

Issue No. 32

April 2012

Friends of Thwaite Gardens Newsletter



OPEN DAY 2012 - 20th MAY

Following another very successful open day last year, we are now busy preparing for this year's event and hope that as many Friends as possible will be willing to lend a hand.

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 corridor, 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

Handing out brochures

Manning the plant stall

Assisting with refreshments

Signing up new members

Taking admission fees

Please indicate your preference and the time which would suit you best on the accompanying loose leaf form and return it to the Secretary, Pam Bailey – contact details at the end of this newsletter – or drop it in to the greenhouse block at the Botanic Gardens.

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 £2.00 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

PLANT OF THE MONTH YELLOW ASPHODEL (*Asphodeline lutea*)



There are relatively few woody plants that can claim to be of great interest throughout the year but amongst herbaceous plants, this claim must be even rarer. Yet the herbaceous yellow asphodel does have an exceptionally prolonged season of value in the garden.

The plant is of Mediterranean origin and like many plants from that region, it has a tendency to grow during the winter half of the year, before becoming dormant in the summer. Although this growth pattern does not fit so well in the British climate the asphodel is sufficiently hardy to endure British winter cold and summer damp.

Growth generally begins in earnest in autumn, with the development of the grassy looking attractively blue – green coloured foliage. Throughout the winter this makes pleasing tufted evergreen patches which contrast

with many more dreary colours at this season. The tufts thicken up in spring and from the strongest of them arise the flower spikes.

The spikes are tall and narrow, not unlike very thick asparagus to look at, sometimes reaching the best part of a metre in height. Attractive yellow star – like flowers burst like sparks from the upper parts of the spike in the latter end of spring - but in relatively random order, so that at any one time the spike may bear a sprinkling of flowers at all points of its length. The overall display lasts for many weeks into early summer.

By mid -summer, the plant begins to rest. The foliage declines and virtually disappears, though because other plants are often at their peak at this time, one scarcely notices the asphodel's retirement from the scene – indeed it could almost be said to be convenient. However, it does have one final “hurrah” in the form of the seed vessels. These are shiny globular fruits which are attached to the old spike. They gradually ripen, yet by the time their somewhat odd beauty has faded completely, the foliage is starting to revive once more.

Given a sunny location and well drained soil the asphodel is fairly easy to please in cultivation. If well sited, the plant will spread modestly by underground stolons. Propagation is easily effected by separating clumps of the plant - which are only loosely joined together. Pieces may be planted individually or in clusters. The best time to do this is probably early autumn, as growth is commencing.

John Killingbeck

Dates for your diary!

*Open Day- 20th May, during which
there will be guided tree walks*

AGM – 2nd October 2012

Spring Talk – 26th March 2013



***!** We are trying to organize a coach trip to
Harewood House in June. If you are interested,
please can you let our Events Secretary, Pat
Foreman, know as soon as possible. Contact
details at the end of this newsletter.*

*Thank you. **!***

With a spring in my step



*With a “spring in my step” let me wander,
Where primroses and daffodils grow,
Along mossy banks and in woodland,
Barefoot amongst the bluebells I’d go*

*With a “spring in my step” let me wander,
Where the river just bubbles so free,
Here sunlight just flickers on water,
And fishermen find tranquillity*

*With a “spring in my step” let me wander,
In the country where wild garlic grows,
And sweet violets line the deep ditches,
On the wind ‘wafts’ sweet scent of wild rose*

*Now the ‘spring in my step’ is much slower,
In my thoughts the sun shines ‘every day’,
The love of ‘all nature’ contents me,
I ‘reminisce’ in my own special way*

Heather Overfield, Cottingham, East Yorkshire

TREES OF THWAITE No. 13 FOXGLOVE TREE (*Paulownia tomentosa*)



We had to cover this one before too long – as it is Thwaite’s best known (famous, even) species. And with some justification; not only is this tree of a very striking appearance almost throughout the year but it is reputed to be the finest of its type in the north of England.

“Breathtaking” is perhaps an overused word and certainly not a word commonly applied to trees. But the *Paulownia* in full bloom is indeed a breathtaking sight. The entire tree is covered with large and exotic mauve -coloured panicles of flowers in mid May, the affect of which is enhanced by the fact that the tree is virtually leafless at the time of blooming, meaning the beauty of the flowers is unimpaired by any obscuring foliage.

A sweet violet scented perfume emanates from the flowers which can be traced by a sensitive nose for many yards down wind. The overall affect is unlike that provided by any other hardy tree and is perhaps closest to that of the sub tropical *Jacaranda*, for which the species is sometime mistaken.

A peculiarity of *Paulownia* is that the flower buds are developed at the end of the year prior to blooming and remain large and obvious, completely exposed, at the end of the twigs all through the winter. These flower buds are sometimes mistaken for seed pods. The true seed pods are larger, more triangular in shape, yet visible simultaneously.

The winter exposure of the flower buds means they may be subject to damage by winter weather and spring frost, so in a poor season blooming cannot be relied upon. However, overall, it is probably the heat of the previous summer which is most influential to flowering quality. A hot summer leads to large, robust and well ripened buds which are more resistant to winter frost. This is why a good flowering *Paulownia* is an uncommon sight in the north and there is no denying that the best trees are to be found in the south of England; also on the continent and America, where summers are warmer (although winters may be colder). An interesting observation is that, 20 years or more ago, our *Paulownia* was generally expected to flower really well in only one year in 4. Now it flowers well most years. Is this the influence of climate change – or just maturity? The same is true of seed pod production, which I can hardly recall before the mid 1990s.



