

**PROFESSIONAL GARDENERS' GUILD
AUTUMN TRIP TO BELGIUM**

24th / 26th October 2014



Report for The Merlin Trust by Giulio Veronese
Professional Gardeners' Guild member and Merlin 631

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Front cover: Woodland path in the garden of Herkenrode.

Diary of the Expedition

This report will focus on the five sites that have been visited by the Professional Gardeners' Guild members during their stay in Belgium.

Friday 24th October.

We arrived at Brussels Midi Station after lunchtime.

In the afternoon we visited the **Arboretum Tervuren**, guiding Wilfred Emmerechts.

We then drove to the Park Inn Hotel in Leuven, where we stayed for two nights.

Saturday 25th October

The bus picked the group up at the hotel in Leuven.

At 10am we arrived and visited the **Arboretum Kalmthout**, with our guide Rob Van Bauwel. This was followed by lunch.

In the afternoon, we spent a two hours visit of **Hemelrijk**, again being led by Rob Van Bauwel.

At 5.30 the bus departed from Hemelrijk for the Park Inn hotel in Leuven.

Sunday 26th October

At 9am bus picks up the group at the hotel.

Within half an hour we arrived at **Herkenrode**. The head gardener Christophe Crock guided us through the garden.

We had lunch at the cafeteria of the **Arboretum Wespelaar**. We then spent the afternoon visiting the arboretum, with our guide Joke Ossaer and Christophe Crock.

At 5pm the bus departed for Brussels Midi Station. By 7pm we were on the Eurostar to London St. Pancras.



Belgian gardens and arboreta visited during the PGG trip

1. Arboretum Tervuren. 2. Arboretum Kalmthout. 3. Hemelrijk. 4. Herkenrode. 5. Arboretum Wespelaar

Digitally-modified picture by Giulio Veronese from maps.com [http://www.maps.com/ref_map.aspx?pid=11920]

Arboretum Tervuren

The curator Wilfried Emmerechts guides us through the arboretum. He starts by giving us a historic overview of the arboretum. The Geographical Arboretum Tervuren was planted on a beech forest; eighty percent of the trees around the site still being beeches. Between 1875-80 a large beech planting was undertaken at the Northeastern edge of the Sonian Forest. The planning of the arboretum began in 1902 under the aegis of Dr. Charles Bommer, curator of the National Botanical Garden of Meise and professor at the University of Brussels. The majority of the trees and shrubs present today were planted between 1902 and 1912.

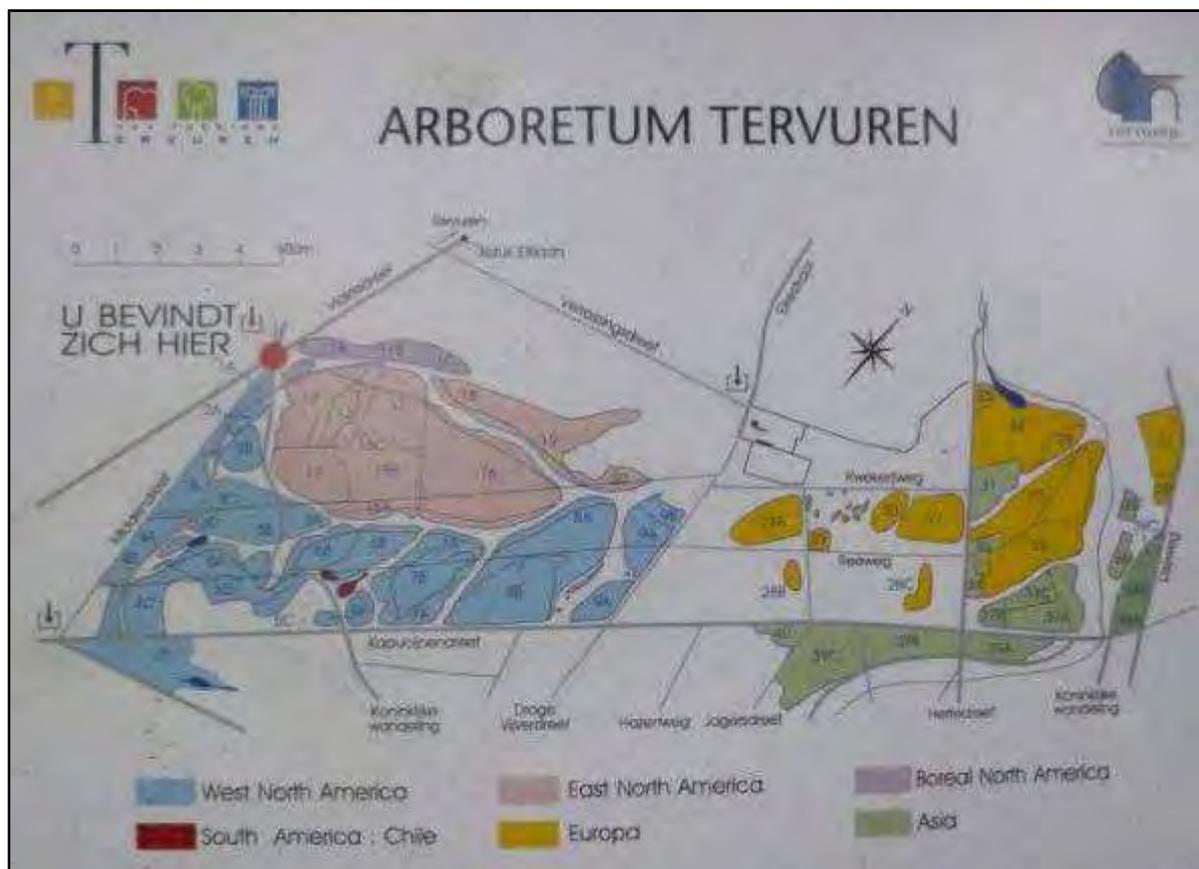
Today the Arboretum covers an area of approximately 100 hectares and includes some 460 different species of tree and shrubs (of which 305 leafy and 155 conifers) growing on loamy, slightly acidic soil.

