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Camellia x williamsii 'Donation'

(1) Plant of the Month: Camellia x williamsii 'Senorita'

The cold weather in the last few weeks has put spring on hold, and looking around for a suitable plant of the month, I have not had too many options. There are some nice primulas coming into flower, and the *Corydalis solida* varieties are still looking good but the stars at the moment are the early camellias. Of course the most impressive is 'Donation' which is looking stunning. It is a superb variety, vigorous and free flowering. If you only have room for one, then it should be 'Donation', but there are many other varieties with flowers differing in colour and form. 'Senorita' is a deeper pink, almost red, with longer, more elegant petals. Like the others it is happy in an open shady position. Ours is shaded by a large oak to

the south and a willow overhead. Given a good moist but not soggy soil that is the acid side of neutral it will grow well. In eight years ours has gone from about 18 ins to 5 ft and spread to about 4 ft.



Camelia x williamsii 'Senorita'

(2) Notes from Seattle: Here are Walt's notes from February.

I love the February days when the sky is a crisp blue and the skeletons of leafless trees are silhouetted against the sky, revealing their branching habits. Trunks and all their colors and texture are more apt to catch your eye now without leafy competition. Visiting birds are more visible now too, picking and pecking at left over egg cases, mites and scale. Your eye then moves downward to the groundcovers, noticing their qualities more in the absence of an overhead blanket of green.



Chrysosplenium macrophylla

Some that I appreciate even more now for their appearance and good behavior include Pachyphragma macrophylla, Arabis fernandicoburgii (the original variegated plant waned), Hebe loganioides, Mitchella repens, Cyathodes colensoi, Blechnum penna-marina, Vancouveria planipetala, and Reineckea carnea. All of these increase at a pace that I can keep up with, dividing when necessary. Others like Symphytum grandiflorum, Chrysosplenium macrophyllum and Epimedium x perralchicum 'Frohnleiten' are overly vigorous and are increasingly being taken out of areas where earlier I needed something green. They served admirably as weed suppressors but now it's time to move on.

Deciduous ground covers will begin making their appearance shortly. Good ones for me include Potentilla alba, Fuchsia procumbens, Vancouveria chrysantha, Pulmonaria angustifolia and Omphalodes cappadocica 'Alba' and various geraniums. A number of these are carpets for various hydrangeas and hostas.



Cyclamen coum 'Maurice Dryden'

There are bare patches too where herbaceous perennials have retreated. I don't mind them at this time of year but start imagining what bulbous plant might co-exist in that spot. I leave a couple of patches bare year-round. One has bulbs in it that need to bake during the summer such as Crocus goullymi, Tulipa bakeri 'Lilac Wonder', Sterbergia lutea, Cyclamen graecum, and colchicums. These are at the foot of an old Rhododendron ponticum which I keep for the sake of seeing annual visits from Western Tiger Swallowtails (Papilio rutulus) coming to sip its nectar. And no, the Pontic rhodies don't seem to be invasive here.

Coming into flower is my Edgeworthia chrysantha. It's not close enough to the path to smell its fragrance, but does stand out against the slope to show the stark leafless stems topped with those tassels of white and yellow. Mine gets direct sun during the noon hour and then back into dappled shade for the rest of the day. It's enough to set flower buds but just barely enough to get the summer heat it needs to



be fully hardy. Tips get killed back some years but the result is more branching so not a total loss.

Edgeworthia chrysantha

Garrya elliptica

(3) Dry Shade, Part 4: Very dry, not quite so shady.

The sort of site I have in mind is deciduous shade under young trees or shrubs, or in the region of the drip line of mature trees. Planting in such a site has been well described by Susan Ferguson's note in the January edition, and I will limit myself to a brief review of the 'Theory'.

These sites differ in two respects from the evergreen shade described in Part 3. Firstly, there is more light, particularly in winter and early spring and secondly the winter and spring are wetter and, if anything, the summer is drier. The driver of this is the leaf canopy. Before it opens, lots of light and moisture get

through, once it is fully open it sucks moisture from the ground at a phenomenal rate.

The first question is whether the site is waterlogged in the winter as this severely limits planting options. If it is, you must either arrange for better drainage or raise beds above the winter water table. This is not as difficult as it sounds as most woodlanders are shallow rooted, so a shallow drainage ditch or raising the borders by 4-6 ins is usually sufficient. A slight digression about 'improving drainage'. It is often said that placing gravel in the planting hole will 'improve drainage'. This is a complete misnomer. It does improve root aeration in silty, compacted or very moist soil, but it does nothing to help excess water drain away.

Once you have good drainage then the rule is always to put in new plants in the autumn or very early spring. This gives them time for root growth before they are hit by their first summer. Planting in summer and hoping to keep pace with watering-in when the canopy is transpiring is a fool's errand.

If you are willing to put in some effort it is worth improving the soil with compost, leaf mould and other humus-rich material. The lazy man's way is to place some fallen logs arranged to catch the fallen leaves from the canopy and slowly build up humus-rich planting pockets. Mulching with shreds will also help conserve moisture lost by evaporation, but the main problem is loss by transpiration through the canopy. However, a mulch of shreds is eventually broken down to improve soil structure and is worth doing for this reason alone.