Paulownia tomentosa originates from China and flourishes best in a hot continental summer climate. The name “foxglove tree” refers not only to the appearance of the flowers, but also to the fact that it is actually and surprisingly, closely related to foxglove (*Digitalis*). It is a fast growing, soft timbered tree which may reach 20m in a warm climate. It normally forms a tall trunk and our tree is untypically forked low down. It spreads rapidly by minute winged seeds and in America is regarded as a bit of a nuisance (imagine!). In some gardens in southern England it may also regenerate fairly freely, though I have never noticed this at Thwaite. Seed from our tree ripens, nevertheless and many new trees have been grown from this. One example can actually be seen over topping the old wall of Cleminson House, on Thwaite street, which used to belong to Hull University.

The foliage of *Paulownia*, though slow to develop in spring, eventually forms impressive, large, heart shaped leaves. These leaves do not enjoy exposure to strong cold winds, which is another reason why the tree prefers a warm climate. Really outsize leaves can be obtained if a young tree is coppiced to the base each year and this is a routine practice in some gardens. A stool may shoot up 2-3 metres in a season with leaves sometimes nearly half a metre across.

Our *Paulownia* at Thwaite is perhaps the “flagship” tree of our collection, for rarity, size and beauty. However, we must take care not to rest on our laurels in this respect. Although, mercifully, it has escaped the worst of the recent flood damage, it is showing signs of decline, with some die back evident. More ominously, a decay wound has appeared near the base of the trunk, which given the soft nature of the wood may prove serious. Additionally, the accolade for “biggest” specimen is being challenged on all sides. *Paulownia* is nowhere near as rare as it used to be a few decades ago. There are several rapidly growing specimens in Hull’s Pickering Park, for example.

There are several other species of *Paulownia* in existence, though rarely grown. A young specimen of one – *P. fargesii* – has been obtained for the garden for planting at a later date.

John Killingbeck

Botanic Gardens Reminiscences No. 1

Cadet Field



Firstly let me describe where this is. It is the piece of land running parallel with the railway line, its western boundary being the railway line and its eastern boundary a ditch which runs the full length of the field and at its northern end joins the stream which feeds the lake. The northern boundary is the wall (which used to be a chain link fence) that runs alongside the snicket leading to New Village Road.

We named it cadet field because there used to be a drill hall almost opposite the station which was used by local army cadets for training purposes. It was originally comprised of two small paddocks.

In the mid -1960s, the, then, Botany Department acquired the land to be used as a departmental facility to support teaching and research.

As you can imagine, the whole area had to be cleared, entailing a lot of hard manual labour, as in those days we did not have the machinery which is now available. At the time there were 5 gardeners and 3 technicians in the Botany Department working at the gardens so there were plenty of people on hand for removing rubble and digging an area for planting.

Once the land had been cleaned, landscaping was commenced. Paths were put in before any planting took place.

At the northern end of the field, a group of willows were planted to supply young shoots which were cut and used in our Plant Physiology unit to keep

stocks of black aphids which were used in their research programme. Strange as it may seem, part of my current responsibilities in the department base me in the same lab., albeit looking rather different now. The work it does currently involves messing about with sea worms and crabs, a bit of a change for a horticulturalist!

Just in front of the willows, a mini coniferous forest was planted, for teaching purposes. This included *Pinus*, *Abies*, *Larix* and *Picea Spp.*

A row of Poplars was planted a few metres from the western boundary to provide shelter from prevailing winds. The ones remaining now are very tall. Like them or hate them, at this time of the year the young buds have a pleasant scent which, when the wind is blowing in the right direction can be detected in the glasshouse area.

Later, close to the western boundary, a row of *Leylandii* was planted for privacy.

In those days the gardeners wore brown overalls like Arkwright in "Open all Hours", whilst the Foreman gardener used to wear a white coat. Some members of the public walking down Station Walk and seeing this group of people working, assumed that it was some kind of institution, with the brown - coated workers being the inmates and the white-coated one being the minder. Thinking back to some of the characters involved, perhaps they were right!!

One incident that occurred in this area involving one of the brown coats was the accidental cutting off of the TV reception to part of Beverley! For those who can remember, we used to have cable TV via Rediffusion, and a stake was driven through the cable. How times have changed!

Part of the departmental research involved potatoes, of which many varieties were used. Keeping to horticultural tradition, we planted certain areas with potatoes to clean the land. These tubers when grown were used for research in the lab. But, as with any good research we made sure we had plenty of "control" plants, the tubers from which were consumed by the staff at the end of the project!

One particular variety of potato which was used a lot for research was Kennebec, an excellent chipper, which was grown in Scotland and sent to us from there. Most of the Kennebecs grown in Scotland were exported to Spain.

One unusual inhabitant of cadet field is a porpoise. The, then, Zoology department had a dead one in a cold room, the skeleton of which they wanted to use. Unfortunately the cold room broke down one weekend and the porpoise started to smell. It was decided to bring it out to the Gardens and bury it in cadet field with the intention of removing the skeleton once all the flesh had rotted off. A few years later, when they came to dig it up, it could not be found. If it is found some time in the future, it is hoped its presence there will not be linked to global warming!

Hopefully you will be able to recognise some of the features mentioned when you walk round this area, which now looks a lot different from its original state in the 1960s.

Vic Swetez, Biological Sciences

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## MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL REMINDER

Annual subscriptions were due on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2011. They remain at £7 per person or £10 for two people living at the same address. Anyone who has not paid by the Open Day 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 2011 do not have to renew their subscriptions until November 2012.***

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