The layout of the arboretum is rather remarkable and unique. It is arranged in 40 sections, each representing a forest type or regional biome from the temperate climate zone of the Northern Hemisphere, with the exception of one group from the Andes. It is not so much a collection of trees as a collection of forests!

Two main divisions have been layout. The eastern side is home of the Old World (Europe and Asia); the western side hosts species from the New World (America). Due to the lack of time, we visit only some of the sections of the New World. We walk through the North West coastal area first, then gradually head to the Southern States and over to the East Coast. Wilfred tells us that the New World is the most popular division among Europeans, as more exotic species are present, such as sequoias, araucarias, Douglas firs, etc.

The forestry commission is presently in charge of the arboretum. A replanting programme is being undertaken. One of the challenges is getting young trees to grow in shady conditions. The original layout will be preserved but the effect of introducing new species will be interesting. Wilfred is keen to start some naturalised underplanting which will ultimately cut down the maintenance, as a lot of time is spent removing brambles and undesirables at the moment.

No grey squirrels (or “grey tree rat”, as one of my PGG colleagues calls them) are found on site. This means less competition for the other fauna. Also no hunting is allowed at Tervuren but if wild boar numbers continue to grow, culling may be undertaken.



Map of the Arboretum Tervuren with the different geographical sections



Curator Wilfried Emmerechts showing us the map and guiding the PGG members throughout Arboretum Tervuren

We start by visiting the Alaska section. Some magnificent trees are cultivated here, such as *Betula papyrifera*, *Populus tremuloides*, *P. trichocarpa* and *P. balsamifera*. However, conifers are the prominent genera of the section. I can notice specimens of *Tsuga mertensiana*, *T. heterophylla*, *Thuja plicata* (with the characteristic pineapple scent!) and several *Picea* and *Pinus* species, as well as *Pseudotsuga menziesii* with its distinctive bark. It takes about one hundred years to get the elephant's skin appearance.

A nice understory used in this area is *Acer circinatum*, which proves to be rather nice this time of the year, colouring beautifully to a pale yellow under the evergreen canopies. It grows low and layers itself easily, but is clearly a native species and therefore not in accordance with the geographical concept of planting.



Two views of the Alaska section. *Acer circinatum* turning yellow under cathedrals of conifers

We gradually meander into different North American sections, such as Sierra Nevada, Colorado and North Carolina. The various groups of trees are separated by grassy paths and glades, gently rolling over the green landscape. It is a rather wonderful experience to admire two groups of *Sequoia sempervirens* and *Sequoiadendron giganteum* facing each other. The remarkable incense cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*) is cultivated here, as well as *Pinus ponderosa*. *Pinus rigida* attracts my attention. This is an exceptional pine as it can reshoot from the base of the trunk. Within the genus, this well-educated habit is shared only with a few species from the Canaries.

Sassafras albidum is also worth a mention. This is a small deciduous tree, presenting the most peculiar leaves. These come in three different shapes (three-lobed, two-lobed and unlobed elliptical), all of which can be on the same branch.

An Appalachian mesophytic forest has been recreated in the Arboretum. This is an independent biome of the temperate broad-leafed and mixed forests located west of the Appalachian Mountains in the Southeastern United States. I find out that mesophytes are terrestrial plants which are adapted to neither a particularly dry nor particularly wet environment. This is an important term, as mesophytes make up the largest ecological group of terrestrial plants.

Magnolia acuminata is cultivated here. This is one of the largest magnolias, commonly known as the cucumber tree, as the unripe fruits are green and often shaped like a small cucumber. The pecan nut tree *Carya illinoensis* is also cultivated here. This is a species of hickory, producing fruits that technically aren't true nuts but drupes, so containing a single stone or pit surrounded by a husk.

Interesting to notice that *Betula lenta* smells like antiseptic. One of my fellow PGG members also tells me that the very long needles of *Pinus wallichiana* are ideal for starting a fire, so confirming my theory that there is always a bit of a pyromaniac in every gardener worth their salt.

For the first time I have the opportunity to compare and distinguish *Acer saccharum* and *Acer saccharinum*. Despite being remarkably different as well as important trees, they are often confused. *Acer saccharum* is the sugar maple, best known for its bright fall foliage and for being the primary source of maple syrup. It is pictured in the Canadian flag. On the other hand, *Acer saccharinum* is the silver maple and is one of the most common trees in the United States. The common name is after the striking effect that even a light breeze can produce when the silver undersides of the leaves are exposed. The former has orange autumn colour, the latter yellow.

