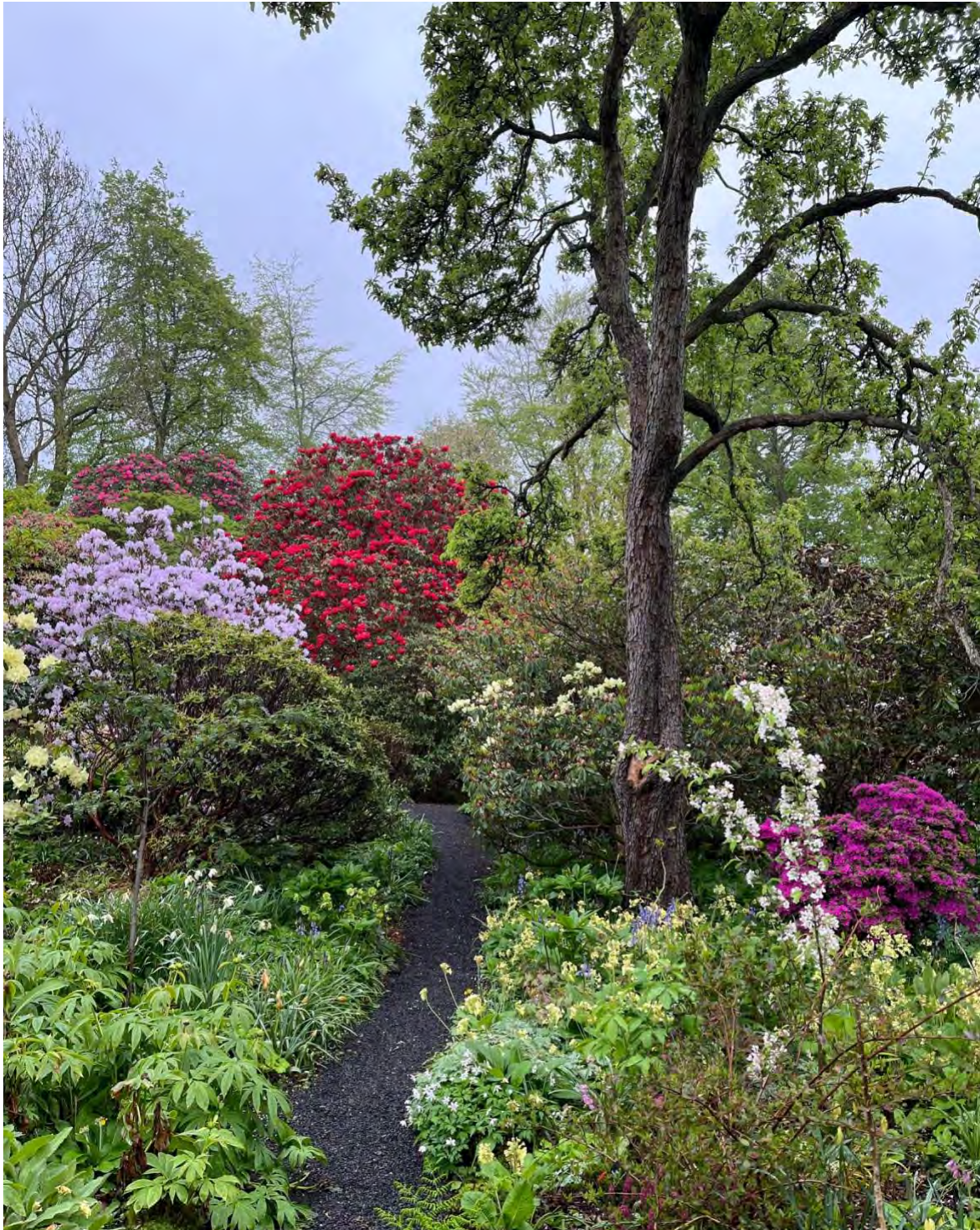


May 2024 Report
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A view into the woodland garden at Branklyn in Perth, Scotland. Massive rhododendron specimens form great clouds of color in the background, with some of the specimens planted in this garden approaching one hundred years old.

A Visit to Branklyn

As a weekend trip in early May, Ernie and I took the train up to Scotland to visit Branklyn, a garden that I've wanted to see ever since I became interested in the genus *Meconopsis*. Branklyn holds the national collection of *Meconopsis* and is renowned for its woodland and rock gardens. We arrived on a very misty Saturday morning and found ourselves in one of the most incredible gardens I've ever seen, and we spent much of the day enjoying each surprise as we turned a corner in a new part of the garden. Mature specimen rhododendrons and maples create a lush canopy of colors, while Primulas, Meconopsis, Trilliums, Podophyllums, Hepaticas, Dicentras, and all manner of ferns carpeted the woodland floors. In the rock gardens, Cassiopes were on full display, along with gentians and other little gems hiding between crevices. The garden is a collector's garden in every sense, with all kinds of botanical rarities and oddities on display. Yet the plants are allowed to intermingle into each other with great care to ensure that nothing is overrun by a more dominant neighbor. Photographs hardly capture the sheer density of planting within this small two-acre garden, as both the understory and canopy layers are filled with plants.

