ICS trial gardens

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In 1977 the UK directors of the ICS decided to start some trials in different parts of the country to investigate the performance of camellias grown in different parts of the UK and under different conditions. The late John Tooby, one time President of the ICS, was instrumental in this scheme.

After much thought and discussion four geographically disparate sites were selected:

- Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park in Belfast, now known as Dixon Park
- Saughton Park, now the Royal Zoological Garden, in Edinburgh
- Northern Horticultural Society Harrogate, now known as the RHS Harlow Carr garden
- Willoughbridge Garden Trust, now known as the Dorothy Clive Garden in Shropshire.

It is a great pleasure, 36 years later, to announce that the UK Board of Directors has decided to recognise all four of the trial gardens with the title, ICS/UK Garden of Special Interest. These awards will be formally conferred in the spring of 2014.

In the dim and distant past camellias in Europe were thought of as plants that would only flourish under glass. Even in the 1970’s, well after this myth had been dispelled, there were still many unanswered questions about where and in what conditions camellias would flourish.

Each of the sites received two plants of 125 varieties including japonicas, non-reticulata hybrids, reticulata, reticulata hybrids and saluenensis.

There were difficulties from the outset. For example the original Edinburgh site suffered serious vandalism and so an alternative had to be found and the zoo provided it, however, even though the site lies on flat sandy loam, when the soil analysis came through, the Ph was found to be 7.3! Investigation revealed that the site had been limed some years earlier as preparation for a planned iris bed. The solution was an application of sulphur. In Harrogate the soil is heavy clay and three different sites were tried, none with much success at the time.

There was also an issue with how to measure the results. There were advocates of rating hardiness, appearance, flowering quality, personal preference, but in the end it was decided to measure the number of buds using a four point scale:

0 = no buds
1 = 1-10 buds
2 = 11-50 buds
3 = over 50 buds
NR = plant died

The early years of the trial were affected by different things at different sites. The very hard winter of 1981/2 had a big effect overall, causing many losses that had to be replaced the following year.

A comprehensive review in 1984 by Tony Lane, the trial gardens coordinator, showed that the best results as far as bud count was concerned were ‘Bow Bells’, (saluenensis hybrid), ‘Cornish
Spring’, (cuspidata hybrid), and ‘Inspiration’, (reticulata hybrid).

The most successful garden at that time was Belfast, followed by Edinburgh.

In 1991 Tony Lane conducted another review. In it he reported:

**Dixon Park Belfast**

Spectacular progress continues. The environment in the walled garden proved very suitable and has demonstrated how well japonica and hybrid varieties can be grown in the Province given suitable soil and shelter. The enthusiasm and resource that the Directors of Parks have brought to the project have been an important factor in making an outstandingly fine collection well worthy of being classified part of the National Collection.

**Royal Zoological Garden, Edinburgh**

Although this trial has suffered somewhat by inaccessibility, the plants donated have survived remarkably well on an exposed hillside. The light soil has certainly been an asset here and many of the plants are now of a size where overcrowding dictates thinning and dispersal.

**Harlow Carr Garden, Harrogate**

Three sites have been tried in this exposed garden with heavy clay soil, and losses have been heavy in each. Without a meticulous programme of mulching and summer watering the plants will not thrive in open positions.

**Dorothy Clive Garden Willoughbridge**

After severe setbacks in the early years good progress has been made of late and the plants are now of a size where they need to be dispersed. The curator will be transplanting a number to the original part of this delightful spring garden among the ranges of rhododendrons.

Tony concluded, in 1991, that the trial itself could be judged as being over, and that three interesting collections had been established, including one of outstanding merit.

He also commented that though it was difficult to draw precise conclusions about individual varieties, one could be judged a universal success, *C. reticulata* Wild Form x *C. saluenensis* ‘Inspiration’.

So, what is the situation today, 22 years after this report?

‘Inspiration’ has survived, and is still doing well, in Edinburgh and Belfast but has been lost in the other two gardens.

Of course the gardeners and the curators in the gardens have changed. They all have pressures and priorities including, but also beyond, our particular interest, but there are still camellias in all of the four gardens, and that can only be a good thing.

Let’s start with **Edinburgh Zoo**. The present curator there is Simon Jones. He reports that over the years they have had their ups and downs with the collection but overall they strongly believe that the camellia collection works well in the zoo. The previous curator told him that during his 12 years there was not much to report other than that the camellias grew a lot! They also took cuttings to give them a stock for replacements. At one point they found the plants losing colour and becoming chlorotic with a yellow band showing and recently they decided, rather nervously, to undertake some hard pruning, never an easy decision, but often it amounts to ‘being cruel to be kind’.

**C. reticulata** Wild Form x **C. saluenensis** ‘Inspiration’ after hard pruning at Edinburgh Zoo

A local ICS member, Bruce Robertson, keeps an eye on progress by visiting whenever he can and giving advice and encouragement.