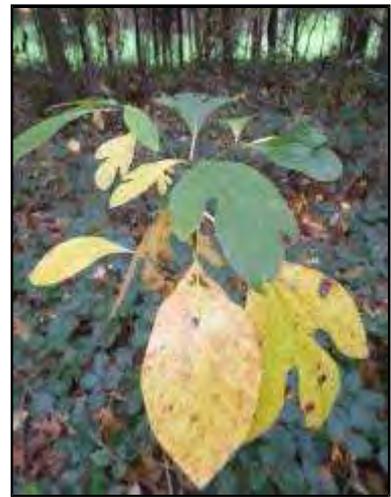
Finally we step into the Andean section. *Araucaria araucana* is obviously one of the stars here, together with *Nothofagus* species. Wilfried tells us that *Fitzroya cupressoides* could be an option for future planting here.



Thuja plicata



Bark of *Pseudotsuga menziesii*



Peculiar leaves of *Sassafras albidum*



The "Royal Promenade", which meanders gently throughout the entire park. Here it stretches into a beautiful beech avenue.

Arboretum Kalmthout

Today we travel north to Antwerp, a few miles from the Dutch border. In this flat, agricultural landscape lays the Arboretum Kalmthout, one of the biggest in Belgium. The director Rob Van Bauwel is waiting for us and will guide the tour.

The arboretum was started as a tree plantation by Charles Van Geert in 1857. He was a nursery man from Antwerp, who moved here to start a new business. However, the site is very much linked with Robert and Jelena de Belder, the couple who took over after Van Geert. Robert was a diamond dealer with a passion for trees and shrubs; however, it was his Slovenian wife Jelena who developed the arboretum, her naturalistic touch still being distinguishable. In a few years they transformed Kalmthout from a nursery into an arboretum. Straight lines and avenues still indicate the original nursery design. Russel Page also came in that time, designing some borders and other small parts of the garden.

Robert and Jelena had to sell the property in 1987, after a huge financial crisis. Since then the arboretum has been property of the Antwerp Province and has recently opened to the public. A few years ago the world-famous Dutch plantsman and designer Piet Oudolf gave his contribution, designing some herbaceous borders within the arboretum.

One of the peculiarities of Kalmthout is the total absence of hedge work; this is rather unusual for a Belgian garden. Kalmthout remains an arboretum *in sensu stricto*, with few botanical elements and herbaceous borders.

It is 12.5 hectares in size and harbors 7000 different species of plants, including named cultivars, as well as species that have almost or even completely died out in the wild. Arboretum Kalmthout holds the biggest collection of *Hamamelis* in Europe; the annual *Hamamelis* festival in January attracts over 15.000 visitors, quite a challenge for the grass paths! The promotion of festivals and other events is economically important. Just during our visit, there is an interesting exposition of bonsai.

Six gardeners are currently employed here, four of whom are full-time; the arboretum can also rely on the help of many volunteers. Seeds are also harvested for commercial trade.



Hamamelis virginiana

We start our tour of the arboretum by visiting the areas behind the scenes. Rob Van Bauwel shows us the machinery shed and the compost area. In the machinery shed enormous seed heads of *Cardiocrinum giganteum* are hung, giving a very remarkable show.

Loropetalum chinense and *Wollemia nobilis* are displayed in pots nearby the glasshouse. It is beautiful to see the Chinese fringe flower again after long time. This is a fantastic shrub in the Hamameliaceae family, which should be seen more often in the British Isles, at least in the warmest counties or in containers. *Loropetalum* is very close to *Hamamelis*, and this might be the reason why it is displayed here at Kalmthout.

Two forms of *L. chinense* exist; a white to pale-yellow flowered, green-leafed variety and the pink-flowered variety *rubrum* with leaves varying from bronze-red when new to olive-green or burgundy when mature.



Display of *Loropetalum chinense* and *Wollemia nobilis*

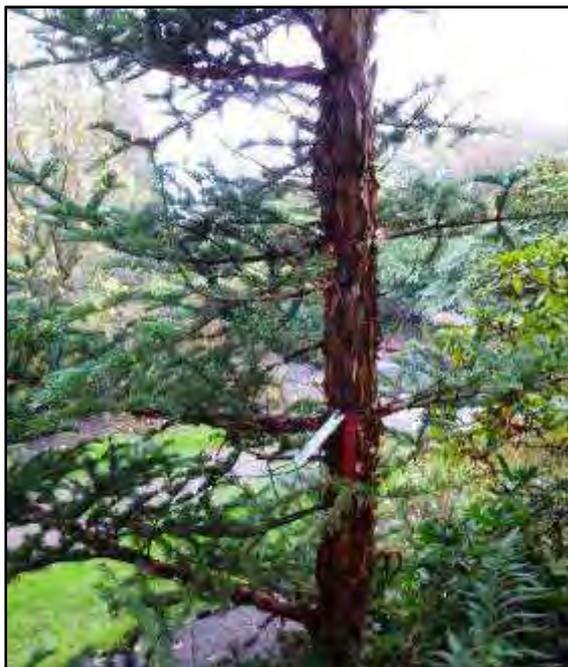


Flowers of *Loropetalum chinense* var. *rubrum*

A real new entry for me is *Abies squamata*. This is an unusual conifer from the Tibetan Plateau, where it grows at altitudes from 3200 to 4400 meters.