Fantastic combination views of understory and canopy interest in the garden. You are enclosed within thick walls of Rhododendron and Acers which wind you around corners to a new surprise.

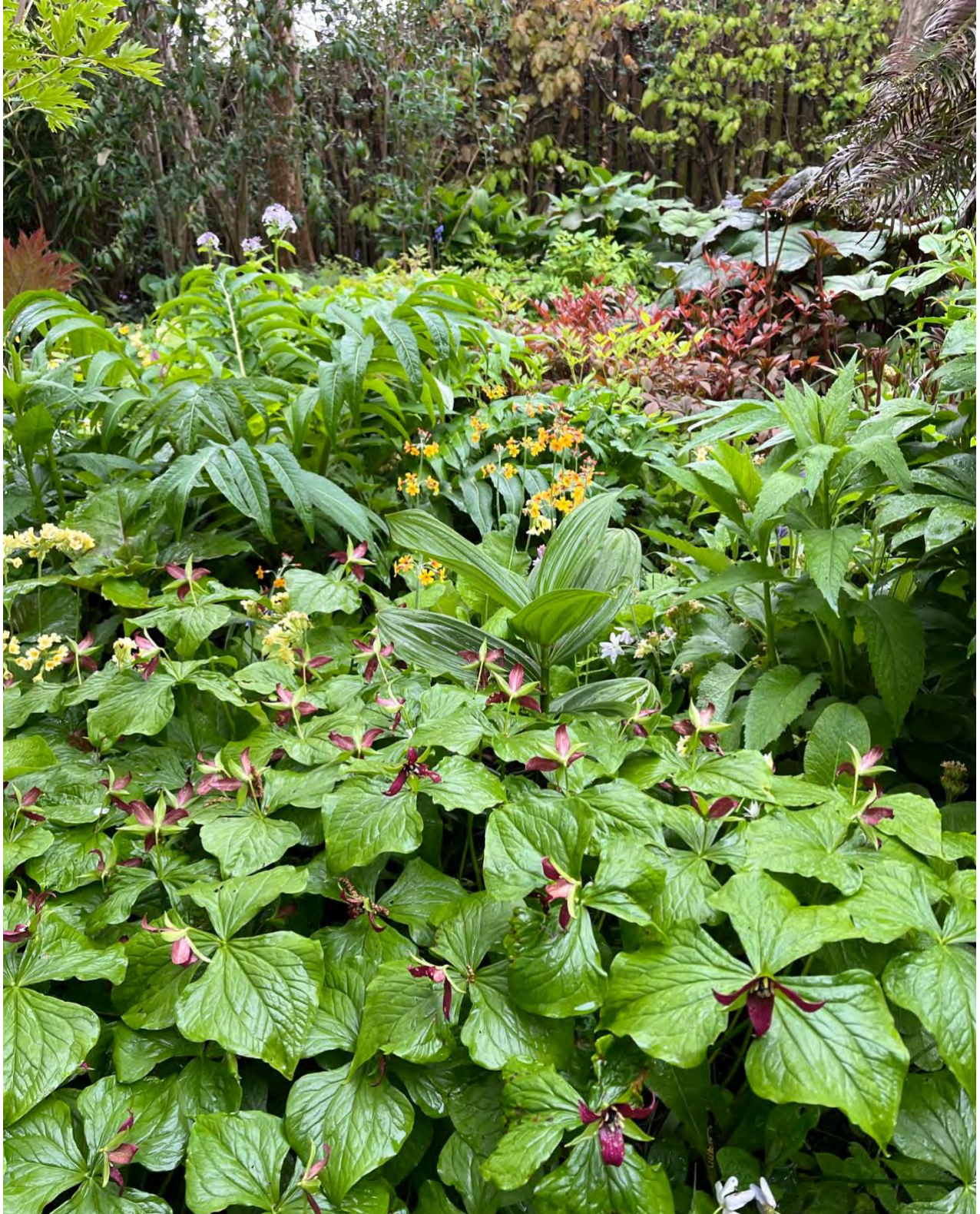


Some of the many fantastic plants from Branklyn. Many of the plants in the garden are rare in cultivation and were collected by Scottish plant hunters in China and planted in this garden by the original owners, the Rentons. Clockwise from top-left: Meconopsis 'Muchty', Calanthe fargesii, Rhododendron thompsonii, Glaucidium palmatum.





