

Arboretum de la Bergerette – previous blogs

May 2020

May arrived wet, with more than an average month's rain in the first ten days, but sun thereafter had plants suffering by the end of the month. Shade temperature exceeded 27°C (80F) on 11 days, but rose only once above 30°C (86°F), with a monthly mean temperature of 18.7°C.

This is the month of grass, and there are four grass-mowing regimes here: some areas are never cut, with the intention of providing a haven for the eggs and caterpillars of the 'Brown' butterflies and other insects; some are cut once a year during the winter to reduce competition for the wild orchids in spring ; some are cut from autumn through to early summer, providing the later wildflowers such as Knapweed (*Centaurea*) the opportunity to flower; and a few areas near the house and additionally a series of paths are cut all the year round. These latter are not cut close, and prove a magnet for many wildflowers, of which the trefoils and *Prunella* are taking over from the flowers mentioned in April.

In the meadows cut annually, the grasses are all in flower in mid-May in a surprising variety of form and even of colour, but by the end of the month they are already starting to take on the dry drab tints of summer.

An arboretum is a collection of trees, so I'm going to start this month's report with.... succulents and daylight robbery. The winter of 2012 produced two weeks below freezing, with a recorded minimum on the plateau of -13°C (no doubt lower in the valleys). Understandably, most of my 'hardy' succulents took a hit and sulked for a while, but are now back on top form. The white *Echinopsis* in the photos has superb flowers, but they are literally one-day wonders. Flowering over a much longer period is the vivid red *Chamaecereus silvestrii*, which has now been transferred also to the genus *Echinopsis* as *E. chamaecereus* (there was already an *E. silvestrii*).



Daylight robbery, by bees! The shrubby *Aesculus pavia* (Red Buckeye to Americans), the parent providing the red colour to the hybrid Red Horsechestnut *Aesculus x carnea*, flowers this month. It comes from southeast USA and its long-tubed flowers are pollinated there by the Ruby-Throated Hummingbird seeking their ample nectar, and possibly also by butterflies and moths with long proboscises. Here they attract bees, yet the flowers are too long and narrow for the bees to enter. Closer examination shows that the bees extract nectar via a hole in the base of the tube, most probably made by Bumble Bees but afterwards used by honeybees as well, thus bypassing the pollen they are contracted to distribute. Outrageous! Except that, nevertheless, some fruits are formed every year. The close photos show the same flower with and without robber bee.



Now that the young oak leaves of spring have matured, one of the most attractive trees is *Q. faginea*, already the battleship grey that some other oak species assume only later in the summer. Keiko Tokunaga, a Japanese artist who travels the world with her husband to paint oaks and especially acorns, visited last autumn specifically to see the acorns of this and a handful of other species. The photo is courtesy of her husband, Susumu [With Keiko Tokunaga]. You can see some of her delicate work on this link: <https://www.internationaloaksociety.org/content/why-i-draw-oaks>



There are plants of a small *Orobanche* scattered all around the property, but a much more striking 'orobanche on steroids' seen for the first time this year turned out to be *O. rapum-genistae*, parasitic on nearby broom plants.



The white fleece nests of the Pine Processionary Caterpillars at the ends of pine branches here are highly conspicuous, and control measures are taken. Sunny days in winter can bring processions to the ground, the longest of which I have seen measured an extraordinary eight metres! However, seemingly less common here but perhaps merely less noticeable concealed against the bark, the Oak Processionaries are in evidence also.



The caterpillars of both species have highly irritant hairs on the body. The latter is now trying to gain a foothold in the UK, and has already been a problem at Kew Gardens.

There are of course oaks with notable autumn leaf colour, but perhaps it is less well known that some have colourful young leaves. The parent of the tree shown was noticed on an Interstate highway parking lot near New Madrid, Missouri, USA, by oak guru Guy Sternberg, who discovered that it's seed-raised offspring produced the same long-lasting spring colour. I was lucky enough to visit the site back in 2006 with Guy and some other oak enthusiasts, and this tree was the fruit of my endeavours.