It is surprisingly unknown in cultivation, but makes a fantastic conifer with the most attractive reddish-brown exfoliating bark. It bears blue-purple cones, so enhancing its winter interest. It is perfectly frost hardy and should be used and seen in British gardens. A reliable, very ornamental selection 'Flaky' exists.

Abies squamata is definitely a plant to note down and remember.



Abies squamata

In the main lawn is a fantastic specimen of *Pseudolarix amabilis*. This is a Champion in Belgium and gives a fantastic show this time of the year with its needles slowly turning yellow.

Despite its common name golden larch, *Pseudolarix* is actually more closely related to *Keteleeria*, *Abies* and *Cedrus* than to *Larix*. It is a monotypic genus and is native to eastern China. Unfortunately the cones are not visible this time of the year, but a PGG member tells me that they are rather distinctive, resembling a small globe artichoke.

On a lawn not far from the golden larch it grows *Picea abies* 'Nidiformis'. According to the books, *Picea abies* 'Nidiformis' is a dwarf form, an excellent and versatile evergreen for borders or containers, requiring little maintenance because of its tight and compact shape. However, the specimen of *Picea abies* 'Nidiformis' growing at Kalmthout is the ultimate demonstration that plants don't read books. Here is a real old giant, requiring some serious arboricultural surgery skills and a lot of props to prevent it collapsing.



Champion *Pseudolarix amabilis*



Picea asperata



Picea abies 'Cranstonii'

Walking throughout the garden, I notice a small tree with a rather peculiar bark. The trunk and the branches are covered in large gnarled warts, giving the plant a distinctive and odd appearance. We look for the label and find out it is *Zanthoxylum simulans*, which belongs to the Rutaceae family. It is commonly known as the Chinese prickly-ash or the flatspine prickly-ash.

Rob Van Bauwel tells us that the Sichan pepper (or Chinese coriander) is produced from the husk or hull (pericarp) around the seeds. So we decide to have a go and taste some leafy parts, which are also strongly aromatic. They taste really sharp and peppery, after which we decide to walk back to the arboretum cafeteria and have an early lunch!



Zanthoxylum simulans

Arboretum Kalmthout is not all about trees and shrubs. During our walk we bump into some very unusual herbaceous plants too. The first one that I notice is an attractive white-flowering specimen that at a first glance reminds me a sort of *Hibiscus*. When I ask about it, I am told that it is actually *Abelmoschus manihot*, commonly known in Japan as aibika. It was formerly considered a species of *Hibiscus*, but is now classified in a genus on its own. Apparently it is edible and is used as a main green in the Pacific Island.

Another Japanese specimen is *Nipponanthemum nipponicum*, which is cultivated in a border nearby. It was formerly considered part of the genus *Chrysanthemum*, but is now the only species in its genus. This is an attractive white-flowering shrub about 1 meter tall, with most of the alternate leaves clustered near the top of the stem.

Perhaps the more interesting herbaceous I can observe today is *Dicentra scandens*. This is a slender, climbing *Dicentra*, with foliage similar to that of *Clematis* and clusters of yellow flowers unusual for the genus. Apparently it needs a warm position to perform well. An ideal growing situation would perhaps be given by growing through a wall shrub or trellis. Unless conditions are right it tends not to reappear for its second spring.



Abelmoschus manihot



Nipponanthemum nipponicum



Influential landscape architects and garden designers worked at Kalmthout. Borders of Russel Page (left) and Piet Oudolf (right)



A temporary bonsai display



The Red Garden



Beautiful crescent embracing the landscape



Stewartia sp.



Parrotia persica



Styphnolobium japonicum 'Golden Standard'



Halesia diptera var. *magniflora*



Fagus sylvatica 'Cristata'



Quercus robur 'Pectinata'



Euonymus myrianthus



Euonymus europaeus 'Fructu-coccineo'



Chimonanthus retusus



Stewartia x henriae



Platanus acerifolia 'El Gordo'



A stunning, old specimen of *Picea abies* 'Nidiformis'.



There is sometimes a strangely playful touch around, reminding me that I am back in the Continent

Hemelrijk

In the afternoon we travel south-east for a visit to Hemelrijk. Rob Van Bauwel is guiding us through the gardens. This site is strongly linked with Arboretum Kalmthout, as it used to be a landscape park and botanical garden belonging to the de Belder family.

Robert and Jelena purchased Hemelrijk in 1961 in order to extend their collections of trees and shrubs, which they had started at Kalmthout. Robert had two major passions; diamonds, with which he made his fortune, and books. The estate house held a fantastic collection of arboricultural books that has recently been moved elsewhere. Robert was also interested in architecture, this passion is noticeable in the design of the features and buildings around Hemelrijk.

Robert and Jelena renovated the estate in accordance with the principles of the English Landscape Garden movement. Russel Page also contributed to the development of the gardens, as he did at Kalmthout. He introduced an English landscape, designing the park to the north of the houses, with the great lake and clumps of trees surrounding it. This has produced a “natural” landscape to set off the trees and shrubs to great effect, a plantsman’s paradise.

Furthermore, the site also has majestic beech and oak avenues, at 150 years old, that were originally planted when the site was property of the Antwerp Abbey.

