

COROKIA

New Zealand's delicate and subtle treasure

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My love affair with *Corokia* began about 15 years ago – it wasn't a flash in the pan that promptly burnt itself out but was a gradual discovery that has blossomed into an overwhelming passion.

I have been given a huge amount of support and encouragement from National Office, for which I am truly grateful. I'm determined to leave no stone unturned to raise awareness in my largely unknown and undervalued genus. I belong to the London group and Fiona Crumley, who oversees my collection, has been most encouraging since I was awarded National Collection status in December 2015.

EASY TO GROW

The genus is a very useful one, being drought, wind and salt-tolerant and quite hardy to -8°C, provided that it is given good drainage. It's easy to grow, not susceptible to diseases, has very delicate, attractive foliage and comes in a great variety of colours from subtle shades of green through to bronze, yellow and silver. Like many Mediterranean plants they are drought tolerant, require good light and drainage and can thrive in poor soils.

Collecting *Corokia* was a natural progression from growing Mediterranean plants, which I've always been drawn to through my background and the landscapes of the Middle East, Italy and southern France.

My first encounter was through a friend who lives close to the Suffolk coast who grew *Corokia x virgata* 'Yellow Wonder' with great success. I bought one and planted it in my North London front garden. Then, on a trip to Cornwall and the Lost Gardens of



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Mona Aboud has potted up her National Plant Collection of *Corokia* and has also planted them in a border, mixed with perennials

Heligan, I discovered Burncoose Nurseries and bought a couple more varieties – *C. cotoneaster* and *C. x virgata* 'Frosted Chocolate'. I did some research and found that the genus consisted of three species of evergreen shrubs – *C. macrocarpa*, *C. buddlejoides* and *C. cotoneaster*.

Corokia are endemic to the forests and rocky areas of New Zealand and boast small star-like yellow flowers followed by red, orange or yellow berries. When I discovered that there were a great number of interesting hybrids I started collecting them in earnest.

I dotted them around the garden until 2013 when I decided to gather them together in one border, mixed in with perennials. In time they will form a hedge. A number of the smaller-leaved cultivars remind me of *Buxus*, and they are perfect alternatives to box. ❁

The author is the National Collection Holder of *Corokia*. For further information <http://monasgarden.co.uk> and the June 2017 edition of *The Plantsman*

SORBUS:

simple name, complex taxonomy

TIM BAXTER, the Ness Botanic Gardens botanist, on the history of its National Collection and his concerns over wild collecting

Sorbus is a large genus that includes the whitebeam, rowan, service tree and wild service tree. It is part of a complicated group of genera within the rose family, which includes apple and quince, known as the Maleae.

Sorbus itself should be split into several genera (Robertson, *et al.*, 1991), because there are no definitive characteristics that link them.

The main centre of species diversity is western China and south-eastern Tibet; because of their complexity, the number of species is not accurately known but is thought to number 300 to 400 worldwide.

Their attractive foliage, good autumn colour and long-lasting, colourful fruit mean that there are many excellent garden-worthy *Sorbus* and there is something suitable for most gardens, large or small.

SIMILAR BUT DIFFERENT

The National Collection of *Sorbus* at Ness Botanic Gardens which overlooks Dee Estuary on Wirral Peninsula, was established in 1972 by Dr Hugh McAllister after a query over identification.

A rowan labelled *Sorbus prattii* looked dissimilar to others of the same name. After growing and studying similar plants and comparing it with herbarium specimens, the plant was described and named *S. forrestii*, a new species.

Thirty years of growing, studying and identification followed, with the aim of providing a stable taxonomic revision of the genus. A monograph on rowans was published by McAllister in 2003 and a monograph on whitebeams by Keith Rushforth, the arboricultural consultant, is planned. The taxonomic work continues, with several particularly distinct taxa soon to be named as new species.

MICROCLIMATES

The entire genus of *Sorbus* is represented at Ness, which is owned by the University of Liverpool, with rowans accounting for the greater part of the collection. At its peak in the late Nineties, the Ness Collection included about 600 accessions, most of wild origin from China and Tibet.

Ness covers 64 acres and lies in the rain shadow of the Clwydian Hills. It has a unique microclimate, being protected from cold winters and with a long but dry growing season. These conditions are not favourable for many Asian *Sorbus*, which tend to grow better in humid climates with cold winters, such as Scotland or Scandinavia. Naturally drought-tolerant plants, such as section *Discolores* (*hupehensis* types) rowans and European whitebeams do best in the garden.

FLOURISHING COMBINATION

The rationale behind the Ness *Sorbus* Collection was to provide a living resource to allow greater access to material for study, without solely relying on herbaria and expensive field work. It is located throughout the garden in combination with our other important taxa including birch, apple, *Spiraea*, *Cotoneaster* and alder.

