

# ventnorenensis

Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society Journal

'We have a thriving Garden under the curatorship of a skilled and experienced horticulturalist with a dedicated team of gardeners and volunteers' – *Sally Peake, Chairman*



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## Arbutus at VBG

### Fruits of Sir Harold's honeymoon

The genus *Arbutus* is a member of the *Erica* family, so related to heathers and heaths, *Enkianthus* and *Rhododendron*. This family are classically lovers of acidic soil, therefore are largely absent at VBG. It'll be no surprise though, that just as in human families where we find the odd auburn uncle sitting at the Christmas table of blondes, we also find the odd *Erica* who will live on chalk. *Arbutus* are odd uncles.

Sir Harold Hillier, the great plantsman who initially populated VBG in his inimitable style, introduced *Arbutus* in the knowledge of their safety in our remarkable microclimate. He included the cast-iron candidates such as *A. unedo*, the Killarney Strawberry Tree; long serving Friends will remember the late lamented specimen that clung to rocks before making way for our Visitor Centre, built in 2000. Gladly he also included the more tender species, in line with his ethos of transferring the riskier half hardy species from Ampfield to the benign valley at Ventnor.

Browsing through the handwritten list that represents the paucity of documentation supporting Hillier's work here, compiled by Roy Dore (the Garden's first supervisor), we see many *Arbutus*. Most of these are now recognised as synonyms, *Arbutus texana* being a disavowed name for *A. xalapensis*; *A. integrifolia*, *A. lucida* and *A. semulata* all being the horticulturally tricky *A. andranche*. The lovely hybrid *A. x andrachnoides* was included of course, the difficulty of its mentioned parent ameliorated by its other, tougher, father – *A. unedo*.

The remaining plants have been fascinating. I've covered before the adventures surrounding a plant listed as *Arctostaphylos glandulosa* that turned out to be *A. xalapensis*, but it's worth repeating the story of our *A. xalapensis* for posterity. The legend states that Sir Harold, enjoying his honeymoon in Mexico with his new wife, found a specimen of *A. xalapensis* and brought its seed back to Winchester. The resultant seedlings struggled in the damp, cold climate of Hampshire and only became the specimens their genetic destiny promised once planted years later at Ventnor.

In the present day Hillier's *A. xalapensis* is recognised as a champion, the largest recorded in the UK, along with *A. menziesii*, planted close by. Both these trees have remarkable



Present day champions: *A. xalapensis* and *A. menziesii* (above) *Arbutus* Tree

bark *A. xalapensis* is a moult in the fashion of a snake; it sheds in entirety its paper thin bark in strips every autumn. Having grown to a rich fuscous brown over summer; the new skin is pinky-green with a white bloom. *A. menziesii* doesn't fully shed its bark; thicker rolls peel away, resembling cinnamon sticks clinging to the trunk and branches. A splendid specimen once stood near King Williams Temple at Kew until blown over in the Great Storm of '87. Its loss was Ventnor's gain; our specimen probably ascended the throne as Britain's biggest at that point.

Subsequent to the storms and freezes that bookend the 1980s, the Garden added to the collection. Seeds were collected from the remarkable tree still then known as *Arctostaphylos glandulosa*, and these intriguing and variable trees are now coming to the end of their lives having given insights into the probable hybrid nature of their parent; though none can hold a flame to its raging red bark. Some large leaved specimens arch over the path behind the New Zealand garden, their origins unrecorded during a quiet time for plant records at VBG. Reimagining the Mediterranean Garden with the Friends' help post 2000 saw introductions of *A. unedo* as large specimens. None fared as well as the naturally regenerated seedlings standing proudly above the bank crowned by a giant Holm Oak. These fruit plentifully, though as their epithet foretells "eat only one", the pips inside will get under your plate.

More recent success has come from growing *A. canariensis* from seed. This species is another striking large shrub or small tree. It shares the statuesque but wild profile of its American relatives, different to the rounder European and Asia Minor species. Coloured bark, though not dramatic, is still arresting beneath effusive flower clusters and shiny light green leaves. Native to the Canaries, it likes to be kept very dry. Once planted amongst rocks about half of our seedlings succumbed. A single plant was donated to the National Collection holders in Gloucestershire (quite how it fares in such northern climes, we don't know). Our remaining two are still young; the darling for the future could be the thin, solitary trunked plant arising from the top of the serpentine steps into the Mediterranean Garden. Or the branched and more vigorous one beginning to shade the nursery glasshouse. I'd personally prefer the former; if only because of its more dramatic perch, and it reminds me of the first *A. canariensis* I ever saw.

At a famous nursery in Cornwall, owned by a curious couple whose extensive collection is hidden from view, in the main, sat a large tree specimen, perhaps three meters high. Its single stem reached the apex of the glasshouse it lived in. Like most of its surrounding rarities, it was emerging from a burst open five litre pot, having "rooted through" years, perhaps decades, before. Immoveable, this specimen steadfastly refused to yield cuttings, a characteristic shared by many *Arbutus* species. Having originated from Tresco, whose plant had since vanished, it may have represented the only *A. canariensis* in Britain. It was indeed for sale, though to reliably have moved it would have proven to be such a task that would surely have been impossible. Indeed, this proved to be the case as I saw it later; dead, still fixed to its pot but without a root in sight.

Of the 14 species described we have but a third, plus the inevitable cultivars, amounting to 23 accessions. It's time we sought out some more.

Chris Kidd

# Top tip: get a Trish

**Roz Whistance** meets **Trish Brenchley**, who the Friends' Society funds to supervise volunteers, interns and apprentices

If you want tangible evidence of the way the Friends' Society supports the Garden look no further than gardener Trish Brenchley. Trish, who was employed at VBG until the swathing cuts made by its then-Council owners, was brought back in by the Friends to supervise the volunteers and interns. But, like the plants she tends, Trish's work tends to spread beyond its original remit.

