

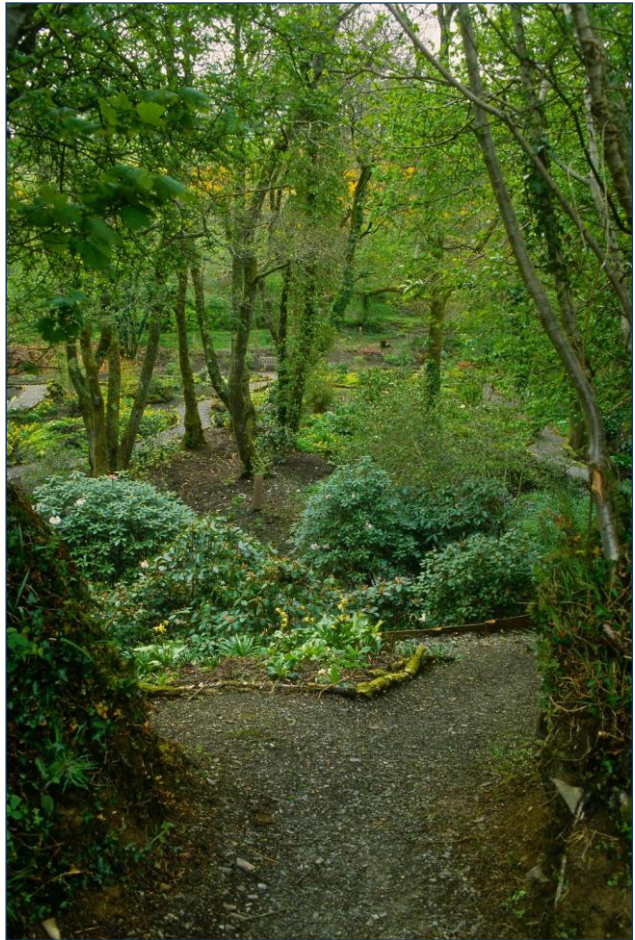


'Bryn Collen'- the garden of Jim and Jenny Archibald by Tim Ingram

In April 2003 I had the good fortune to be invited to give a series of lectures in Ireland and visited a number of fine gardens, both private and public, which remain strongly in the memory. But best of all was returning through South Wales and the opportunity to see 'Bryn Collen', at Ffostrasol, Llandysul, the home of Jim and Jenny Archibald. Those marvellous Welsh syllables were only known to me from the enticing seedlists received over the past decade or more and had not fully prepared me for a garden both deeply sympathetic to the landscape and full of the most wonderful variety of plants. Of course I should have known that here would be something very special, but one can become so immersed in one's own garden and gardening that a different outlook can only be good. I had listened to Jim speak and read his articles and felt very privileged to be invited to his and Jenny's garden. All gardeners, though, have that instant rapport that comes from a lifetime of growing, propagating and studying plants, and perhaps also a tolerance of those, like me, less experienced and eager to learn.



Stream in the woodland



Entrance to the woodland through the hedge

'Bryn Collen' lies on the side of a valley, high above a stream which in the [March 2001 seedlist](#) Jim described they were beginning to clear and manage to create a moist woodland garden. The rainfall in this part of Wales can reach 2m (6ft) or more annually, and the effect of too much of this coming too close together is described in the [September 2008 seedlist](#). Many of the streamside plants, naturally adapted to such occasional floods, withstood the weather well. This part of the garden took my breath away when I visited in 2003, two years after it had been started. And it was obvious then how carefully it had been planted. The stream was managed

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and divided to moderate and spread its flow and many choice species planted on the banks and at strategic points throughout the woodland. Coming through the narrow entrance in the hedge from the open garden above was both a surprise and a revelation. All really good gardens rely on contrast, both between plants and in the overall plantings, and I imagine that the woodland must have been the greatest fun to make; an opportunity to grow a whole range of plants impossible elsewhere. A few larger trees made focal points and winding stony paths enticing access to the streamlets and planting areas.



Chrysosplenium davidianum and *Caltha palustris* carpeting the banks of the stream, with some good *Meconopsis* rosettes in the central "island"

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In places the fresh green foliage and sulphur-yellow flowerheads of *Chrysplenium davidianum* completely carpeted the banks, and bold clumps of *Lysichiton* and *Gunnera* erupted from the moist soil. Low, near the constantly running water, were choice primulas, 'King Cups' (*Caltha palustris*) and the contrasting form of sedges.



Lysichiton and *Gunnera*

Higher in the woody soil between the trees, familiar woodland species such as trilliums, pulmonarias and ferns, interspersed with many rhododendrons ranging from dramatic large leaved species to the lovely glaucous, waxy-flowered cinnabarinum. Come summer with the leaves on the trees and perennials in full growth, the scene must have resembled a lush monsoon forest in the Himalayas! Much more time would have been needed to take in the full richness of the planting but already the garden captured the imagination and was a true work of art.



