

Issue No. 54

February 2020

Friends of Thwaite Gardens Newsletter



Diary DATES

Diary Dates

Meeting on Tuesday 24th March,

7.30 at Cottingham Methodist Church

A bees' guide to a balanced diet.

Dr James Gilbert, Lecturer in Zoology, University of Hull

The garden buzzes with bees in summer, merrily pollinating our flowers and crops. But behind this country scene, the relationship bees have with the flowers they visit is as complex as any social network.

We know bees are important, and we should help them. But amid all this complexity, how do we know which plants are really best to grow to help bee populations? This talk will focus on how you can help encourage wild bees in your garden, and how at Hull we are working to help make more.

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### **Open Day**

This is scheduled for Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May, but unfortunately Thwaite Hall has not yet been sold and we do not yet know if we will be able to include the main grounds in the Open Day.

We will, of course, keep you informed of the situation.

## TREES OF THWAITE – WESTERN RED CEDAR

*(Thuja plicata)*



The two most easily identified specimens of this tree at Thwaite are to be found at the rear of Green Wickets lawn. They form two broad pyramids, though are slightly overshadowed by some golden Leyland cypresses.

*Thuja plicata* is quite a common tree in the county and in Britain overall. Our specimens are quite good for this part of the UK although rather better examples will be seen in wetter western areas of Britain. It hails from Western North America and is one of the many giant trees to be found there. In Britain it is generally of more modest proportions, though has exceeded 40M so far in Scotland. One of the more striking features of some specimens of this tree is for the lower branches to curve downwards to touch the ground and layer themselves, eventually forming a giant tepee-like effect with an open interior. This feature is only starting to develop in our Thwaite trees but in many stately home gardens, such trees are often used to form the focus of adventure play areas for children where they are easily climbed and somewhat ‘mysterious’.

In its homeland and also in some parts of the UK, *T. plicata* is grown as a timber tree. The wood is quite valuable and well known to many gardeners as 'Cedar Wood' – renown for use in ornamental greenhouses and such like. It has a reputation for rot resistance as well as being attractively red and slightly fragrant. This is where the "Cedar" part of the Western Red Cedar name comes from. In spite of this, *Thuja* is not related to true cedar (*Cedrus*) at all and apart from both being conifers, the two are otherwise quite dissimilar. "Cedar" is the name given by the timber trade for a number of fragrant reddish woods that resemble the original. Many of these others are also conifers but some are even more remotely related broadleaved trees like "Chinese Cedar" (*Toona*) and tropical hardwood, *Cedrella*. The upshot is that Cedar is a name applied rather indiscriminately.

Although ultimately far too big for the average garden, *T. plicata* is commonly grown in domestic situations as well as parks and estates. It is very fast growing and is sometimes recommended as a better alternative to the notorious Leyland cypress. However, in terms of speedy growth in reaching excessive size, the *Thuja* is only a little less problematic. Just like the Leyland, it can be made into a successful hedge – arguably a more attractively brighter, shinier, green one. One particularly pleasant feature is the fragrance of the foliage when bruised or cut. The odour reminds different people of different things but to most it resembles something fruity, particularly pear drops.

*Thuja plicata* is very hardy and uncommonly tolerant of chalk soil – always a useful trait in East Yorkshire. Unlike many conifers, though, it has not given rise to many ornamental varieties. There are a few rather rare yellow forms but the best and most widespread is *T.p.* 'Zebrina'. Though somewhat variable in shape, this mostly resembles, at a distance, a rather lovely pale yellow pyramid. Close to, the foliage is zebra striped in green, gold and almost white. We actually have a specimen of 'Zebrina' at Thwaite among the conifer beds in Green Wickets. Unfortunately it is badly crowded by neighbours so is somewhat shapeless and unnoticeable. Otherwise 'Zebrina' might be said to be among the best golden conifers of all for a large garden.

There are a few other *Thuja* species commonly grown in gardens in various ornamental forms. They resemble Lawson's Cypress type "conifers" but most can be separated by their sweeter fragrance.

John Killingbeck Jan. 2020

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**PLANT OF THE MONTH – WINTER STEM DOGWOOD (*Cornus sanguinea*
'Midwinter Fire')**



This shrub, which can be seen in quantity in our winter border, caused quite a stir when it became widely available in the 1990s and was soon popular. There were already well established Dogwoods and a few other plants which were grown primarily for the rich colour of their winter twig bark. The two main ones were *Cornus alba* with red stems (particularly in the variety 'Siberica') and *Cornus stolonifera* (now *C. sericea*) 'Flaviramea' with yellow stems. Both these are still popular, though particularly in the case of *alba*, tend to become coarse heavy shrubs, a bit overwhelming in a small garden and if unpruned, decidedly

oppressive. By contrast, *Cornus* 'Midwinter Fire' and similar clones like 'Winter Beauty' and 'Magic Flame' are more lightly proportioned and extend the colour range with a warming creamy orange intensifying to deep rose pink on twigs exposed to the sun.

The stem dogwoods are particularly popular with landscapers. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, they are extremely hardy and easy to establish in all sorts of less than perfect situations. Secondly, the pruning and maintenance requires almost no skill beyond hacking to the ground periodically. Thirdly, they look most impressive in extensive swathes, making them straightforward to specify for simple and cheap mass planting plans.

This last point about mass planting is worth bearing in mind even when using them in smaller gardens. They are always more effective in groups rather than isolated individuals; not necessarily packed together but certainly repeated through a border. This is where *Cornus* 'Midwinter Fire' wins out over the coarser types, where only large gardens can support quantities of the latter.

