

Issue No. 33

September 2012

Friends of Thwaite Gardens Newsletter



Chairman's Annual Report

The Chairman/Treasurer is currently on holiday, so his report will be presented to the AGM next month. However he has sent the figures from the open day in May, last year's figures in brackets.

Gate receipts £529 (£670)

Donations £8.29

Plants £503.81 (£269.12)

Cake sales and Refreshments £253.75 (£300.53)

New members on the day £247 (£245)

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## **SECRETARY' S REPORT 2011-2012**

The Friends programme this year has included two interesting presentations, a profitable Open Day and a new Open Evening event. In January a presentation by Tony Rymer relating to alpine plants was of particular interest in view of the future development of the Alpine House. The March presentation was a view of the work at Harewood House given by Trevor Nicholson, Head Gardener. An excellent talk of the work involved in the design and preparation of the gardens for the many visitors each year. The talk gave an insight into his travels and work experience in the Himalayas. This had given him the opportunity to use this knowledge and fulfil his ambition of creating the Himalayan garden within the grounds of Harewood House gardens.

Future presentations will be held in March and October and details will be given in the newsletters. Also should there be enough interest shown, the Friends Group are willing to arrange a garden visit and Harewood House is one not to be missed.

Open Day was thankfully a rain free day and the plant stall taking a record £503. Thank you again for all donations of plants/cakes and your help on the day. We could not do it without you.

Our first Open Evening took place on mid- summers eve, June 21st. So much for the balmy evening we envisaged it was dark, misty, cold and stormy. However thanks to our brief appearance on Look North BBC TV showing the gardens on a lovely sunny day we did get visitors who braved the elements and were delighted with the gardens.

Debbie Hall journalist for The Journal was also delighted with the gardens when the Friends were interviewed whilst giving an escorted tour. Describing the gardens as “a positive eye-opener” and “a green and picturesque oasis” Debbie did a wonderful article for the August edition with many pictures showing the diversity of the garden.

In the garden the volunteers are looking forward to being involved in the forthcoming development of the Alpine and Evolution House. Any other volunteers are always welcome.

Despite the upside down weather this year with the Spring drought and the Summer soaking, low light levels and soil temperatures have delayed and reduced flowering in certain plants. However with the late arrival of warm summer temperatures this has now improved. Indian Summer no definitely British.

Enjoy the gardens

Pam Bailey  
Secretary, Friends of Thwaite Gardens  
06/09/2012

**Thank You to Phil and Hannah Bielby, who donated £75 towards a tree in commemoration of the birth of their daughter Elsa Katherine Alethea on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2012.**

**Elsa's naming ceremony was held at Thwaite Hall this summer.**



***Thank you from The Red Cross***

***Thank you to all the members of the Friends who supported the recent Red Cross Open Day, which was a resounding success, despite the weather forecast, which thankfully proved to be entirely wrong!***

***Thanks to everyone who came or donated produce. Particular thanks to Jenny and Marilyn (an honorary friend!) for all the lovely cakes and scones (which sold out completely!) and to "Annie the Scone Lady" whose cheerful and enthusiastic hard work was invaluable in helping us to keep up with the demand for refreshments!***

## TREES OF THWAITE : No. 14 SASSAFRAS TREE (*Sassafras albidum*)



I describe this tree now because it appeared on TV in July on the BBC Look North programme which briefly featured the gardens.

The *Sassafras* is one of our species which does not draw attention to itself and is easily overlooked, yet is actually one of the most remarkable and important trees in our collection. Not only is it rather a rarity but is, probably at least, a Yorkshire “champion” (meaning the largest in Yorkshire) if not over a wider area. Having the good fortune - unlike many others in our collection - to grow in a position free of competition from other trees, it is also a fine shapely specimen. Though not a large tree, it has a straight soaring trunk and characteristic narrow crown and can be seen easily enough near the eastern boundary of the garden, just beyond the greenhouses.

*Sassafras* is described in ‘Collin’s Tree Guide’ as “a rare but stylish tree, confined to acid soils in warm areas” - and further - “seldom grows well in UK”. In several respects then, our Thwaite specimen appears virtually to defy the laws of gravity in that, although some way short of its potential height of 18m, it is certainly growing reasonably well (described in Collin’s as – “sometimes shrubby and gaunt”) in what is generally thought to be a rather chilly part of the UK and in a soil that is not particularly acidic to

boot! In short, it is an excellent example of how even a small botanic garden can contribute usefully to scientific knowledge. Presumably the Collin's guide was written without awareness of Thwaite's *Sassafras*? It further demonstrates to anyone who remains unconvinced, of the importance of preserving Thwaite garden and raising its profile to the wider world.