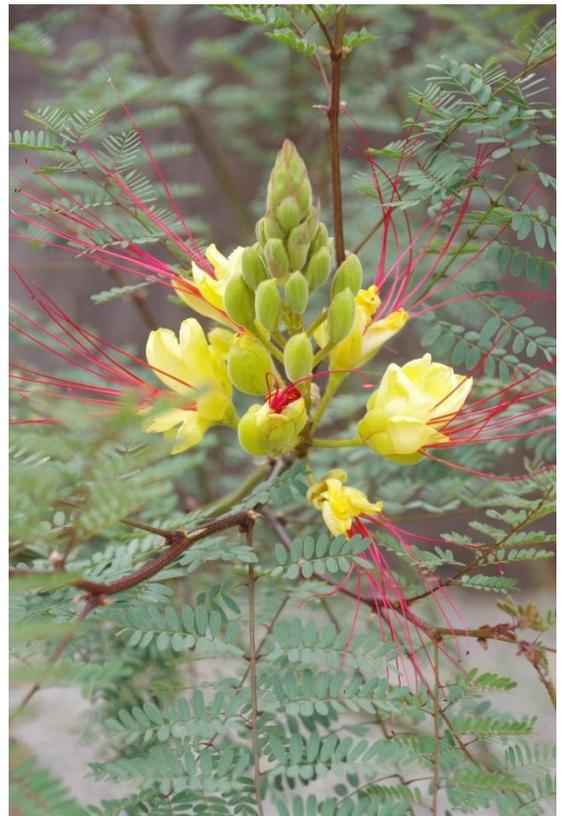
New Madrid was virtually destroyed in 1811 and 1812 by earthquakes and consequently gives its name to a seismic area; now it has more peaceable fame as an oak cultivar: *Quercus nuttallii* 'New Madrid'. Botanists insist that *Q. nuttallii* should now be known as *Q. texana*, but many of us botano-luddites prefer the old name. Whilst on the subject of oaks from the USA, the delightful little drought-tolerant oak *Q. hinckleyi* contrasts pink young growth with tiny grey older foliage, but sadly is endangered in the wild.



Random photographs: an Iris I begged for in England for its unusual colour (lilac almost tending to rose) has finally flowered, allowing me to separate it from a muddle of Irises in pots, and our carpet of *Saxifraga stolonifera*, grown mainly for its delightfully marked leaves, is now in delicate flower.



Acca (ex *Feijoa*) *sellowiana* is in flower, the guava-flavoured fruits will follow in autumn; the exotic flowers of *Caesalpinia gilliesii* are just commencing and will continue all summer.



Rarely seen is the Australian shrub *Bursaria spinosa* (not to be confused with *Bursera*, a genus in the fragrant family which produces myrrh and incense).



The Bee Orchids are open this month – bizarrely they are amongst the first to produce foliage in autumn but amongst the last here to flower.



And how about this – hostas free of slug damage!



Butterflies, here a Fritillary, have taken a liking to *Senecio vera-vera*.



Finally, I leave you with The Mystery of the Squirrel's Tail. One morning, lying on the ground outside the bedroom window, was a squirrel's tail.



No squirrel, just the tail. Unlike those careless lizards, squirrels are not known for leaving their tails behind, and I was wondering if the cat might wish to throw some light upon the subject; however, our arboretum helper, a real countryman, suspects a Buzzard (plentiful here), who he says are very partial to them. As if to add weight to his theory, on the 29th a tractor cut hay in a field by the side of our access road, and impressively fourteen buzzards were following him, most likely to catch the fat Bush Crickets put up by the mower.

April 2020

April followed the latter part of March in being dry, but much rain in early March ensured that the grass continued to lengthen and that the trees commenced their annual growth vigorously. Gardeners, particularly in the Mediterranean zone, often speak of a 'second spring' when the rains arrive in the autumn and everything, including of course the weeds, starts to regrow. In the area of the Arboretum known as 'Mexico', however, one could speak instead of a second autumn, as the preponderance of the oaks there from Mexico and southwest USA are semi-evergreen: that is to say that they stay green all winter but drop all their leaves, sometimes with 'autumn' colour, when the new buds start to break. Like the cat on the bed, they moult. The leaves on the tops of the trees drop first, whether because there is more wind up there to tear them off or because the bud-break hormones are strongest in the leading branches I couldn't say.



'Second autumn' leaf litter



Quercus graciliramis, old leaves below, buds breaking above



Quercus graciliramis, the old and the new



Q. rysophylla shedding leaves on top

I should really be out every day with the camera, as several oaks produce beautifully-

coloured young leaves, but the effect is often fleeting; also the fresh male catkins can frequently form a bright golden haze around the trees. Caught in good colour on April 4th were the mysterious Langtry oak with golden young foliage, and the red leaves of two 'Mexicans' – *Quercus planipocula* in high polish and a somewhat atypical *Q. sartorii*. The Langtry Red Oak has never been officially described, and so does not yet have a Latin name. I had always imagined some romantic connection to Lily (or Lillie) Langtry, popular actress and a one-time mistress of the future king Edward VII of the UK, but the reality is more prosaic. The oak is found near Langtry in Texas, which had gained its name from a foreman on the Southern Pacific railroad, George Langtry. Romance is dead.



Q. 'Langtry' in spring colour



Q. planipocula's young leaves



Q. sartorii, with detail of young leaves

Two oaks yet to leaf out caught my eye for their form: *Q. palustris* and *Q. georgiana*, both with ascending upper branches, whilst those below descend.



The distinct form of Q. palustris, with Q. phillyreoides to the left



Winter form of Q. georgiana

There is an explosion of wildflowers in April, particularly on the mown paths, which in some places prohibit mowing.