Currently they have 35 of the original (or early replacement) plants still there, amongst which are *C. hybrid* ‘Dainty Dale’, *C. x williamsii* ‘St. Ewe’, *C. j. x* *C. cuspidata* ‘Cornish Spring’, *C. x williamsii* ‘Mary Larcom’, *C. x williamsii* ‘Sayonara’, *C. x williamsii* ‘Grand Jury’ and ‘Inspiration’, which were singled out in 1985 as doing well.
The best news though is that recently they were visited by the NCCPG’s (Plant Heritage) Scottish co-ordinator for camellias and have decided to undertake a major project to build the collection back up. Even better, they plan to do this on the basis of the original planting list, so, with a bit of luck, in a few years those original varieties may once again grace the slopes and walkways of the zoo. Who knows, they might even outshine the giant pandas as an attraction!!

Paul Cook is the curator at RHS Harlow Carr and Peter Fenton is the technical officer who helped me research the story of Harlow Carr for this article. Harlow Carr, originally the Northern Horticultural Society in Harrogate was always the most difficult of the four original sites. The losses were high. At the time the explanations included the severe winters in 1978/9 and exposure to the prevailing Westerlies from the neighbouring moors. A replanting, with many replacements provided, was undertaken in 1981-3, but the losses continued. A further re-siting followed in 1986, which at least reduced the losses, but the key to success was the taking over of the garden by the RHS in 2004, with its knowledge, skills and resources. The woodland area was cleared of unwanted undergrowth and the density of the tree cover was reduced dramatically, but appropriately, to give them enough light. The camellias said ‘thank you’, and after a delay of some 25 years the Harrogate corner of the trial began to catch up with Edinburgh, Willoughby and Belfast.

The collection of some 60 plants is now one of the best in Yorkshire, largely made up plantings made well after the original trial. The few that did survive, either from the original or a subsequent early re-planting include C. japonica ‘Tricolor’, C. japonica ‘Alba Simplex’, C. j. ‘Elegans’, C. j. ‘Rubescens Major’, C. x williamsii ‘J.C. Williams’, C. x williamsii ‘Mary Christian’ and C. x williamsii ‘Rose Parade’.

Tony Lane, the original trial co-ordinator, also wrote to the curator recently:
‘The prospect for the year ahead includes a watch on the way C. j. ‘Carnea’ performs. It produced one flower in 2012 from which it could not be identified with any certainty as being in fact a C. j. ‘Middlemist’s Red’, which is a very rare variety.

But its vigorous growth this autumn suggests that there may be more blooms in 2013 from which to identify it as the rare specimen it could well be. If so then it will be possible to say that in addition to the only two known examples, another of unknown origin exists at Harlow Carr. This would do much to enhance the reputation of this camellia collection internationally and more generally of the Garden itself at home as well as abroad. (The only other known examples of the plant are at Chiswick House in London and at the Treaty House in Waitangi, New Zealand).’

What an exciting discovery that would be!!

Marcus Chilton-Jones is the curator at the Dorothy Clive Garden in Willoughbridge, Staffordshire. After a very difficult beginning good progress was made in developing a fine collection. The lovely Camellia Walk is a designated part of the garden and it includes over 30 of the originals that have survived. Those mentioned in 1985 that are still alive and well are C. j. ‘R.L. Wheeler’, C. x williamsii ‘Donation’, C. j. ‘Baronne Leguay’, ‘Mary Christian’ and C. x williamsii ‘Tiptoe’.

Stephen Quinn, the community parks manager in Belfast that includes Dixon Park, reports from the records that have been recently uncovered there that the first camellias were planted inside and outside the Walled Garden. In the winter of 1996,
the plants inside the Walled Garden were moved out, added to the rest of the collection and the plans were updated.

In May 1996, an ICS UK Regional visit took place, which included visitors from all over the UK, Netherlands and as far away as South Africa, USA, and New Zealand. There was a ceremonial planting of the variety *C. x williamsii* ‘Muskota’ by Councillor Jim Rodgers, then chairman of the Parks and Amenities Sub Committee.

The records of this visit remind us that one of the objectives of the Trial was to help the public to make the best choice of cultivar for the region.

In the trial ground today around 90 cultivars remain. Some are being crowded out by competing vegetation that is currently being cut back.

Tony Lane, the ICS coordinator of the trial from the start, quickly saw that Belfast was the star garden of the four, and today they still seem to have the magic touch.

From the original trial the best flowering cultivars in the garden now are; *C. x williamsii* ‘Anticipation’, *C. j.* ‘Duchess of York’, *C. x williamsii* ‘Joan Trehane’, ‘St. Ewe’, ‘Bow Bells’, *C. x williamsii* ‘J. C. Williams’, *C. reticulata* hybrid ‘Innovation’, *C. j.* ‘Apollo’, *C. x williamsii* ‘Donation’, *C. hybrid* ‘Dainty Dale’, *C. hybrid* ‘Freedom Bell’, *C. x williamsii* ‘Garden Glory’, *C. j.* ‘Cecile Brunazzi’, and *C. j.* ‘Tricolor’ and including the four that were outstanding in 1985 and are still there today, *C. x williamsii* ‘Alba Simplex’ x ‘J. C. Williams’, *C. x williamsii* ‘Daintiness’, ‘Inspiration’ and *C. x williamsii* ‘Charity’.

So; four gardens with four different stories, all bound together by camellias. No single cultivar of the original 124 has survived in all four gardens, and there are only four that have survived in three. They are ‘Donation’, ‘Duchess of York’, ‘J. C. Williams’ and ‘Innovation’.