The garden is situated on a hillside of acidic loam, with the moist and temperate climate of Fife making an ideal location for growing Himalayan plants.



Trilliums and primulas are represented strongly in the understory plantings, forming lush mosaics.

Branklyn holds the national collection of Cassiope, a genus of dwarf Ericaceous sub-shrubs native to alpine and boreal habitats across the world.

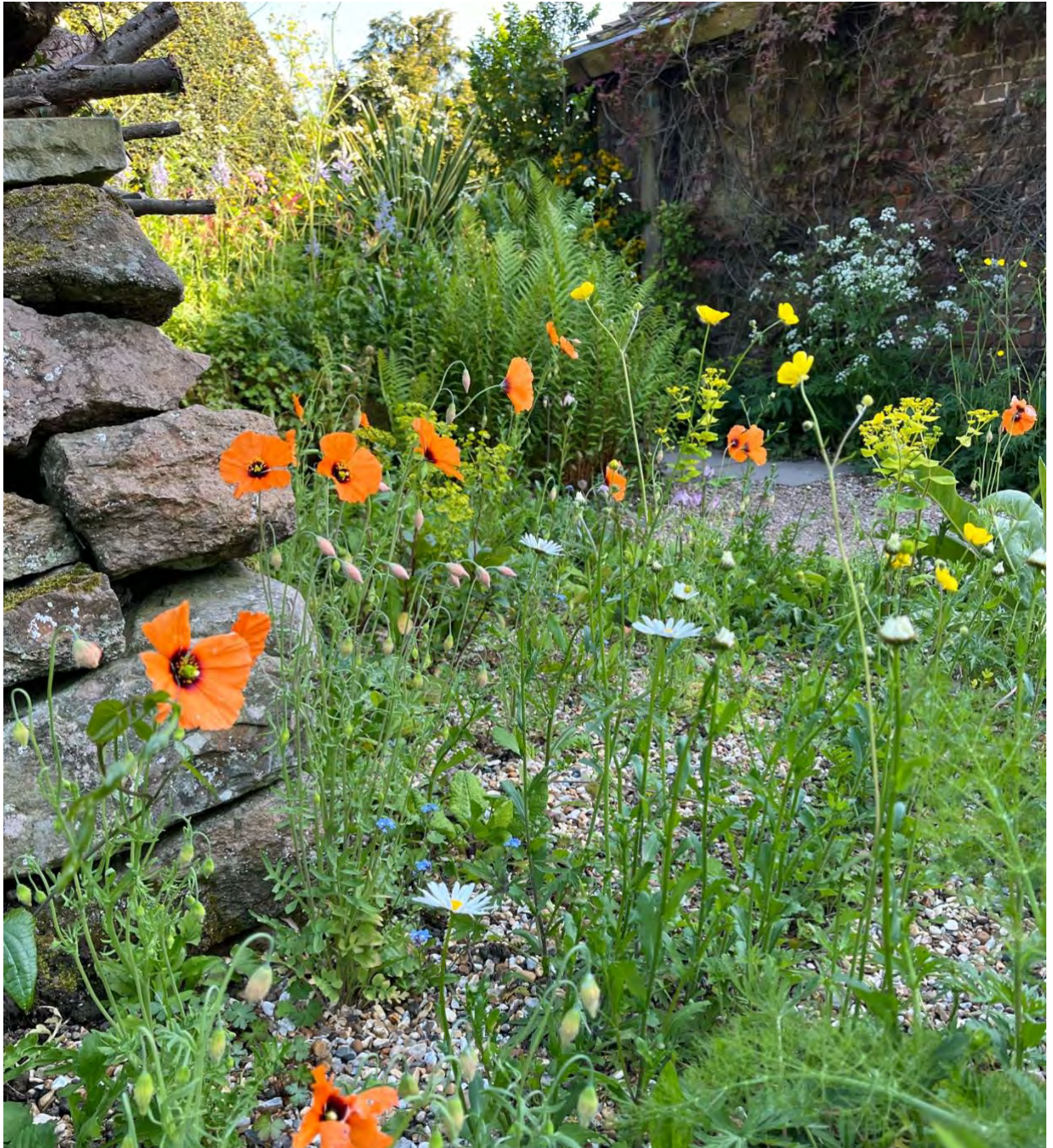




A lovely deep, purple-flowered form of Glaucidium palmatum named 'Mikado.'

