1811.

Of equal significance as a collector, when we consider the hybrids which followed, was Robert Fortune who in 1855 was sent to China to bring back the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*). From this expedition he introduced seed of a rhododendron which was to be named *R. fortunei*.

## RHODODENDRON HYBRIDISATION IN CORNWALL

On receiving these early species introductions west country gardeners and nurseries wasted little time in acquiring skills to successfully raise the seedlings and as soon as nature would allow they began to hybridise. Two of the greatest achievers were Samuel Smith, the head gardener at Penjerrick, and Richard Gill, gardener for the Shilson family at Tremough and later a nursery proprietor.

Smith was Head Gardener at Penjerrick from 1889 to 1935 when the property was owned by Robert Barclay Fox. He produced many excellent hybrids which have stood the test of time, for example: 'Penjerrick', a straight cross of the Hooker introductions *R. campylocarpum* and *R. griffithianum*; 'Werei', commonly seen in large rhododendron gardens (it is *R. arboreum* × *R. thomsonii*); *R.* 'Barclayi Robert Fox', was named after the owner of Penjerrick (it is a hybrid between *R. thomsonii* and the hybrid 'Glory of Penjerrick' — the latter had been produced by Richard Gill at Tremough, illustrating the strong links that existed between these two men).

Richard Gill was gardener for the Shilson family at Tremough, a property near Penryn. His skill, combined with the very good growing conditions offered by the location of Tremough, enabled these early introductions to flourish and become sizeable plants in relatively few years.

By 1876, Henry Mills, Head Gardener of Enys, was giving high praise to Tremough in an article in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*. "For some years past the plants from this place have taken a leading position in all the horticultural shows in this county, the admiration of all visitors, and the high commendations of professional".

Such was the quality of the specimens that in 1898 a number were given back to RGB Kew, for the new wing of the Temperate House. These included plants up to 15 feet high and of nearly 2 tons in weight. A plant of *R.* 'Shilsoni' (*R. barbatum* × *R. thomsonii*) needed a separate railway carriage.

Gill's plants stocked many Cornish gardens but he wasn't the only nursery or distributor around. The Veitch nursery of Exeter was of particular significance as it employed the famous plant collector Ernest Wilson who, in 1899, undertook an expedition to the Western Himalayas and sent back seed of 12 species including more seed from the hybridiser's dream plant, *R. fortunei*. Subsequent Wilson expeditions yielded a further 31 species which were distributed by Veitch and also by John Charles Williams of Caerhayes, who had part funded Wilson's trips.

Williams (known as J.C.) was an exuberant amateur. As well as Wilson, he also backed George Forrest's 1910 and 1912-14 trips to NE Burma and Yunnan. He personally made up the seed packets and distributed 42 species. Inspired and encouraged by Williams, the owners of other Cornish gardens took to serious cultivation and hybridising of what became known as "God's genus". They included Percival

Dacre Williams (known as P.D.) at Lanarth and E.J.P. Magor at Lamellen. Here are some of the hybrids they produced:

### J.C. Williams.

'Blue Tit' (*R. impeditum* × *R. augustinii*); 'Yellow Hammer' (*R. sulfureum* × *R. flavidum*); 'Red Admiral' (*R. arboreum* × *R. thomsonii*); 'Moonstone Pink' (*R. williamsianum* × *R. campylocarpum*); 'Susan' (*R. campanulatum* × *R. fortunei* subsp. *fortunei*); 'Robin Hood' (*R. calophytum* × *R. sutchuenensis*).

### P.D. Williams.

'Saint Keverne' (*R. arboreum* subsp. *zeylanicum* × *R. griffithianum*);

### E.J.P. Magor.

'Saint Tudy' (*R. impeditum* × *R. augustinii*); 'Saint Breward' (*R. impeditum* × *R. augustinii*)

These dilettantes built a well earned reputation and respect. Their excitement about new species introductions evolved into a passion for hybridisation. They were breeding at a time when success was not solely measured in terms of commercial value. Moreover they had the time, space, and patience to grow out the progeny. Like Robert the Bruce's spider, they were prepared to "try, try, and try again".