The estate covers some 107 hectares of agricultural land and parkland, densely planted with rare trees and shrubs. A recent inventory has identified some 8400 labelled plant accessions; the major collections being of *Acer* and *Rhododendron*.

At present the garden is not open to the public and no permanent gardeners are employed. The site is subject to a regime of preservation, but great care is put in recording and accessioning the living plant material. External contractors are periodically employed for the maintenance of the lawn and hedges.

In the Walled Garden *Ilex crenata* is used around the beds, being some 20 years old. Rob tells us that a colleague of him working at Ghent University has recently propagated a *Buxus sempervirens* resistant to box blight that will be marketed in 2015.



Private estate of Hemelrijk built in the traditional Belgian vernacular style



The entrance avenue is 150 years old, presenting some truly majestic trees; signs of the time are visible



The Lake Garden, with the cottages in the distance



An imposing stump around the lake

The view which welcomes us when entering the site is the wonderful lake with the cottages in the distance. Many interesting trees and shrubs are planted around the lake, however not all are labelled.

Ginkgo triloba 'Tremonia' is planted here. This is an interesting yet controversial selection. It is column-shaped with a remarkably straight trunk and open sparsely branched crown. It is slow growing, especially when young (as always with ginkgoes) and remains very narrow, even when mature. It is a good selection, but unfortunately has presented the tendency to develop twin leaders, so splitting at the base of the trunk. This makes it more prone to failure and a shorter lifetime.



Ginkgo triloba 'Tremonia'



Exploring the Woodland Garden

We gradually step into the woodlands, where maples, hydrangeas, rhododendrons and witch hazels are planted. *Acer triflorum* (the three-flowered maple) is a really good plant. It is related with *A. mandshuricum* and *A. griseum* and has a yellowish-brown exfoliating bark that peels in woody scales rather than papery pieces like *A. griseum*. Even more than its relatives, this maple has spectacular autumn colour that may include brilliant orange, scarlet, purple and gold; it is also one of the few species that develop good autumn colour in deep shade. Unfortunately it is still rarely seen in cultivation outside of arboreta.

Koelreuteria paniculata, belonging to the Sapindaceae, is another real new-entry for me. This is a small to medium-sized deciduous tree, with a broad, dome-shaped crown. Unfortunately it's not in flower at this time of the year, but the beautiful structure and foliage are well evident. It would be nice to eventually see the beautiful flowers and seed pods, features for which the plant gained the name "Pride of India".

Leptocarpus is also interesting. This is a genus of dioecious rush-like perennials endemic to Australia. Apparently only two accepted species exist, being *L. laxus* and *L. tenax*. The one I find at Hemelrijk is *tenax* and really stands out in the herbaceous plantings.

Coming back to some woody specimens, *Quercus dentata* presents gigantic leaves. I wonder if stooling would be possible, in a similar way as it is sometimes done with *Pawlonia imperialis*.

Hydrangea serrata proves to be a good, yet underrated plant. It presents great morphological variation and gives many reliable cultivars; it could be used as a groundcover or as a low hedging plant too. Also *Osmanthus heterophyllus* should be used more often in horticulture, its foliage being particularly attractive.



Acer triflorum



Koelreuteria paniculata



Formal herbaceous borders and hedging in the Walled Garden



Cottage in Slovenian vernacular style



Collection of classic antiques



Wooden architectural features and buildings are scattered within Hemerrijk



Hydrangea serrata



Hydrangea sp.



Beautiful peeling bark of *Betula davurica*



Hamamelis sp.



Parrotiopsis jacquemontiana



A fantastic avenue of lime trees guides us outside Hemerlrijk into the idyllic Belgian landscape

Herkenrode

This morning we visit the gardens at Herkenrode, our guide of the morning is the Head Gardener Christophe Crock. Herkenrode is the private garden of Philippe de Spoelberch, situated on the family estate in Wespelaar. Philippe de Spoelberch is a passionate dendrologist and president of the Belgian Dendrological Society. Prompted to plant trees by his interest in birds, trees soon became his main interest and he expanded the estate to house his increasing collection. The collection was started in the Seventies with many of the trees and shrubs being acquired from well know nurseries such as Hillier's and Esveld. A great number of specimens were also propagated from cuttings and seed. More recently, botanical explorations around the world resulted in the introduction of many plants which are from wild provenance.

The estate measures 25 acres in size, with only two part-time gardeners managing Herkenrode. Grass cutting is carried out once a week, while hedge trimming is usually done in June, and it takes about three weeks (weather permitting...).

Herkenrode is an interesting private garden with a remarkable collection of trees and shrubs, as well as elements of typical Flemish-Belgian garden design. The hedge work is perhaps the most distinctive one. A mixture of formal yew, box and hornbeam topiary are skillfully combined with the informal planting. Christophe tells us that the different heights and shades of green are used not only to give structure to garden, but also to contrast the rather flat light of these regions.

In terms of climate, one of the main differences between Belgium and the British Isles is the warmer summers, which help trees (e.g. *Nothofagus* species) which don't mind cold winter but also need some heat in summer to develop hard wood.



