

## A GARDEN TO VISIT

# Trewithen

MEGAN WESTLEY DISCOVERS HOW THE CORNISH PLANT-HUNTING LEGACY LIVES ON

Trewithen Garden, near Truro, is a site with a rich and fascinating history, particularly for those interested in the plant hunters of old.

During the early 20th Century, intrepid explorer-gardeners traipsed around the world in search of rare and beautiful species to import back to Britain. Cornwall, because of its mild sub-tropical climate, was best-suited to these tender new varieties. Trewithen in particular benefited from the excursions, with a wealth of its current plants dating back to these days. Rather than simply preserving the old, however, Trewithen's head gardener Gary Long is looking to the future with an innovative approach involving modern day plant hunters.

The garden is primarily the creation of George Johnstone, who inherited Trewithen in 1904 when only 22 years old. Prior to his ownership, the estate was largely set in a landscape park, with the focus on caring for trees. Plans for a garden had been drawn up in 1738 but never completed. Work began in earnest some 150 years later.

New specimens collected by plant-hunters began to find their way into the garden in 1905, with the introduction of one hundred rhododendron arboreum hybrids. Johnstone valued the work of contemporary plant hunters and helped to fund the expeditions of George Forrest to far-flung locations such as China. In return, Forrest populated the gardens with wild origin seed collections.

A further key plant-hunting player in Trewithen's gardens was E H Wilson, an employee of the famous Veitch Nurseries. Wilson made four expeditions to China and is responsible for many of the trees, including several magnolias, found in the garden today. Plants collected by both Forrest and Wilson can also be found at the Caerhays estate in St Austell.

Visitors to the gardens can learn more about the plant-hunters of yesteryear through



Images by  
Benjamin Oldcom

"During the Great War, the estate was ordered to supply 300 trees as wood for the trenches. Fittingly, the name Trewithen means 'house of the trees'"

the Travelling Trees Exhibition, held in a small museum in the courtyard.

The exhibition was collaboration between the RHS, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Royal Cornwall Museum to celebrate 200 years of plant-hunting in 2004. After it finished in Truro, Travelling Trees moved to the estate, where it has remained.

Trewithen House, though not commonly open to the public, makes a striking feature in the gardens as it is stumbled upon almost without realising it. The house backs onto the lush, stretching South Lawn. This sunny spot is something of a happy accident – prior to the First World War the space was filled with beech trees. During the war, however, the estate was ordered to supply 300 trees as wood for the trenches, meaning that the beeches were cut down and the area opened up. Fittingly, the name Trewithen means 'house of the trees'.

The lawn is surrounded by nine of Trewithen's 24 Champion Trees. These are measured and recorded by the Tree Register and awarded Champion status for their height or diameter.

Many flowered later for 2010 due to the winter's extreme cold weather. While a number are thought of as spring flowering, our increasingly mild climate has resulted in earlier flowerings over the decades. While one of the magnolias regularly flowered on January 19 – every year for six years – this is no longer the case – the recent cold snap set it back 47 days. Gary tells me that, in effect, the low temperatures 'reset' the timing of these old specimens, meaning that they will now flower much more closely to when they would have done one hundred years ago, prior to climate change and warm winters.

Leaving the South Lawn leads you into the woodland gardens, with many possible paths from which to choose and unusual plants to discover along the way. Here there



## The Essentials

### Visit Trewithen Gardens

Grampound Road, near Truro TR2 4DD.

Tel: 01726 882301

[www.trewithengardens.co.uk](http://www.trewithengardens.co.uk)

The gardens are open until September 30, Monday-Saturday 10am-4.30pm.

### Garden entry prices

Adults: £7.50, group (20 plus): £5.00, children under 12: free,

\* Local offer (TR2 postcode – ID required): £5.00

To book a guided tour with head gardener Gary Long, call 01726 883647 or reserve online.

Trewithen House will open to the public on August 30, Bank Holiday Monday; booking is recommended.



are many options: explore for yourself, buy a guide or take a head gardener's tour.

The plant-hunting tradition continues to this day, with new varieties collected by Tom Hudson of Tregrehan in Par. The modern-day adventurer goes on regular plant hunting trips, recently travelling to Mexico, Vietnam, Japan and China. Trewithen and Tom have a good working relationship, and he has been able to bring back many rare plants for the gardens. One such example is an *exucklandii* from China – only known to grow in two places in the wild.

Nationally, the gardens work with Crug (pronounced creeg) farm in north Wales. Sue and Bleddyn Wyn-Jones go collecting every year, with Vietnam being their most recent destination.

The gardens currently cover 30 acres, though this figure is currently rising as new areas are cleared. An impressive rose garden was added in 2008, created at the request of the estate's current owner, Michael Galsworthy (George Johnstone's grandson), and jointly developed with Stuart Pocock of the Cornish Rose Company. With more than 3,000 specimens, the rose garden is a riot of colour throughout summer. Varieties were planted in the design of a Celtic cross for a Cornish twist. There are many interesting species among them, including a *Rosa mundi*; the first hybrid rose in England, bred in the 18th Century.

George Johnstone, the garden's pioneering force, died in 1960 with the satisfaction of seeing his vision realised. Fifty years on, his spirit for the place remains strong in its ever-evolving nature. New plant varieties are regularly introduced, many for the first time and with no real guide as to how they will survive. The excitement, for Gary and visitors alike, is in finding out. Trewithen is very much a living, breathing garden and deserves to be appreciated as such.

### Top rose-growing tips

Get the best results for your garden by copying head gardener Gary Long's routine

All roses (except the hybrid *Rosa mundi*) are cut down to about four inches high in October.

Mulch with a four to five inch layer of mushroom compost in late winter or early spring.

Control all pests and diseases.

Prune lightly in spring, making sure that all buds are facing outwards to encourage growth, rather than in towards the branch.



### The Magnolia Fountain

The unusual magnolia fountain, found in the heart of the woodland garden, was designed by artist Tom Leaper.

A frequent visitor to Trewithen in 1997, he became inspired by the form of the flowers and created the piece to sit within the landscape. The fountain was completed in late 1998, shaped in bronze with a copper patina and mounted on Cornish granite.

Tom's work can also be seen in Gallery Tresco on the Isles of Scilly.



**Head gardener's tip**  
Thinking about pruning your rhododendron?

Be careful – the smoother its bark is, the less likely it is to recover from hard pruning.