Most were planted in the farthest parts of the garden in heavily stocked beds. The most attractive taxa were also distributed around the garden to more prominent positions with favourable growing conditions. An example is our pine wood, where humus-rich acid soils have allowed many important *Sorbus* to grow well. A maintenance programme, auditing, labelling and propagating are helping the Collection to flourish.

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■ The herbaceous border at Ness Botanic Gardens: the garden itself is home to many excellent garden-worthy *Sorbus*

RARE SEED

Many Ness *Sorbus* are rare and propagated to ensure that they persist in cultivation; many come true from seed and will often make superior plants when compared with more typically grafted trees.

Some rowans are naturally multi-stemmed (for example, *S. frutescens*) and in some cases (*S. rosea*) are more drought tolerant on their own roots. Many European whitebeams (for example, *S. intermedia*) are tough and grow easily from seed; most Asian whitebeams need to be grafted.

Everything is grown from seed at Ness using raised beds and a field nursery because this produces healthy, well-grown plants by ensuring the right growing medium, reduced watering and better control of pests, especially vine weevil.

UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES

Botanic gardens have access to a greater range of plant material, especially of wild origin, than

is typically available in most private gardens.

We legitimately exchange plants for science and research, education and biological conservation in accordance with the Convention on Biological Diversity and Nagoya Protocols.

However, questions are being asked about how this is to be managed by botanic gardens in future, particularly the role they play in spreading garden-worthy plants into the wider horticultural world.

“The best way to look after a plant is to give it away” is a philosophy true of all gardens. While it is commendable to be able to account for the material’s origins and for originating countries to receive their legal entitlements, an unforeseen consequence could be to confine introductions of wild-collected material solely to botanical institutions. It is hoped that this will not become a threat to the National Collection scheme, which relies on many individual Collection Holders.

Those taxa that grow poorly in one garden may grow beautifully elsewhere. This is true of


the Ness *Sorbus* collection, where distributing plants to other gardens has helped to mitigate plant losses and provided an excellent source of new material.

Sorbus are an interesting and beautiful group of plants of incredible diversity and complexity. Although there are challenges, we have a commitment to the long-term management of our Collection and hope that this will ensure these fascinating plants can persist in cultivation. ✨

REFERENCES

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McAllister, H.A. (2003). *The Genus Sorbus: Mountain Ash and other Rowans*. Kew Publishing

 The author's interest in *Sorbus* started his career at Ness, first as a volunteer, then as the botanist, a post he has held for nine years

SORBUS COLLECTIONS AROUND THE UK

HAMPSHIRE

Sorbus (British endemic spp.)

Glyndwr Marsh, the Collection Holder, says that indigenous species are mainly found at the most specialist nurseries – or not at all. “I’ve done a lot of my own grafting,” he says. “People tend to prefer the Himalayan or Chinese trees because of their berries.” However, if you want endemic trees, *Sorbus domestica* and *S. aucuparia* are easily found. He recommends the latter because it flowers and fruits well every year. His visitors tend to be “botanists or people with botanist tendencies”. A recent guest from the Tree Council told him that botanists have identified another dozen UK species – “Those botanists are a menace! Some of the new species consist of only a couple of trees but I will add them to my Collection over time.”

GRAMPIAN AND TAYSIDE

Sorbus (pinnate-leaved species)

Philip Bolt's interest in rowans was sparked when his wife, Moira, bought a white-berried tree from Ness Botanic Gardens. Until then, he had thought they came only in red. Berries are the reason for growing them, he says. The flowers smell of cat, though they are pollinated by bees and hoverflies, so he is not sure why. His *Sorbus* Collection is the only one in Scotland. Hugh McAllister, formerly of Ness, suggested to him that *Sorbus* might grow better on the East Coast than at Ness. “Most of my trees are Himalayan and the Himalayan

Rhododendron that George and Betty Sherriff grew at Ascreavie,” Bolt says, “about five miles north of here, grew particularly well so I knew *Sorbus* would do well too.”

NORTH EAST

Sorbus sect. *Aria* & *Micromeles*

Stephen Heslop, head gardener at East Durham College, where this collection is held, runs an active grafting programme, which was started by his predecessor, Mike Hirst. The college has wild-collected material and some *Sorbus* that arrived via the collection held by the late Lord Ridley.

BERKSHIRE

Sorbus subgenus *Sorbus* sect. *Sorbus*

The collection of 25 taxa is held in the Valley Garden, the 200-acre woodland garden where you can wander for hours and not get lost. The soil is thin, free-draining Bagshot sand and the gardeners are keeping an eye on the effects of climate change on the trees. *Sorbus* were planted in the 1930s. John Bond, the eminent plantsman, increased them during the Seventies and Eighties and the late Mark Flanagan registered the Collection. The garden has an active grafting programme. The *Sorbus* berries are popular not only with visitors but also with parakeets, which find the fruit of exotic trees very much to their taste.

 For information about opening times, contact details etc. check the *Directory 2017* or our website www.plantheritage.com