Traditional Belgian hedge work at Herkenrode



Sapium japonicum



Parrotia persica waiting to be named

A new discovery for me here is *Sapium japonicum* which belongs to the Euphorbiaceae family. This is a beautiful small tree with fantastic autumn colour, native to the woods of central and southern Japan. It is completely unknown to British horticulture, but could do well in the British Isles. Once established, greenish-yellow, catkin-like flowers can be seen in midsummer. Christophe tells us that one of its drawbacks is the fact that it is very sensitive to herbicide spraying, meaning great care must be taken.

Another great autumn colour plant is the more common *Oxydendron arboreum*, in the Ericaceae family. This is the sole species in the genus, native to eastern North America, where it is a major component of oak-heath forests. It is perfectly hardy in the north and a worthy ornamental tree. Its late bloom makes it desirable, and its autumn colour is particularly brilliant. The leaves are heavily charged with acid, and to some extent have the poise of those of the peach.

My attention is then drawn by a specimen of *Parrotia persica*. It is unusually compact and erect, with incredibly deep autumn colour. Christophe tells us that this is an on-site selection waiting to be named. ‘Burgundy’ is a hypothesis.

More autumn colour is also offered by a long row of *Liquidambar styraciflua* ‘Lane Roberts’. This is a particularly stunning cultivar of sweet gum that does well and is common in the UK as well. It is both smaller in stature and tighter in its pyramidal shape than the species, with a larger leaf and more red focus to the autumn colour, however it performs poorly on chalky soils.

As always, *Viburnum* proves to be a reliable, useful choice for the garden. In particular *V. plicatum* and *V. setigerum* display the most beautiful autumn colour and make me willing to test them in some garden in the future. *Nyssa sinensis* is on fire in these days. The only tupelo tree I was aware of was *N. sylvatica* from North America; *N. sinensis* is more compact and erect, therefore being useful for the small garden. Both species, originating from swamps and wetlands and require moist conditions.

Finally a mention is necessary for *Euonymus carnosus* (Celastraceae). The epithet *carnosus* means flesh colored and I can clearly see why, as the leaves are almost ruby pink now, with berries of a similar colour. This is a fantastic specimen shrub. A cultivar ‘Red Wine’ exists, a very promising name!



Liquidambar styraciflua ‘Lane Roberts’

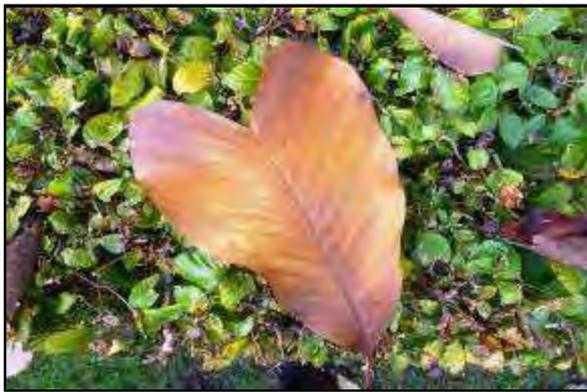


Euonymus carnosus



Hedge work and perennial borders at the garden of Herkenrode

Continuing my stroll throughout the garden, my eyes are drawn to some interesting and unusual trees. *Magnolia officinalis* var. *biloba* has heart-shaped leaves that are now turning pale yellow. I collect some leaves from the ground and put them in my notebook; they could be turned into good holiday romance material! *Magnolia fraseri* x *pyramidata* is another interesting new-entry. It has a double value for the gardener, as it is one of the few magnolias having interesting autumn colour, as well as bearing bright red seed cones later on.



Magnolia officinalis var. *biloba*



Magnolia fraseri x *pyramidata*

Christophe shows us a specimen of *Pterocarya rhoifolia*. It is one of the few wingnuts with no suckers at the base, making a good choice as a specimen tree for the garden. It grows along riverbanks and mountain streams in China, so it requires moist conditions to thrive.

Some very peculiar fruits that have dropped on the ground attract my attention. They basically are yellow pomes about 6 centimeters wide. I initially thought about quince (*Cydonia oblonga*), but then eventually find the label *Chaenomeles chatayensis*, which indicates the plant is closer to the Japanese flowering quinces. However the smell is every inch similar to that of the eating quince.

In a perennial border nearby, a beautiful specimen of *Gymnocladus dioica* is cultivated. It has been long time since I come across a Kentucky coffee tree, so it might be worthy to spend some words here. *Gymnocladus dioica* is an important plant in the United States, where is largely used both in horticulture and human usage. It is a very good performer, being largely unaffected by heat, cold, pests, diseases, road salt, ice and alkaline soil. Interestingly, the leaves are produced late and dropped early in the season; this is a fact to consider when choosing plants to grow beneath it.



Pterocarya rhoifolia



Gymnocladus dioica



A bench strategically placed within the hedges



Herkenrode Estate from the Lake Garden



Old-fashioned grafting technique, with joining much higher than usual



Bamboo canes placed around the main stem for protection against roe deer



A never-seen-before training technique: experimental or horticulturally-valuable?

An interesting herbaceous specimen is *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Black Beauty', used in a border in combination with *Tricyrtis formosana*. This is a good selection with spectacular dark, busby-like flowers in autumn and needs moist soil. These recognisable and distinctive characters make it a favourite of landscape architects and modernist garden designers.

