

Issue No. 49

May 2018

Friends of Thwaite Gardens Newsletter



Diary DATES

Open Day

Sunday May 20th

There will again be a plant stall with a wide variety of plants for sale. Donations of plants from Friends would be welcome. There will be the usual refreshments served from 11 am in the new classroom, and we would very much welcome contributions of home baking to this stall, as it usually goes down very well!

Other ways in which you can help to make the day a success are:- Welcoming visitors, assisting with refreshments, handing out brochures, signing up new members, manning the plant stall or taking admission fees

Admission to the Open Day is free to members on production of their membership cards and for non-members is the very reasonable price of £3.00 with accompanied under 16s free, so please tell all your family and friends about the event and let's try and make this year's Open Day even more of a success than last year.

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#### **Gardens Opening Times Reminder**

**Monday to Thursday 10am to 3.30 pm  
Fridays 10am to 3pm except on Bank Holidays and at other  
times when the University is closed**

## TREES OF THWAITE : HANDKERCHIEF TREE

*(Davidia involucrata)*



I have chosen a tree this time which can be seen in the first part of the garden, given that access has recently been prevented to the woods and lakeside.

We have two specimens of this tree at Thwaite though neither of them is a particularly good example. Both, though quite old are also small, but they do flower well and are unmistakeable. The one to which we still have access is in the little copse at the top of the inner garden to the east of the wooden gate. It has been suppressed for years by excessive shade from other trees, particularly a neighbouring beech. However, this tree has recently died and been felled so it is possible that our *Davidia* may have a new lease of life. Our second *Davidia* (out of bounds) is weak for different and more mysterious reasons, possibly due to excessively wet ground, or chronic infection by honey fungus. Although only a few metres high it has die back in its crown and has sprouted quite prolifically from its base – which is never a good sign.

*Davidia* is one of those trees which command reverence from tree enthusiasts and collectors. Botanically unique, it hails from western China where it is endangered in the wild. It was originally introduced to western gardens by

plant collector Earnest Wilson. The story goes – and I think it is true - that he found a single specimen in full bloom in some remote locality and was so taken that he determined to return later in the year to collect seeds. He was mortified to find, however, that on his return, it had been cut down and used to build a house! He had to re-find another before he could send seed to Europe and where it became a sensation.

Why a sensation? The tree itself though graceful is not particularly majestic. Except when in bloom. The flowers are extraordinary in themselves but collectively they produce an effect that seems almost magical. Each bloom consists of what look like two snow white leaves (technically bracts) enveloping a central boss of fluffy dark stamens with stigma in the centre. Each flower is pendulous and mobile with the ability to catch in the breeze in such a way that *en masse* it brings to mind a tree full of fluttering white birds, or perhaps chains of small flags. A popular alternative and certainly more poetic name for *Davidia* is thus ‘Dove Tree’.

But there is another quality to this beauty that is harder to define – almost subliminal in nature. While there are many spectacularly white flowered trees – like pear, thorn or even butterfly like flowering dogwood, in each of these the effect is one of solidity and brightness. The whiteness of *Davidia* on the other hand is more ethereal - flirting between shadow and sunlight, transmuting between green and white and back again, such that one only really appreciates its effect when standing directly below the canopy and even then perhaps never quite fully. Maybe it is this quality that has inspired its third poetic name – ‘Ghost Tree’?

Far better examples of *Davidia* than Thwaite’s can be seen even in Yorkshire – Newby Park’s perhaps being the best. Overall it seems the tree does much better in the South/South Western quarter of the UK where it seems to appreciate the greater warmth and rainfall. Here some truly spectacular individuals can be found. *Davidia* is however completely winter- hardy though it is very vulnerable to late frost which can totally blacken the new leaves and terminate that year’s floral display. These reasons combine to make its success

most likely in a sheltered semi woodland spot on rich moisture retentive soil. Give it plenty of space to develop.

The tree readily produces fruits which resemble small hard plums each containing a single 'stone'. One might be tempted to grow these, but if so, be sure you have plenty of years ahead of you in the same garden because they are likely to take a couple of decades or more to flower and rather longer to become a spectacle. However, ready grown *Davidia* is not difficult to obtain commercially, sometimes in ordinary garden centres, though the same warning about flowering age applies to small specimens.

