



## Nantes

This weekend study tour to look at the collection of trees in a great port town in western France took place from 20 to 22 April 2018. Organised by Jim Gardiner and Mary Buisson, the main focus was to be on *Magnolia*. We were late in the season for this genus but there was much more to see in a very green city and in a particularly good year. PHILIPPE DE SPOELBERCH reports on some of the highlights.

Our first stop was at the **Jardins des Plantes** where we were met by Jacques Soignon, James Garnett, Laure Guillemette, and the Director, Romaric Perrocheau. The Jardin des Plantes is free to enter, and had 2.2 million visitors in 2017 and is a top attraction on TripAdvisor. The main railway station opens straight into the garden which makes it an ideal first introduction to the city and an unusual waiting room for travellers! The city management sees it as a sort of museum and there is a different artist in residence each year.

The plantings are varied, well kept, and well labelled. Of particular note is the very complete collection of camellias and the International Camellia Society convention was recently held there.

**Les Machines** is an amazing initiative of the City Council; the project is to build, in the parc des Chantiers, huge robots from the time of Jules Verne, the author of many fantastic stories, who was born in Nantes. Giant insects and the Elephant are world-famous attractions. We were privileged to visit the workshops, situated in the old covered buildings of the former shipyards of the city, where the giant Minotaur was being completed. Most relevant to our dendrological interest was the project to build l'Arbre Héron, approximately 30 m in height, which was to be erected in the old quarry of Brasserie de la Meuse and welcome many plants in a construction reminiscent of the floating rock of the fantastic world of the movie *Avatar*.

The **Manoir de Procé** was built in 1789, the year of the French Revolution and was therefore never much enjoyed by the owner of the time. It was rebuilt in 1830 by Marion de Procé. The park (11 ha) still shows off some remarkable trees from the period and probably one of the first introductions of the tulip tree *Liriodendron tulipifera*. The majestic tree in front of the manoir alone is worth a visit. *Sequoia sempervirens*, *Cedrus deodara* and *C. libani* also grace

the grounds. Younger plantings dating from the 1960s will ensure the future of the park. I was astonished by the good health and structure of the old cedars and tulip tree, as if Nantes did not suffer from the severe gales which normally threatened the Atlantic coast. Isolated trees may have been hardened by repeated trials over the centuries. A warm and sunny day ended with a wonderful dinner on the terrace of the manoir, now an excellent restaurant.

**Friday 21 April** The **arboretum du Cimetière Parc** is another unique project for Nantes; a 50 ha cemetery planted in the 1960s and 1970s. It was not an arboretum initially, but a park with a collection of common trees. The city had planned to have a single cemetery for the whole of Nantes, but today it is one of several. We realised that this was an interesting site and could be developed into a proper, well-labelled and diversified plant collection.

There are some 11,000 trees and shrubs with large collections of *Ilex*, *Camellia*, *Magnolia*, *Cornus*, and *Viburnum*. We were shown the dwarf *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Maulévrie' found by chance by James Garnett, in a row of forgotten plants in the arboretum de la Maulévrie (Arboretum Gaston Allard) in Angers. At 20 years of age it has barely reached 2 m high and only grows a couple of

**Opposite top left**, *Magnolia laevifolia* 'Guillemineau' at the arboretum du Cimetière Parc with **right**, *Magnolia* 'Allspice', at the Parc de la Beaujoire.

**Below**, James Garnett in the Cimetière Park explaining how he found this dwarf *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Maulévrie' in a row of plants at the Arboretum Gaston Allard.



centimetres every year. Another *Magnolia grandiflora* selected by Roland Jancel presented huge leaves; Jim Gardiner suggesting that they were bigger than those of *Magnolia* 'Goliath'. It also has huge flowers and is considered the best *grandiflora* selection made here. We were also shown *Arbutus* × *thuretiana* (the rare hybrid of *canariensis* × *andrachne*). This is undoubtedly one of the most attractive cemeteries in the world.



Two outstanding magnolia hybrids growing in the Parc de la Beaujoire: **left**, *Magnolia* × *brooklynensis* 'Woodsman' a cross between *Magnolia acuminata* and *M. liliiflora* with multicoloured flowers and **right**, *Magnolia* × *foggii* 'Picotee', a clone that is less hardy than others.

**Parc de la Beaujoire** This is one of four gardens in France specialising in roses. It was created in the late 1980s on some 5 ha of the much larger and beautiful park. A competition is held here every year to determine the best scented roses. But our main objective was to examine the magnolia collection. Nantes is the main national collection holder for the genus. Magnolias were mostly over with some flowers appearing between the new leaves. Some of the 'yellow' magnolia were flowering with good 'Elizabeth' as always and a miserable second flush with much reduced flowers on *Magnolia* 'Banana Split'. *Magnolia acuminata* 'Large Yellow' was spectacular. We were pleasantly surprised to hear that *Fraxinus* was not (yet?) affected by the fungus *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* (*Chalara fraxinea*). A large specimen of *Mallotus japonicus* was just leafing out, a remarkable multistem small tree or big shrub, from the Euphorbiaceae.

**Saturday 22 April Le Grand Blotterreau** This 35 ha landscape park is probably what most of us would consider the ideal arboretum, with grand lawns (open to the public) between didactic 'bosquets' dedicated to various themes. Both geographical and ecological sections display plants of the marshes of the American Bayou or Korean hills or sub-tropical countries. James Garnett was again at our side to guide us through the tropical greenhouses and orangery area. These greenhouses have been restored to the historical condition which would have been known to the officers sent out to the French colonies and who were required to study the flora which they would encounter.

All plants in the greenhouse are grown in pots but placed back in the soil! This requires that they be unpotted, have their roots pruned and be set back in the same pot once a year. Some plants have been going through this exercise for close to a century! Edible fruits and flavouring spices were beautifully displayed; the pruned specimens have the advantage of being able to grow in the historical greenhouses within their limited height. Coming out of this area, we were surprised to see a beautiful vigorous hedge of *Acca* (*Feijoa*) *sellowiana*.

This short tour was organised in masterly fashion by Mary and Jean-Claude Buisson, mixing taxis and trams to guide us through the city not least, on the last day, as our hotel was locked up in the middle of the Nantes annual Marathon circuit.



James Garnett (left) and Jim Gardiner with *Magnolia acuminata* 'Large Yellow', Parc de la Beaujoire.