"It started as two mornings a week and now it's four," she says cheerfully. "Initially it was to do the mixed borders but now because of the extra time the Friends are funding I can extend to other areas of the Garden." She grins: "I'm everywhere now."



*Mixed bag: Trish on tractor with apprentice David and interns*



*'Visitors want zing': The mixed borders*

When we meet in mid-September she is supervising planting in the Mediterranean garden, leading David, the latest apprentice (who is also funded by the Friends) and a collection of interns in pulling out and replacing plants there. "It's a really mixed bag," she says, referring not to the plants but to the people. "Some have no horticultural experience and others, like a lady from Austria who arrived today, is a qualified gardener who wants teaching experience."

The plants that she and her disparate team are putting in have been propagated by them, or by their predecessors. "We do propagation for plant sales

and propagate to go back into the Garden, as well as seed collecting." She pauses. "I'm back to doing what I used to do, but in four mornings a week!"

She is clearly not a clock-watcher; admitting that she won't leave on her appointed hour if a job isn't finished. "I love teaching. It's about trying to find a balance where the students don't feel downhearted as they learn. I like to get them up to what I call horticultural speed, because if you want to go on and work in this business you need to do things well, but quicker."

When it comes to supervising an apprentice there is more than passing on her practical skills. Every job David is given needs to be logged, photographed and his proficiency vouched for by 'witness statements', which are passed to the Isle of Wight College. "I try to do as little paperwork as possible," she grins, "but it is all part of ensuring the apprentice gains his qualification. We need to do Plant Identity and learning about weeds, but with so few of us it's a question of sorting out the time." She admits that thoughts of how much there is to do buzz around her head at night.

## 'I love teaching. It's about trying to find a balance where the students don't feel downhearted as they learn'

She clearly has a good, easy relationship with the students and volunteers. Even as she fends off some gentle joshing from David a young man comes over to remind her that she taught him when he came with his school for a day's experience. Trish is delighted to hear he is now at college studying horticulture, and even more so when he says he wants to volunteer at the Garden.

Trish works with Chris Kidd on planning so as many jobs as possible get done, but her own 'baby' is the mixed border: "The idea is that it's a main attraction while the kids are on holiday and most visitors come. Visitors want banks of colour. They get that in 'South Africa' but when they get to the bottom of the Garden they want zing. A mixed border means that we can blend shrubs, herbaceous perennials and annuals in a different combination each year. That way it doesn't become staid, and the visitors who come back won't think they've seen it all before."

The far end of the borders contain the Salvia collection that will keep the colour going into the winter. Next on her list is the herb garden, which needs a bit of a revival.

Trish is pleased that there is a cabin available for foreign students to stay on site. "We need to build up the manpower: that's why the volunteers are important"

All in all there could be no better way to fulfill the Friends' Society's remit to propagate horticultural education than to employ the energetic, inspirational and passionate gardener that is Trish Brechley. Surely money well spent.

## Spread the word and you might win a prize!

Enclosed with this issue is a Membership Leaflet. Huge thanks to John Curtis for allowing us to use Alex Williams' marvellous painting of the Garden as the cover. The leaflet does not do justice to the painting so when you next visit the garden you should find it.

If you pay by Standing Order you need do nothing about your subscription. Those who pay by cheque should find two leaflets in their envelope. However you subscribe, PLEASE pass on your spare leaflet to a friend, ask them to join and return the leaflet and payment to Caroline with your name on it (the best place is probably at the top where it says 'renewal'), we will then put all the new members' leaflets into a Draw and you, the existing member, could win an annual pass for two to the Garden.

# Harold Hillier Award 2016

The worst kept secret!

It was billed as the worst kept secret, but it's hard to keep anything from the secretary of any organisation – especially one so good at her job.



***Richly deserved: Rosemary Stewart receives the Harold Hillier Award from Hon Sec Brian Kidd***

Rosemary Stewart, 78, received the Sir Harold Hillier award, the trophy awarded annually to a person considered to have made significant contribution to horticulture on the Island. It was presented by VBGFS president, Brian Kidd, horticultural writer and broadcaster.

Rosemary has been Honorary Secretary of the VBGFS since 2000. "I calculate I have written the Minutes for nearly 150 meetings!" she said in her acceptance speech. "After 17 years as Chairman of the IW Music Centre Friends, I wanted something active with no other responsibilities. But, oh dear! I was soon put on the Friends' Committee and by 2000 I had taken on the secretarial duties."

She has, she said, "seen off" four Chairmen, and seen vast physical changes to the Garden – a grant application resulting in the South African Terraces and the Arid Garden required many hours of typing of plans and figures. The Garden's ownership move from the IW Council to the current CIC has been another change she has embraced, along with new technology – in ways that put younger Friends to shame. Incoming chairman Sally Peake said: "Her self-appointed role as our IT magician means she has made the digital age our friend by ensuring that the rapidly changing world of VBG is communicated to Friends and Volunteers in a friendly and appealing way."

The fact Rosemary is herself a stalwart gardening volunteer means her invitations to get involved are all the more enticing.

One of her many duties had been editing *Ventnorenensis*, when it was still printed at Albany Prison. These days it is her photography that enhances its pages, something the current editor is constantly grateful for.

During her acceptance speech Rosemary recalled in 1995 seeing an appeal in the County Press by the then-curator, Simon Goodenough, asking for volunteers to work at VBG. "My husband was going on a sailing holiday so I came to join several others one morning, hoping to be of help and maybe learn something ... and I'm still here!

Roz Whistance