There are two forms of *Davidia*, var. *involucrata* which has downy leaf undersides and var. *vilmoriniana* which does not and is said to be hardier and commoner overall.

John Killingbeck April 2018

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MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL REMINDER

***Annual subscriptions were due on 1st November 2017.
They are £8 per person or £12 for two people living at the
same address***

***Anyone who has not paid by the Open Day 2018 will be
removed from the database.***

***Cheques should be made payable to "The Friends of
Thwaite Gardens" and sent to the treasurer, whose
contact details are on the last page of this Newsletter.***

***Please note: new members who have joined on, or
after, the Open Day in May 2017 do not have to renew
their subscriptions until November 2018.***

PLANT OF THE MONTH : AZARA (*Azara serrata*)



This is a magnificent evergreen shrub – potentially almost a small tree which for no obvious reason is rarely encountered in East Yorkshire. There are several species of *Azara*, which hail from South America, generally in the wetter areas of Chile.

The only *Azara* species encountered with any regularity here, though even this is quite uncommon, is *A. microphylla*. Sometimes affectionately dubbed ‘The Chocolate Tree’ – it has strong vanilla/chocolate scented but very tiny greenish flowers early in the year. It has small rounded leaves and seems to be the hardiest species, only damaged or killed in the worst winters here. A reputation for being less hardy has perhaps limited the uptake of other species like *A. serrata* more widely, though on the whole this reputation is perhaps exaggerated. Although our Thwaite specimen has been killed back once or twice over the years, it has regenerated and persisted for decades here. It grows next to the lean to greenhouse in the corner bordering the car park.

Azara serrata is altogether different from *A. microphylla* in the qualities it brings to the garden. It has a lusher appearance with bright glossy green foliage which remains fresher looking than most evergreens through the winter. Its habit is loose and mobile adding to its softer than average look for a winter evergreen. Although a shrub, *Azara* is large enough to pass muster as a small tree in smaller gardens and worth considering in this role. Without becoming

excessively large, its light evergreen foliage and slightly cascading habit does not become oppressive and in any case responds well to pruning.

But it is the flowers that are the real 'star turn' of this species. Produced in dense fluffy masses resembling if anything perhaps golden yellow snow along the wiry branches, this plant comes as close as any to the Mimosa blossom of Mediterranean gardens or the coastal far south west of England. This is combined with a distinctive spicy fresh clove like perfume. So for two weeks of the year it is a real treasure and almost unique in its effect. Sometimes a scatter of tiny white berries follow the flowers though rarely sufficient to be interesting. I have never tried to grow the seeds but in any case, cuttings are far easier.

Soil conditions, as long as reasonably well drained do not seem an issue for this species. It gives of its best in sheltered sunny position but will also look good in moderate shade or fair exposure. Severe winters will take their toll and very late April or May frost may kill the developing flower buds but otherwise *Azara* will endure most climatic conditions in this area.

A similar, about equally rare species is *A. lanceolata*, which has narrow serrated leaves, so if encountered is a suitable alternative to *A. serrata*. One or two even rarer species exist. I have at home one which I am unable to name precisely but if anything seems to be an intermediate, possibly hybrid between the above, or might be a different species entirely. Either way, it is very successful in two parts of the garden. One is a sheltered wall shrub while the other is an exposed 'small tree' and both are good in different ways. Both were damaged by the exceptional cold of December 2010 but not completely ruined and have recovered rapidly.

John Killingbeck April 2018

A Note From The Treasurer

Hello everyone. At long last it seems as if spring is actually here and we can envision sunny days in our gardens. What a long cold, wet winter and early spring (so called) we have had.

This is the newsletter in the lead-up to Open Day, this year on Sunday the 20th May. Despite the wet and cold, the volunteers have been carefully sowing, planting and nurturing young plants for you to come along and buy. I never cease to be amazed at how much they do.

The rose arch was pruned in January, under the guidance of Jean Major. It is a massive task and takes many weeks but now it is sprouting well and we can look forward to another lovely crop of roses.

Nowadays, different parts of the botanic gardens are “managed” by specific volunteers, with advice from John Killingbeck on request. In addition, a small group moved earth from the huge pile left by the builders beside the new classroom. (Yes, it did feel like moving heaven and earth!) Some was redistributed around the gardens, some remains in situ, now planted up to provide an attractive hillock. One of the celebrity gardeners recently said he thought every interesting garden should have a hill in it. Well, now we have!