Susan also makes the point that many expensive shade plants, particularly those from summer-wet regions like east Asia will not thrive. Don't waste your money, particularly as there are so many good plants that will work.

In addition to those suggested in Susan's article, you should consider any spring ephemeral or summer dormant plant. Some (but not all) cardamines and corydalis are summer dormant and will do well. Also some of the mediterranean plants normally associated with hot hillsides can be fooled by the moist springs

and dry summers of this sort of shade. For example I grow *Iris bucharica* and *Arum creticum* quite happily in such a site. You should also consider understory shrubs such as *ruscus*, *ilex* and arborescent ivy which will usually establish well in such sites.

In short, if it comes from woods or woodland edges in Europe or Central Asia give it a go!

(4) An article on one of the best of the spring woodlanders by Pete Williams:

***Mertensia virginica* - Virginian bluebell**



Mertensia virginica is a North American native that occurs widely in the Eastern states, where it is known as the Virginian bluebell. It grows to form large stands in woods and woodland margins and is a member of the Boraginaceae - a family that contains many excellent plants for shady gardens. It grows naturally in dappled shade on acid soils that



are damp in spring and dry in summer - *my conditions exactly!* The beautiful tubular flowers are sky-blue when fully open but are tinged with pink at the bud stage. The glaucous flowering shoots appear in late March or early April as the plants emerge rapidly from winter dormancy only to disappear underground once again by mid-summer. This ephemeral lifestyle is rather like our celandine and common in many plants that avoid shady conditions rather than tolerating them.

I wished to establish a group of *Mertensia* at the back of a woodland bed, but the price of individual plants prevented a 'mass purchase'. Propagation is by seed and division but my plants have not proved fertile so far. The initial specimen was purchased in a 9cm pot and

immediately moved into a 2litre container for its first seasons growth. The following spring, as the shoots emerged, the plant was washed



free of compost and divided into four sections and each repotted until established and then planted out. Whilst vegetative propagation was very easy and totally successful, I wanted a larger number of plants and decided that growing from seed was the best way forward. Because I had no seed of my own I looked at the exchange schemes (Hardy Plant Society, Scottish Rock Garden Club) and specialist seed companies and was surprised to find that this species was not listed. The internet came to my rescue and I purchase two packets each containing approximately 20 seed from a North American supplier.

I stratified one set for six weeks in moist peat in a domestic refrigerator, and the other I stored dry, without pre-sowing treatment. Both seed samples were sown at the same time in late January in my usual mixture of 80% fine peat (plus 1.2 g per litre of dolomitic limestone per litre of peat) and 20% horticultural sand. The finished seed mixture was fertilised with 1.5g per litre of micro slow release fertiliser and the pots were placed in a propagator with a minimum temperature of 15 degrees Celsius.



Germination began after about four weeks in the stratified sample where 80% of the seeds emerged. The non-stratified seed did not germinate at all in the first year and have failed to do so again this year. Seedling growth was rapid but each plant produced just two cotyledons and a single pair of large, ovoid leaves. All above-ground structures died back in early summer but observation of the pots showed that each had a firm, plump vegetative bud just below the compost surface. Plants were kept in a cold glasshouse and in March of the second year, the buds expanded and a few of the young plants produced small heads of flowers. I hope to plant these out shortly but the bed has been saturated all winter and is currently too wet to walk on!

Some sources suggest that *Mertensia virginica* is not very hardy but I have no direct experience because I have grown it only for the last three years and these have had mild winters. However, most authorities claim that in USA it occupies hardiness zones 3-8 which span the temperature range approximately minus 40 to minus 10 degree C, and it certainly appears to grow in some potentially very

cold locations. I am hopeful that by next spring I should have a good show of this lovely woodlander.

(5) Available Seed:

If you are a paid up member of the Shade and Woodland Plant Group and would like any of the seeds listed below, please send a SAE to S.J.Sime, Park Cottage, Penley, Wrexham LL13 0LS.

If you have late ripening woodland seed to donate, please send it to the same address.

Akebia quinata

Arisaema candidissimum

Arisaema ciliatum

Gentian asclepiadea

Geranium psilostemon

Kirengeshoma palmata

Actaea cordifolia ex 'Blickfang'

Adenophora takadae var. *howazana*

Astilbe rivularis CC6857

Cardiocrinum giganteum var *yunannense*

Cornus capitata

Fothergilla major Monticola Group

Hydrangea paniculata ex 'Tender Rose'

Lochroma australis (both blue and white forms)

Phytolacca japonica

Disporopsis aspersa

(6) Shade Charades:

Guess the species, two words.

First word, two syllables:

1st. Sounds like an area of alder scrub

2nd. One's former partner

Second word, three syllables:

1st. A blend of black and white

Last two. An expression of surprise and then assent in Yorkshire

Last Month's Charade was *Cardiandra alternifolia*. *Cardiandra*s are an herbaceous genus in the hydrangea family. They are not common in cultivation but make quite nice woodland plants with hydrangea-like flowers. They need a reliably moist but not soggy soil, and flower better in light shade. The one shown unfortunately dies in the very cold winter we had a few years ago, but *C. formosana* survived and is still growing.