Another difference with *Cornus sanguinea* is that it is a native shrub, while the others are exotics. This means that 'Midwinter Fire' is of some use for wildlife – most notably the pretty Holly Blue butterfly whose larvae feed on the buds. The name "sanguinea" means bloody and refers to the fact that the wild *C. sanguinea* is suffused with a deep red pigment. This is noticeable in the twigs but particularly in its autumn leaf colour. Even so, the wild plant is relatively dull compared to the rich salmon pink of 'Midwinter Fire', whose autumn colour is also good, but of a golden sometimes pinkish yellow.

As mentioned, maintenance of 'Midwinter Fire' is easy. As the brightest twigs are the youngest, it is customary to cut the plant back hard every two or three years – down to the base if preferred, which encourages vigorous long replacement twigs of better colour. Otherwise it will become a large twiggy shrub of more limited merit.

One complaint made by some gardeners about 'Midwinter Fire' and its ilk, is that of suckering, which an established plant will do with some vigour. In some

settings, this might be seen as an enhancement of the mass display of twigs, insinuating itself naturalistically through a border. Other gardeners of a perhaps more disciplined and tidy approach, may find it a problem.

Cornus 'Midwinter Fire' is readily available in garden centres.

John Killingbeck, Jan.2020



Membership renewals, finances & volunteers.

As you all know, we are reliant on our membership fees as a source of income. After Open Day, when a large number of people joined for the first time, we had approximately 350 members (220 households). Many of you (more than half) have already renewed your memberships in this current year (1.11.19 – 31.10.20), despite us omitting to include a renewal form with the Autumn newsletter. We now have an updated renewal form which includes DPA (Data Protection Act) information, as required by law. We hope those of you yet to renew will do so soon.

Our income essentially comes from membership fees and Open Day takings. During the course of the year, we spend as much as we receive. Most of this money is spent on things directly associated with maintaining and improving the Botanic Gardens – a wide variety of plants (specialist plants and shrubs can be expensive), compost for seeds, plants and shrubs, bark for use as mulch, and equipment such as tools and treatments for plants.

The Friday volunteers give generously of their time. When I started as a volunteer 9 years ago, there were about a dozen of us and we worked from 10.00 – 12.00 every Friday morning. Now there are 21 of us, many of whom work from 9.30 -1.00pm. Two or three people come in mid-week as well for a couple of hours. Of course, not everyone can come in every week, but there are usually about 16 volunteers each Friday.

We have a coffee break at 11.00 and this enables the group to come together and to share information and ideas, as well as enjoying each other's company before going back to the four corners of the garden to tend plants, to weed, dig, plant, clear leaves and other detritus, to prune and to develop new planted areas.

By the time you read this, the rose arch will have been pruned back, a task which takes a number of weeks under the guidance of Jean and Pat.

We work in partnership with the University which owns the site and maintains the structures therein, deals with any fallen trees and also cuts the expanses of grass. However, most Botanic Gardens round the country have professionals who manage the garden and who advise the volunteers accordingly. The plants and planting at Thwaite Gardens are entirely the responsibility of the volunteers. Visitors from other gardens have expressed some amazement at this, so I would like to take this opportunity to thank the group for their energy and commitment and to express appreciation of their knowledge and enthusiasm.



Area being extended and developed into a grassed bed.

Mason bees - a beginner's guide

This year, for the very first time, the 'Friends of Thwaite Gardens' are going to become bee guardians. We will not be keeping honey bees in hives, but Red Mason Bees, which do not sting, and are not aggressive. We will learn more about creating a suitable environment from James Gilbert, who is giving our March talk entitled 'A bees' guide to a balanced diet - how can you help the wild bees in your garden'. *

Mason bees are ideal for gardens. They are solitary and make their homes in cavities in wood, brickwork or hollow stems. They are not destructive to the fabric of buildings, as some people believe. Both sexes have black heads, brown thoraxes and orange abdomens. Males are slimmer, have white hair on their faces and larger antennae, while females have a pollen brush on the underside of their abdomens, to collect pollen to feed their young. Mason bees are up to 200 times more effective as pollinators than honey bees, which nourish their young with nectar.

Our bees will be sent to us as cocoons in the spring, having been carefully overwintered by the company supplying them. When we get the cocoons we need to position them close to the bee hotel, which came as part of our package. It comprises of a wooden box with a Perspex front to allow for viewing, and stout cardboard tubes which fit inside. The hotel should be positioned south to south east at a height of 1.5m in full sun. It can be put on a post, wall or fence, preferably in a quiet area reasonably close to a source of mud. When the bees hatch from the cocoons they should gravitate towards the hotel to lay their eggs in the cardboard tubes. Mud is used by the female to enclose each egg in its own cell, within the tube. A slightly warmer temperature is needed to ensure successful incubation of female eggs, so male eggs are laid at the front and back with female ones in the middle. At the end of the season all filled and sealed tubes are sent back to the company for cleansing of parasites and overwintering, and so the process continues.

Setting up our Mason bees has incurred a one off cost of around £90 because we are benefitting from support every year in overwintering etc. We have also chosen a more expensive bee hotel which allows for viewing, as we thought

Friends and visiting groups would enjoy observing the bees. Setting up could be done at a much reduced cost.

Mason bees numbers are declining, and hopefully we can try, in a small way, to change this, by creating a bee friendly habitat and taking an active part in protecting them from disease and predation. In return we hope the increased pollination within the garden will benefit its eco system of plants and wildlife, as well as providing additional interest to the gardens for our visitors.

*See Diary Dates for details of the talk

Jane Scorer

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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

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