Waldsteinia ternata is largely used under tree canopies. This is a very useful plant for difficult growing conditions, such as in dry shade position or areas with greedy tree roots. Unfortunately the yellow flowers are not present at this time of the year, but the palmately-divided leaves are nice and rather gentle. *Pachysandra axillaris* is also used in similar difficult spots. This is a very nice, berried groundcover, slightly higher than *Waldsteinia ternata*. It is also a new species for me, as I only knew *P. terminalis*.



Pennisetum alopecuroides 'Black Beauty'



Waldsteinia ternata

We gradually enter the Woodland Garden, which is one of the areas of major interest at Herkenrode. The soil here is extremely acid and many plants struggle to grow. A big collection of *Stewartia* is displayed here, as well as *Acer*, *Rhododendron* and *Magnolia* species and cultivars.

Many other plants we see in the other gardens and arboreta are effectively grown here, such as *Sapium japonicum* and *Cornus kousa*. *Illicium floridanum* 'Halley's Comet', a relative to *Illicium verum*, the star anise, is in flower, displaying the most beautiful dark red inflorescences.

The herbaceous understory planting is well-established here, but one of the on-going projects is to introduce more hardy ferns. *Woodwardia unigemmata* (the walking fern) and *Adiantum pedatum* are already cultivated and prove to perform well in some very acidic spots.



Woodland Garden at Herkenrode



PGG members botanising trees and shrubs around

Acer pseudosieboldianum ssp. *takimense* is an interesting plant. It is valued for its erect habit, which is uncommon in maples; this makes it a very good choice for small garden or spots where space is a luxury. It is also more tolerant of exposed conditions than many other Japanese maples.

Acer davidii is cultivated nearby, its well-developed horizontal superficial roots being the most recognisable features.

At the far end of the Woodland Garden is a bed where *Parrotia persica* and the closely related *x Sycoparrotia semidecidua* are cultivated in proximity; *x Sycoparrotia* is a progeny of an unusual inter-generic liaison between *Sycopsis* and *Parrotia*. It is valued for its leathery leaves and its chocolate-brown flowers with bright-red anthers. The selection 'Purple Haze' is a recent addition to the market, the young growth is blushed with a purple haze, which adds an extra dimension. The name is in my note-book: next February I might invest some money in a trip to the closest nursery where *x Sycoparrotia semidecidua* is grown: I'm sure it will be worth it!



Acer pseudosieboldianum ssp. *takesimense*



Rhododendron schlippenbachii



x Sycoparrotia semidecidua (left) and *Parrotia persica* (right)

Superficial roots of *Acer davidii*

I notice a specimen of *Illicium floridanum* (Schisandraceae) which is in fruit. This is another very good plant that could do well in the British Isles, but still struggle to step out of the shadow in our horticulture. It is a beautiful evergreen shrub native to Florida and Louisiana. The flowers (unfortunately just gone now) are deep carmine red or maroon. *Illicium floridanum* is a close relative to the Chinese star anise *Illicium verum*, but is highly toxic and shouldn't be considered a valuable substitute!

Paris polyphylla is in flower now and proves to be a truly valuable woodland plant. In British gardens we always see nice *Trillium* species and cultivars, yet *Paris* shouldn't be forgotten, especially when a "wilder" look is pursued. *Paris polyphylla* has spider-like flowers that throw out long, yellowish green petals from mid-summer to autumn; to me, is more attractive than *P. quadrifolia* and should be seen more often in our woodland gardens.

The rather exotic-looking *Tupistra chinensis* attracts my attention. This is a very alien, unusual plant, but I reckon it can give a nice result if planted in big clumps, similarly to *Ophiopogon* or *Chlorophytum*. It looks like a miniaturized *Aspidistra*, and I am not surprised to find out later that it is in the same subfamily of Asparagaceae.



Fruit of *Illicium floridanum*



A "forest" of *Cardiocrinum giganteum*



Epimedium 'Stella', hybrid between 'Caramel' and *dolichostemon*



Tupistra chinensis



Paris polyphylla

Arboretum Wespelaar

A beautiful double-rowed avenue of mature lime trees brings us from Herkenrode to Arboretum Wespelaar, the last site we are going to visit this week-end in Belgium. One of the assistant gardener Joke Ossaer joins Cristophe Crock for the tour through the arboretum. After a well-deserved lunch at the recently renovated visitor centre, we are ready to roll again.

Philippe de Spoelberch, a passionate dendrologist, started his botanical collections at Herkenrode in the 70's. In order to accommodate more plants, he then bought 20 hectares of bordering land, which in 2011 became the Foundation Arboretum Wespelaar.

The arboretum holds specialized collections of some 2000 different taxa as well as cultivated varieties of trees and shrubs from around the world, hardy in Belgium. The three largest collections are probably *Rhododendron*, *Acer* and *Magnolia*, but other favorites are *Quercus*, *Betula*, *Tilia*, *Carya* and *Stewartia*.

Many interesting cultivars have also been bred and named here. Most of the selections come from on-site seeds and crosses, but also from plants that the arboretum bought or received as gifts. They are named after a period of observation and comparison, when they show exceptional qualities and are worthy to be introduced to the market. Some selections of *Magnolia* and *Rhododendron* have proved to be particularly successful.

Plants of wild origin are a priority, due to education and conservation purposes. The aim is to home 80-90% of plants collected from the wild within a few years.