The species exhibits a number of interesting characteristics which make it distinctive. It is a member of the *Lauraceae* plant family which is generally considered to be an early-evolved and rather "primitive" group of flowering plants. Well known relatives would be the bay tree – *Laurus nobilis* and perhaps more surprisingly – the avocado pear - *Persea americana*.

The flowers are produced abundantly on our tree at about the same time as the spring leaves unfurl, but are rather small in greenish yellow clusters, so remain largely unnoticed to the casual observer. The species is generally dioecious (male and female on separate trees) which is presumably why our tree never produces any fruit. These would otherwise be small black berries on curiously thickened red stalks.

Nevertheless, *Sassafras* also reproduces abundantly by spreading suckers. Our tree is surrounded by these, a few of which are themselves developing into nice young trees. *Sassafras*, in common with many trees which hail from the continental climate of eastern North America, is fairly late into leaf in the spring. By way of compensation perhaps it does not shed until very late in autumn, sometimes carrying a fringe of foliage into December. In its native land it is noted for its rich red/orange autumn colour but here a more modest display of mixed yellow is more usual.

Perhaps the oddest key identification feature of *Sassafras* is the variable shape of the leaves. The great majority, particularly on the more mature wood, are narrowly ovate in shape. However many on younger growth have a lobed pattern of two or three parts, in some cases looking remarkably like small mittens or oven gloves. The crushed foliage has a slightly spicy vanilla scent. The whole plant seems to have a high vitamin C content and at one time it was the practice to boil up the bark (of the

roots, I believe) as a spring tonic – known as “sassafras tea”. Perhaps this is still done?

Outside Thwaite, I have rarely encountered the *Sassafras* tree myself. However, on a recent trip to central France, I visited an outstanding arboretum called Balaine near Villeneuve sur Allier. They had a specimen (or rather a cluster of self regenerated specimens). These were about a third as tall again as our tree. But otherwise our tree compared quite favourably with these French examples particularly given the age and quality of many other species in the collection. I spent the afternoon open mouthed at *Liquidambar* and tulip trees probably in excess of 40m in height and walking among swamp cypress “knees” of thigh height, to name just a few marvels.

***John Killingbeck***

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## ***Dates for your diary!***

### ***AGM – 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2012***

The speaker following the AGM is Mr Chris Cocks of Taylors Clematis near Doncaster who will give a talk entitled 'Clematis Through the Seasons' and there will also be a large selection of clematis for sale.

***Spring Talk – 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013***

## PLANT OF THE MONTH – *Hydrangea aspera*



The ordinary ‘mop head’ or ‘Hortensia’ hydrangea as it is widely known is one of Britain’s most popular garden shrubs due to its very conspicuous, mostly pink or blue (depending on soil acidity), flower heads which are particularly useful as a late summer replacement for all those spring and early summer flowering species. It is a stalwart of the stately home Rhododendron garden open to the public which might otherwise seem rather dull in the peak visiting summer holiday season.

The true ‘mop head’ is one mass of sterile florets which is an abnormality of the natural *Hydrangea* flower. The natural *Hydrangea* inflorescence consists of an outer ring only of sterile florets surrounding the much smaller inner fertile florets which produce pollen and seeds. The idea is that the conspicuous sterile florets attract pollinators to the inconspicuous fertile flowers, which I suppose means that less energy is wasted producing large petals on all flowers. Garden hydrangeas with the more natural arrangement are called ‘lace cap’ varieties. However there are also a number of other *Hydrangea* species which are far more subtle and elegant than the common variety.

One of the loveliest of hydrangeas – indeed arguably one of the loveliest of all garden shrubs - is *Hydrangea aspera*. It is not a rarity by any means but is far less frequent in gardens than it ought to be. In its most frequent form it is often referred to a *H. villosa*. Unfortunately, there has been much confusion over the naming of this plant such that it is now correctly, if rather pedantically called by the clumsy title: *Hydrangea aspera* Villosa



Group. And it is to this plant that my attention is directed since *Villosa* is by far the commonest form encountered. However, if searching for it in a nursery, be aware that it may be found under either name.