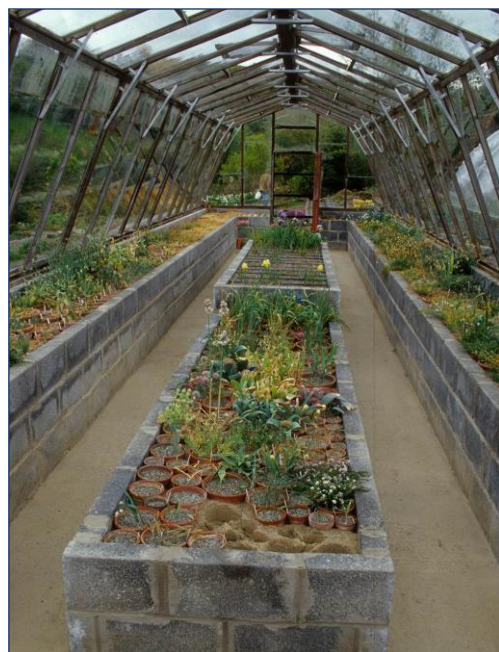
Chaerophyllum hirsutum 'Roseum'



Rheum palmatum 'Atropurpureum'

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But of course the garden didn't stop here! Above the woodland a small orchard of mature fruit trees was underplanted with hellebores and other woodland species, plus strong growing perennials like *Euphorbia griffithii*, which revels in damp soil, and the lovely pink umbel ***Chaerophyllum hirsutum* 'Roseum'**. ***Rheum palmatum* 'Atropurpureum'** was magnificent in its expanding spring foliage, but not just one - planted in some numbers! A second smaller *Rheum* species made a fascinating conversation piece. Higher still and the garden became more open and loosely planted with smaller species of rhododendrons and other Ericaceae, choice shrubs like *Fothergilla*, and many bulbs and tidy early flowering perennials. The quality of the planting throughout could easily compare, and often outshine, any of the finest Botanic Gardens throughout the country, and reinforces the view that Jim was a plantsman and educator of the highest calibre. His often acerbic comments made in the introductions to the seedlists may have made uncomfortable reading at times but were strongly founded in experience, and their value no doubt recognised by many not in a position to posit them themselves.



Above: Planting in the upper garden
Right: Stock plants in a greenhouse
Below: *Helleborus vesicarius*



For me the highlight was the range of greenhouses and tunnels at the highest point of the garden, containing stock plants for seed and propagation which wouldn't prosper in the open. Here was a treasure trove of rare species; bulbs of all kinds; probably the finest collection of peony species in the country; and oddball plants like the summer dry adapted ***Helleborus vesicarius***.

Most of the bulbs were grown traditionally and meticulously in pots. Many earlier flowering species of fritillarias and narcissi were over, but notable plants in full flower included burgeoning potfuls of all three forms of ***Tecophilaea cyanocrocus***, the glorious and vivid flowering *Anemone biflora*, several *Calochortus* species (a genus rarely seen in cultivation, even given the greater availability from Dutch bulb growers in recent years), and some mouth-watering irises.

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Below: *Tecophilaea cyanocrocus* forms



In the large polytunnel larger herbaceous species were planted out directly and included the most magnificent clump of *Paeonia cambessedesii* that I have ever seen! Along one side a shallow raised bed was devoted to an enviable collection of peony species; 28 different accessions are listed in the September 2008 seedlist, and those who have grown peonies from seed (slow but usually quite reliable) will know that this was a remarkable and painstaking resource, and an example of the immense value of growing and collecting seed of such plants in cultivation. Extraordinary and completely new to me was the rare and darkest maroon *Paeonia parnassica*, a very local endemic from Greece, and a plant I shall always wish I had obtained seed of when listed.



Above: Stock plant tunnel

Below: *Paeonia cambessedesii* and *P. parnassica*



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In this tunnel was the endangered Californian *Delphinium luteum*, along with a number of elegant Pacific Coast irises; trailers of *Tropaeolum polyphyllum*; a beautiful white form of ***Thalictrum orientale*** growing en masse; and a wonderful clump of the original *Helleborus* 'Ballard's Black', showing how well this responded to the warm and dry conditions under cover. The very lovely azure-blue relative of muscari, *Bellevalia forniculata* (a Turkish species of melt water meadows in Erzurum), especially appealed to me, though attempts to establish it in our garden have not succeeded to date. The tunnel and greenhouses contained a true cornucopia of plants!

Below: *Thalictrum orientale*



A garden of this quality in the public sphere would be lauded and cherished by gardeners. There is no doubt that Jim himself had this effect on those who knew him, whilst at the same time making, with his wife Jenny, a garden that was a private masterpiece. Dr. Tim Ingram