A blaze *of* beauty

IN THE SOUTH DEVON GARDEN THAT ONCE BELONGED TO AGATHA CHRISTIE,
EXQUISITE MAGNOLIAS AND CAMELLIAS THRIVE AMONG NATIVE WOODLAND PLANTS

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE GIFFORD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: MAGNOLIA CAMPBELLII; MAGNOLIA X LIEBNERI 'LEONARD MESSEL'; CAMELLIA JAPONICA 'MARGARET DAVIS'; FERNS UNCURL AMONG FALLEN RHODODENDRON PETALS; THE BRIGHT GREEN NOTHOFAGUS OBLIQUA FROM CHILE, IS ONE OF THE FIRST TREES AT GREENWAY TO COME INTO LEAF

Situated above a river, not far from the sea, and hidden from view among the mellow hills and wooded valleys so typical of south Devon, the Greenway estate has been the home of local notables since around 1530. The location has changed little in the last 400 years and there has probably been some kind of garden here for at least 300 — the atmosphere is rich with the ghosts of pleasures past. Walter Raleigh was a frequent visitor and, in his day, a Tudor mansion known as Greenway Court stood in the grounds. This was later replaced by the present Georgian building and renamed Greenway House.

The property is on the east side of the River Dart, about a mile above Dartmouth. It is south-facing and sheltered from the chilly north and east winds, open only to those generally more clement breezes from the south and south-west. The average yearly rainfall is quite low (around 95cm) and the garden's position on a steeply sloping river bank means the drainage is sharp, so the very occasional severe frosts do not wreak the havoc they might in more waterlogged grounds. The temperature rarely falls below freezing, however, creating a kind of sub-tropical environment in the shelter of established woodland. Successive owners have recognised this as the perfect micro-climate for growing magnolias and camellias, and the appeal of the garden today lies in the way in which the natural environment has been used to create a haven for exotic species, while preserving the native woodland's essential charm.

Informal and discreet, the garden rises on four levels from the riverside to the top of the hill. The land has probably been wooded from the earliest times and much of the indigenous woodland flora has been allowed to remain, creating a rich tangle of wildflowers and ferns beneath oak, beech and lime trees, interplanted with sweet chestnut, yew and Scots pine.

Camellia plantings began in the 1880s and many specimens in the Camellia Garden today are over 100 years old. By the end of the 19th century, Greenway was already well established as an ideal home for the many exotic species, such as rhododendrons and magnolias, then being introduced into Britain by explorers. The soil, which is neutral to fairly acid (pH 7-5.6),

was replaced by peat where necessary for the benefit of these new plants. Early magnolias at Greenway include M. campbellii, M. campbellii subsp. mollicomata and hybrids, and M. denudata.

In 1938 the house and 32 acres of the estate were sold to Mrs Mallowan, better known as Agatha Christie. Dame Agatha loved her garden, especially the large *Magnolia campbellii* in the tennis court garden, which she described as "a glorious blaze of 600 blooms against a dark sky". Dame Agatha's husband, the distinguished archaeologist Max Mallowan, was particularly fond of wild flowers. Steep banks of primroses, violets, bluebells, campions and foxgloves, combined with happily naturalised plantings of daffodils and spring and autumn cyclamen, remain an important feature of the garden today.

During the Second World War, the Nursery Garden was used to grow vegetables and the house became a home for evacuees in 1942. The following year it was requisitioned by the admiralty as an officers' mess. Since 1947, however, the Nursery Garden has been a commercial venture, first specialising in vegetables, fruit trees and cut flowers but now devoted almost entirely to trees, shrubs and climbers. Today it is in the capable hands of Head Gardener Roger Clark, whose specialises in southern hemisphere plants. The nursery walls are covered in honeysuckle, roses and clematis, the greenhouses with vines and passion flowers, and the atmosphere is as lush and informal as the rest of the grounds.

The present owners are Anthony Hicks and his wife Rosalind, Agatha Christie's daughter, who have lived at Greenway since 1967. Lady Mallowan was a frequent visitor until her death in 1976, and Rosalind Hicks planted the deep pink rose "Agatha Christie" in the gardens to commemorate the centenary of her mother's birth.

Having been opened up greatly in the last 30 years (at least 100 trees were lost in the gales of 1990), the garden now contains a wide range of plants from Chile, Tasmania and New Zealand, countries whose climates are very similar to that at Greenway.

The gardens have never been open to the public*, except for a couple of days in early spring under the National Gardens Scheme. The Nursery Garden, however, is open daily and is well worth a visit for the many interesting and unusual plants on sale; call 01803-842382. ❦
* Negotiations with the National Trust for the future of this lovely garden are currently underway.
See Grass Roots for further details.

GREENWAY PROVIDES THE PERFECT MICRO-CLIMATE FOR GROWING MAGNOLIAS AND CAMELLIAS

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Gossip is synonymous with village life – and the most reliable material (if it is at all printable) makes its way into the parish or village magazine. In our Hampshire village we have two publications. One is a 'proper' parish magazine that unites three villages and a neighbouring hamlet and opens with a letter from the parish priest. Here, the editorial tone is one of reserved gentility and the content is the comforting stuff of rural life. Reports from the Gardening Club, the WI and the Wine Society sit alongside more robust comment on a proposed housing development and the OFSTED report on the village school. In the (impressive) 12 pages of advertisements I have found the carpenter who built our much admired kitchen, an upholsterer and a log supplier.

Our own village newsletter, on the other hand, has a much smaller audience and as such can afford a more familiar voice. Peppered with fine names and in-jokes, it feels truly local, and reading between the lines becomes a fascinating pastime. In Country Living this month we explore the quirky world of these publications (page 80) and I guarantee that some of the snippets will make you smile. Parish magazines are described by the Archbishop of York, Dr David Hope, as the 'glue that holds rural communities together' and I believe this is the key: old timers and newcomers alike can leaf through the pages and feel that they belong. Write and tell us about your local newsletter or, better still, send us a copy – you could win more than £1000 worth of Canon office equipment.

The plans for my garden move on apace. Early February brought our man with his digger to transform the lie of the land and we have since planted two rows of limes – one pleached, one to be pollarded. After a little turf laying we shall stand back and work out what to do next: garden designer Bunny Guinness has offered me much inspiration with her own transformation tactics (page 44). For more gardening ideas, read about Jan Howard's flourishing rural business on page 136 and then come along to see the "ancient" magical woodland she has created for us at this month's Country Living Spring Fair. For your last chance to buy discount tickets, turn to page 33.