Common flowers abound: buttercups (*Ranunculus*); daisies (*Bellis*); Ajuga with its orchid-like blooms; red clover (*Trifolium pratense*, the nectar plant of choice for the insects), *Euphorbia polychroma*



and of course the orchids themselves, starting with the Early Purple (*Orchis mascula*), then the variable Lady (*Orchis purpurea*)



followed at the end of the month by the Pyramidal (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*)



and two species (and maybe a hybrid between the two?) of *Serapias*, *S. cordigera*



and *S. lingua*.



The bee-type orchid *Ophrys sphegodes* is in inconspicuous bloom – it is very localised here but common on the calcareous soils further north in the department; the Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera* and Lizard Orchid *Himantoglossum hircinum* (smelling powerfully of male goat) bloom later. If the internet is to be believed, this latter is becoming more common on golf courses because its seeds are being spread by players beating their golf-balls out of the rough. It is contrary that these two late-bloomers are amongst the first to show their leaves after the autumn rains, presumably in order to complicate my annual mowing cycle.

April is also the month of the migrant birds' return: sad to relate that last year's population crash of Nightingales seems to be repeated, and although they can be heard here, there are maybe only three instead of a dozen. Happily the cuckoos, the swallows, the Hoopoe and the Golden Oriole are back, business as usual.

In the garden a few snapshots: the two forms here of *Rosa banksiae* are eye-catching (and the double white is nose-catching in addition), equally *Rosa chinensis* Mutabilis at a lesser height, now perversely to be called *R. x odorata* 'Mutabilis' despite having no noticeable perfume.



Rosa banksiae, the double yellow form



R. banksiae, the fragrant double white



R. x odorata 'Mutabilis'

A wild violet has infiltrated a hosta charmingly:



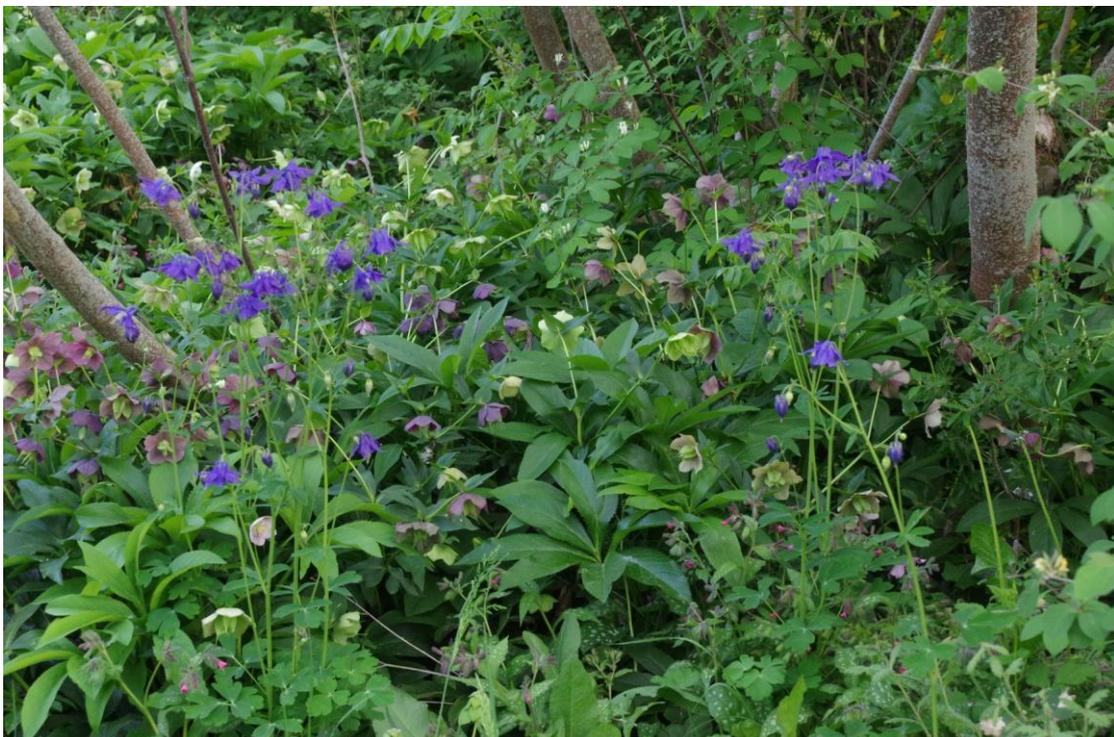
the winter-flowering Mahonias are already in fruit,



the potentially invasive *Scilla peruviana* are in bloom (the dried flower-heads later break off and roll like tumbleweed, spreading their seeds)



whilst a wild-collected *Aquilegia vulgaris* contrasts with *Helleborus x hybridus*



The foliage of various irises in flower forms a happy contrast with other plants (in this case *Senecio vera-vera*)



Next up will be May, which I always consider to be the most beautiful month here. Rain which commenced on May Day should help ensure that will again be the case.





Rainy day, inside looking out...