Everywhere in the garden there is a flush of acid green, yellow, and white in all different floral combinations. Clockwise from left: *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii* with xx-eye daisies, Woad (*Isatis tinctoria*) with *Allium* 'Giant White', *Euphorbia* with cow parsley in the Peacock Garden, and giant fennels with cow parsley and ox-eye daisies.





A sweet moment with Papaver heterophyllum 'Copper Queen' nestled between self-sowers and other volunteer seedlings by the kitchen courtyard. This area was previously completely covered by a Cotoneaster horizontalis, which received a hard cutback for rejuvenation. The cover that the Cotoneaster provided created a nursery for these plants to establish without being trampled, and they are now given the opportunity to express themselves fully after being exposed to the sun.



A pot display in the Wall Garden showing the real value of hostas for providing bold leaf shape and colors in a transition time between bulbs in pots and our early annuals. Admittedly, I am not the biggest fan of hostas (or cannas) – sometimes it's the waxy leaf texture which makes them look fake, other times it's their proclivity for slug damage – but undoubtedly, they are both extremely useful for injecting bold foliage when you need contrast from finer textured plants.



Deutzia x rosea 'Carminea' has beautiful arching branches and a low-ish habit which looks great in this skinny section of the lower terrace.

May thoughts

In May the garden has taken on a new flush of growth everywhere – the meadows are beginning to express themselves more fully with the emergence of Early Purple Orchids (*Orchis mascula*), which have a lovely moment of overlap with the fading bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) in some of the shadier edges around the garden. A lush greenness emerges in every area of the garden. Early May marks the transition from the tulips finishing to our next major display of annuals and biennials that were planted in late winter.

Poppies provide much of the strength in the next display, and the thousands of ladybird poppies (*Papaver commutatum* ‘Ladybird’) planted in the Long Border, High Garden, and Barn Garden emerge to create great swathes of red in late May and early June. Beth’s Poppy (*Papaver dubium* subsp. *Lecoqii* ‘Albiflorum’) is smattered through the whole of the Peacock Garden, where they dance between emerging perennial clumps and self-sowers. But before we enter the poppy moment, there are a number of plants which play the crucial role of a ‘bridge’ between displays. Of course, all of the permanent structure in the garden provided by trees and shrubs create good interest which helps carry a bed through a dip. Self-sowing elements such as *Papaver cambricum* fill in the gaps between plantings and especially in shadier, moist corners which can help draw the eye into the bed when it’s still a sea of green. Libertias have a very nice moment of blooming which bridges the seasons, and then they fade back to being more foliage interest later in the season when other plants take over. Cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*) is by far the most noticeable element in our May bridge season, and it’s also more labor intensive as a display. We constantly have to edit cow parsley in the beds so that they don’t overtake the picture, and we especially have to make sure to cut the seedheads down before they ripen. The garden takes on a wonderful fluffy texture with cow parsley, but it’s a carefully considered picture which we must control.

We’re really still enjoying the fruits of our labor from the winter where we planted many of our early biennial and annual display out. Each season has its peculiarities – our larkspurs this year were all eaten by slugs, and our *Silene* ‘Blue Angel’ was infected by a rust which shriveled and browned its foliage. We spread out our risk by growing lots of different annuals which we can use to plug up gaps or fill in for an area that has gone over prematurely. Because the beds still look really good from the work preparing them in the early spring, we’re making sure to stay on top of both annual and perennial weeds before we have to crack into any major changeovers. Cleavers (*Galium aparine*) is particularly important to stay on top of early, as it is tolerant of the early vegetation cover and high competition in the Dixter beds which squeezes so many other common weeds out. Any bedding pockets that need changing over, particularly forget-me-nots and wallflowers, are replaced as they go over rather than all at once, so we avoid a major crash in flowering happening at the same time.

It’s important that we don’t lose sight of production this time of year, as we need to be moving things on to size so they can be ready for planting in a few weeks. Dahlias, cannas, and

hedychiums, all important elements of the high summer displays, need to be potted on and looked after so we can plant in June and July. We're also staying on top of staking and tying in annuals and climbers, ensuring clematis are properly trained up poles and *Hesperis matronalis* and *Centaurea cyanus* are staked in the beds. In New England, May is a wonderful time in the garden and in nature because everything is starting to move – from the spring ephemeral woodland flora to canopy leaf out, and the perennials pushing up through the ground alongside spring bulbs – and it all moves at once. In the English climate at Dixter, many of these spring events have happened in February, March, and April. Here, May is a kind of acceleration, where we feel the inertia of the garden starting to push past our capacity to contain it.



Poppies and Hesperis in the High Garden.