Unlike the common *Hydrangea*, the foliage alone of *Villosa* is of considerable merit having the appearance of green velvet. This tempts one to touch it. Nor will one be disappointed – for although not actually velvety, the leaf surface does have a definite “plush” feel to it. Given good conditions the foliage is of luxuriant aspect.

Towards the latter part of summer the flower heads are produced. These are of the elegant looking ‘lace cap’ variety. But their chief beauty perhaps lies in the delicacy and subtlety of their colour which is a gorgeous pinkish lilac suffused with bluish purple when at its peak and which is set off superbly against the dark green leaves. The colour slowly fades to a buff pink and finally to parchment as the flower dies. Yet the delicate structure of the dead head remains on the bush throughout winter maintaining interest. The twigs and branches, though bare in winter also have an attractive papery peeling bark.

*H.a. Villosa* is a plant deserving of plenty of space if not a prime position. Although it can be pruned hard, too much trimming will reduce the flower display. Expect it to reach around 2m in both spread and height. The shrub grows well, if not better, in shade and may flourish under a light tree canopy if not too dry. To be at its best a reasonable degree of shelter is required, as well as a fertile moist soil and it looks particularly good against a shady protected wall. The two worst enemies of the plant are extreme dryness and spring frost, both of which will badly scorch or wither the foliage and prevent flowering. It is not a plant to grow in a frost hollow or a wind tunnel!

One odd note on propagation: like common hydrangeas (but unlike most other shrubs) *H.a. Villosa* can be propagated by division of a large mature specimen. We did this successfully at Thwaite gardens years ago when we needed to move an old plant. The stool was split into three and each is now nearly as large as the original.

John Killingbeck  
Aug '12

## New Residents in Thwaite Gardens!



Our newest residents are some European Water Voles (*Arvicola amphibius*).

The water vole is a semi-aquatic rodent, sometimes called a water rat (*remember “ratty”, the water vole in “The Wind in the Willows”?*), although it only superficially resembles a true rat. Water voles have rounder noses than rats, deep brown fur, chubby faces and short fuzzy ears. Unlike rats, their tails, paws and ears are covered in fur.

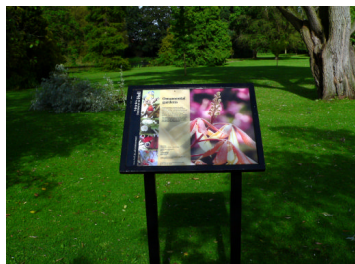
Adults reach 5.5 - 8.7” (140-220mm) in length, plus tail. They weigh from 5.6 - 12.3 oz (160-350g) and are expert swimmers and divers. Water voles do not usually live in large groups but tend to have their own territory which they mark with faecal latrines near their nests and their favourite water entry points. They also scent-mark by using a secretion from their bodies, and may attack other voles invading their territory.

In the wild, on average, water voles only live for a few months. In captivity they can live for up to 2 years. The water vole is the UK’s fastest declining mammal and efforts are underway to protect it and its habitats from destruction. It has been found that vole populations increase in areas where there are reeds and, of course, we have reeds in Thwaite gardens, which may explain why they have settled here. Water voles are a protected species in the UK.

***Thanks to Paul Lazenby for his patience in waiting for hours to get this lovely photograph. Additional information courtesy of Wikipedia***

## Tree Trail Interpretation Boards Now in Place

Dr Lindsay Atkinson and Mrs Janet Gibbs of the University have designed the 3 interpretation boards, shown below, representing three habitats in the gardens - lake margins, ornamental gardens and woodlands - in connection with the tree trail, developed to introduce local school children to plant and habit diversity and their importance at the gardens. There are 20 trees of particular note which have been labelled, and there is an accompanying leaflet.



The additional benefit of this project has been the bringing together of different groups with interest in the gardens to work together more closely. This has resulted in further funding being obtained towards the creation of an outdoor classroom for the gardens.

***Thanks to Dr Atkinson and Mrs Gibbs for their work and also to all those others who participated in the project.***

## **MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL REMINDER**

Annual subscriptions are due on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2012. They remain at £7 per person or £10 for two people living at the same address. There is a membership renewal form enclosed with this Newsletter.

Anyone who has not paid by the Open Day 2013 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 2012 do not have to renew their subscriptions until November 2013.

***And finally...thank you to all contributors to the Newsletter, who make it as interesting and informative as it is. We are always looking for new articles, letters and comments, so please let the Editor know if you have anything for the next edition (see contact details last page).***

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