Others will tell you of our efforts to liaise with the university about the lake area of the gardens. We will keep you informed as best we can. Meanwhile, the Botanic Gardens part remains open to Friends during the week and the lake part will be open on Open Day, as will the greenhouses.

I thank you all for your support as members. The membership 2017/18 lists around 575 members, although not everyone has renewed for the year ending 30.10.18. Not only is your financial contribution essential (via membership fees) but we need to be able to tell the university what an important and valued facility we have within our community. Our bank balance shows that

we have almost exactly the same amount of money as we did this time last year so all the costs of our spending on plants, trees, compost, bark chippings, gravel, etc, has been covered by our membership fees and what we make on Open Day and on the Garden Walks.

Thanks to our volunteers too, always cheerful and committed to the gardens whatever the weather throws at us. This Open Day you will see us wearing posh sashes, all made by Olive, so you will know who we are.

Annie Bourton Card

Treasurer

25.4.18

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## **Unnatural Gardening**

On 20<sup>th</sup> March some 40 of us gathered in the Methodist Hall in Cottingham to hear retired botanist Peter Williams bring his scientific training to question some of the concepts underlying the current vogue for “natural” and “wildlife” gardens.

The “natural” garden is based on the concept that native plants are better for biodiversity than alien ones, and Peter pointed out that although this was shown in the 1980s to be true for trees, it has never been proven for flowers and shrubs. He instanced Himalayan Balsam as an alien which provides a rich nectar source for native insects, while some attractive “wild” plants are in fact ancient introductions, either by prehistoric farmers (Poppy, White Campion) or by escape from Roman or Mediaeval gardens (Snowdrop, Fritillary).

Seed packets purporting to provide “floral meadows” usually contain colourful but short-lived annuals which occur naturally as arable weeds, while On 20<sup>th</sup> March some 40 of us gathered in the Methodist Hall in Cottingham to hear retired botanist Peter Williams bring his scientific training to question some of the concepts underlying the current vogue for “natural” and “wildlife” gardens.

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Turning to wildlife, Peter showed slides of the damage caused to his garden by some of the cutest forms of wildlife – rabbits, grey squirrels and roe deer all devour flowers and vegetables and damage the bark of young trees, while woodmice will dig up and eat bulbs. Conversely sparrowhawks, disliked by some, control pigeons and do less damage to the small bird population than cats.

Small areas of nettles in a garden do nothing to help butterflies – research has shown that Red Admirals, Peacocks and the like will only lay eggs on large nettle beds growing in full sunshine. However “bug hotels” are valuable in encouraging Solitary Bees – provided the hollow stems in them are at least six inches long, which was not the case in some of the expensive models depicted in Peter’s slides. The most important insects are small, overlooked, harmless and part of the normal ecosystem: they will thrive without any special measures provided they are not sprayed with insecticide.

After a brief tour of some expensive and unnecessary “natural gardening aids”, such as Mycorrhizal Fungi, Water-Retaining Crystals, and unspecified “bioadditives”, the talk finished by considering how important gardens – natural or otherwise – might be in preserving Britain’s natural biodiversity. Research, it seems, is sparse and difficult to conduct, but concludes that gardens, however wildlife-friendly, are just too small and too isolated from one another to substitute for large-scale nature reserves.

Rohan Lewis

## **Contact Details**

### **Chairman**

John Killingbeck  
7 Ash Grove  
Market Weighton  
YO4 33DY

01430 872312

[johnkillingbeck80@gmail.com](mailto:johnkillingbeck80@gmail.com)

### **Treasurer**

Annie Bourton-Card  
595 Endyke Lane  
Hull  
HU6 8TE

01482 849158

[card33690@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:card33690@hotmail.co.uk)

### **Secretary**

Vacancy

### **Newsletter Editor**

Sue Swetez  
141 Mill Rise  
Skidby  
Cottingham  
HU16 5UA

01482 846487

[s.swetez@hull.ac.uk](mailto:s.swetez@hull.ac.uk)

***Friends' website:- [www.thwaite-gardens.wordpress.hull.ac.uk](http://www.thwaite-gardens.wordpress.hull.ac.uk)***