The comprehensive, diverse dendrological collections provide not only breath-taking all-year interest, but also the opportunity for ornamental display and planting on a very vast scale. Aesthetic elements of design and structure have been introduced, such as statues and the Artois Pond at the focal point of the arboretum. Radially from here, gentle meadows and more austere woodlands gradually take over, in an ascending progression of colours, textures and interest.



Island beds with perennial planting in the Werner Wood at Arboretum Wespelaar



Wonderful double-rowed avenue of lime trees accessing Wespelaar



Gentle landscape around the Artois Pond at Arboretum Wespelaar

In the Marnef Wood, trunks of the mature native oaks (*Quercus robur*) give the structural foundation of the woodland, providing a protective canopy above an understory of maples and many other smaller trees and shrubs. In autumn this is like a gothic cathedral set to fire. Specimens of *Betula lenta*, *Carya glabra* and *Pseudolarix amabilis* display lovely autumn colour. *Lindera obtusiloba* had the most beautiful foliage, with elegant orbicular leaves, terminally trilobed, turning yellow in autumn. The dark appearance of *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Brown Velvet' stands out in this botanical fire, is a magnificent contrast.

Hardy, unusual shrubs and trees are successfully cultivated and displayed. *Euptelea pleiosperma*, *Disanthus cercidifolius* and *Sapium japonicum* could be grown in British gardens. One of the points of major interest was to compare the different horticultural tastes within the countries, getting new ideas and inspiration.

Euptelea pleiosperma in particular is an interesting new-entry to me, with elm-like flowers and a beech-like bark, packed with lenticels.



Head Gardener Christophe Crock



Bronze statue by A. Berger, picturing a great stag and shepherd



Disanthus cercidifolius



Lindera obtusifolia



Cornus kousa 'Satomi'



Euptelea pleiosperma



Ostrya carpinifolia



Magnolia obovata x *tripetala*

There is a comprehensive collection of Styracaceae at Wespelaar, but unfortunately their characteristic white flowers are not present this time of the year. It would be fascinating to come back here with the PGG in July for the bloom of the many *Styrax* and *Halesia* species and cultivars on show here.

Styrax 'Wespelaar' has been selected here and Christophe proudly shows us a beautiful, mature specimen. This is a hybrid between *S. japonicus* and *S. hemsleyanum*; it has broad foliage, emerging green and turning brownish-purple later in the season. Its white flowers have dark stalks and calyces and appear *en-masse* in June. It is a small specimen tree for lime soils, best out of the hottest driest sites.

We then come across a small, broad-leaved tree in the middle of the Artois Pond lawn. This is *Asimina triloba*, commonly known as paw-paw or poor man's banana. It is in fruit, so we all have a go and taste the mango-like fruits. They are pale yellow, fleshy, containing big dark seeds. The flavor is sweet, somewhat custardish and similar to banana, mango and cantaloupe. I personally don't dislike it excessively; yet, by observing the expressions of my colleagues, I come to the conclusion that is one of those things, just like Marmite: you can love it, or hate it...



Diospyros lotus



Sorbus caloneura



Quercus 'Pondaim'



Carya glabra



Bark of *Ulmus lamellosa*



Asimina triloba



Styrax 'Wespelaar' (*S. japonicus* x *hemsleyanum*)



Hydrangea aspera subsp. *sargentiana*



Euonymus gradiflorus



Euonymus europaeus 'Red Cascade'



Euonymus planipes 'Sancho'



Euonymus alatus



Oxydendron arboreum



Gleditsia sinensis

Together with the other world's major botanical institutions, Arboretum Wespelaar aims to implement practical conservation of plants. The arboretum holds 166 taxa appearing on the Red List of threatened plants. Among these are the critically endangered *Torreya taxinifolia* and *Picea martinezii*, as well as the beautiful (but uncommon in cultivation) *Magnolia sargentiana*.

The fantastic *Franklinia alatamaha* (Theaceae), now extinct in the wild, is in full bloom and its beauty is worth the journey itself. The fragrant white flowers are similar to those of *Camellia* and smell like honeysuckle. A peculiarity is the fact that the flowers retain their petals once dropped; this could be valued by planting *Franklinia* by a pond or a lake, with white flowers floating on the water surface. Also a PGG colleague makes me notice that *Franklinia alatamaha* has the potential for doing well in the Italian climate, as a specimen small tree in gardens and parks.

Just like the other gardens we visited, Arboretum Wespelaar offers us an interesting selection of unusual herbaceous plants. A few of us know the beautiful *Pycnanthemum muticum* (mountain mint), but nobody knew *Cephalanthus occidentalis* and *Isodon effusus*. In particular the last one, which is in flower and attracts our cameras' attention.



Franklinia alatamaha



Tetradium danielli



Ilex crenata 'Green Lustre'



Pycnanthemum muticum



Cephalanthus occidentalis



Isodon effusus (syn. *Rabdosia effusa*)



In the Continent a different range of material is sometimes allowed in the gardens; here cemented raised beds (with *Ilex crenata* as a hedging plant in the background!) and fish tank gravel used for prop work



Common oaks in the Marnef Wood



The Temple of Flora in the Park of Wespelaar, seen in the distance from the Marnef Wood

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Group photo in front of the visitor centre at The Arboretum Wespelaar