It is of no surprise that they are to whom Lionel de Rothschild turned when embarking on establishing his famous collection at Exbury, Hampshire.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXBURY AND CORNISH COLLECTIONS

The son of E.J. Magor of Lamellen remembers between 1925 and 1932 regular spring visits by Mr. Lionel de Rothschild, Mr. Henry McLaren (later 2nd Lord Aberconway), and Colonel Stephenson-Clarke of Borde Hill (pers. comm). They scrutinised the garden and went away with their cars packed full of young plants.

Lionel de Rothschild became one of the major players in the rhododendron world and was one of the founders of the Rhododendron Society. He created the 250-acre garden with its rhododendron collection at Exbury in a 2 decade period from 1919.

He recorded all his hybrids in a stud book. This records 1210 hybrids which he considered successful. There were 452 of these were worthy of being individually named and registered with the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS).

Several of the most famous Exbury hybrids would not have been possible without material and help from West Country gardens: 'Naomi' (*R. aurora* × *R. fortunei*) ['Aurora' is a Gill hybrid (*R. kewense* × *R. thomsonii*)]; 'Carita' (*R. 'Naomi'* × *R. campylocarpum*); 'Lionel's Triumph' (*R. 'Naomi'* × *R. lacteum*); 'Charlotte de Rothschild' (*R. fortunei* × *R. 'Saint Keverne'*) ('Saint Keverne' was bred by P.D. Williams at Lanarth); 'Oxslip' (*R. williamsianum* × *R. wardii*, both early Williams introductions); 'Damaris' (*R. 'Dr. Stocker'* × *R. campylocarpum*) ('Dr. Stocker' was raised by Veitch); 'Mariloo' (*R. 'Dr. Stocker'* × *R. lacteum*); 'Fortune' (*R. sino-grande* × *R. macabeanum*) (the *R. sino-grande* pollen came from plants at Trewithen).

## CONSERVATION OF SOME EARLY INTRODUCTIONS

**In Cornwall.** I visited Tremough in 1999 with the Cornwall Gardens Trust. At this time the original house was being used as a girls' convent. In the grounds were thickets of stunning rhododendrons, most of the arboreum type. They were the remnants of Gill's nursery beds. The Trust was anxious to make records of these plantings as the property was due to change hands and the new owners, Falmouth Art College, planned to extend the buildings into these areas of the grounds.

We made an inventory of the mature rhododendrons, though in most cases definitive identifications proved impossible. However, we were able to locate a specimen of 'Beauty of Tremough', a hybrid produced by Richard Gill which had particular significance to me.

I became aware of Gill's hybrids very early on during my time as manager of Trebah Garden. Major Hibbert, the owner, was quick to point out the gems in Trebah's rhododendron collection: 'Trebah Gem' and 'Glory of Penjerrick'. I was fascinated to learn that these were all Gill's hybrids and even more so that they were all selections from the same cross between *R. griffithianum* × *R. arboreum*. I also learnt that there were more named hybrids from this cross: 'Gill's Triumph', 'Gillii', 'Gill's Goliath', 'Glory of Leonardslee', and 'Beauty of Tremough'.

All the selections are vigorous with a tree-like habit. The flowers vary from red to pale pink, borne in loose trusses. The buds are all a deeper shade than the flowers adding to the beauty of the truss. It is said Gill's success was due to a particularly fine form of *R. griffithianum* obtained as a layer from a plant growing in a garden on the Italian lakes.

I was impressed by the beauty and vulnerability of these hybrids. Ros Smith of Duchy College felt the same and I passed material of 'Trebah Gem', 'Glory of Penjerrick', and 'Beauty of Tremough' to her to micropropagate. Conventional propagation was proving nigh on impossible with such old material. The results have been promising but the success of the micropropagation will only be borne out if the flowers come true to type as the process notoriously causes genetic disruption.

**At Exbury.** We are actively propagating Lionel de Rothschild's hybrids to restock the garden for future generations to enjoy. We are able to do this because the majority are of a shrub-like habit which lend themselves easily to layering. Luckily, we also have the skill of a long-serving Head Gardener Douggie Betteridge.

I think it is important that Exbury and other gardens conserve the priceless legacy of *Rhododendron* taxa left by Lionel de Rothschild and his West Country gardening comrades. After all, *Rhododendrons* are integral to West Country gardens.