

A garden for all seasons

Text and photos by Michael Davison

Walking round Isabella Plantation in the glory of azalea time last year, I was amazed by the ease with which my guide, gardener Dick Farr, could put a name to one after another of the hundreds of different species which line the paths and flank the lawns. Does he know the name of every one of them? "Only those I point out," he grinned – but I think he was being modest.

Dick is a member of the team who look after one of the most visited areas in all London's Royal Parks. Behind its railings, safe from grazing deer, plants flourish undisturbed. Five gardeners work full time to maintain the Isabella Plantation as a garden for all seasons. If azalea time in early May attracts the most visitors, at every time of year there is something to catch the eye. In chill January the wych hazels near the north gate hold out promise of spring to come. In April camellias and magnolias burst into flower; as the azaleas fade, bluebells carpet the ground in Wilson's Glade; then come the late rhododendrons; and autumn brings a blaze of colour from maples and beeches.

Dick Farr has worked in the Isabella Plantation for 33 of his 52 years and has become very much the public face of the Isabella team through the regular guided walks he has been leading for the last five years. Last year alone, more than 400 visitors enjoyed Dick's quick-fire chats



Garry Scarffe and Dick Farr



about the plants in season. He likes to feature a particular seasonal plant with what he calls the "wow factor"; on a summer walk, the star was the handkerchief tree, with its long fluttering white bracts. Dates of Dick's walks are posted on car park notice boards and in the Visitor Centre at Pembroke Lodge.

At their mid-morning break I joined Dick and the rest of the Isabella team: charge-hand Garry Scarffe (20 years in Isabella), Lee Cottington, Toby Vane and Nigel Smallwood. Their work is supplemented by part-timer Barry Ede, and by Damian Black who combines conservation work in the Park with warden duties when Isabella's 40 acres are crowded at weekends. The team starts work at 7.30am, and how the day progresses varies from season to season. When I left for my walk with Dick, Lee was off to mow one of the plantation's grassy areas, Toby to stabilise the stepping stones in the Bog Garden, Nigel to prune the rhododendrons, Barry to tidy up the mess room. Garry himself planned to do some spraying (organic spray only, of course, since 1992) to rid the oak trees of the tortrix moth caterpillars which shred the young

leaves and dangle from the branches like flies caught in a web.

The team agree that the main attractions of the job are the open-air life and the enthusiastic response from visitors. How do the public behave, I asked, aware of the litter problem in the wider Park tackled by the team working from Oak Lodge. Fairly well, it seems. Generally they take their litter home (any that is left is collected by one of the gardeners on a daily scavenge), and if children sometimes have to be discouraged from climbing trees their parents are usually understanding - Dick again: "If not, I just give them a stare."

In addition to the routine tasks of clearing winter plants, mulching, replanting and weeding, there are occasional emergencies. The havoc caused by the storm of January 2006, though costing only 14 trees, took six weeks to clear up. There is also behind the scenes work in the plantation's nursery. This contains the National Azalea Collection, deriving from species collected in China by Ernest Wilson. Here also are the beds and polytunnel in which new plants are grown from seed or cuttings, ready for planting out

to replace failing specimens in the public areas. New plants are bought in from nurseries across the country: a "wish list" of wanted plants includes the parent species of some of the hybrid rhododendrons.

For long-serving gardeners like Dick and Garry, there is the satisfaction of seeing plants they have themselves sown or potted gradually maturing to take their place in the public areas, and seeing the plants in their care win awards year after year at Royal Horticultural Society shows (five Firsts and five Seconds last autumn, and the coveted Rosse Cup for a display of autumn foliage from three of the Plantation's conifers).

The logo on the gardeners' fleeces has changed four times since the Royal Parks assigned garden work to private contractors. Their employer is now fountains, based at Oak Lodge, but operations at Isabella, like those at Pembroke Lodge, are under the control of assistant park manager Jo Scrivener. To Jo falls the responsibility of maintaining the Plantation as an amenity for the public, while ensuring its conservation as part of a National Nature Reserve. I could see that he has the support of a team who know their plants and delight in their work.



Members of the Isabella team in the wintry gardens.
Left to right:
Damian Black,
Lee Cottington,
Nigel Smallwood,
with Toby Vane
in front.