

CHARLES WILLIAMS

The owner of Caerhays Castle and Burncoose Nurseries in Cornwall is a man of impeccable horticultural pedigree, but isn't afraid to stand his ground when needed

WORDS THOMAS PETHERICK PORTRAIT CHARLIE HOPKINSON

In 2003 an outbreak of a deadly new pathogen was causing headaches for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Known as *Phytophthora ramorum* or sudden oak death, the pathogen had already caused widespread havoc among populations of oak trees in the USA and had now been found among *Rhododendron ponticum* in the UK. Defra decided the best course of action was the instant removal of great swathes of rhododendron to stop the pathogen's spread. But if Defra thought this was a simple solution it had reckoned without Charles Williams.

Among the rhododendrons Defra had in its sights were those forming a shelter belt protecting Charles's family home, Caerhays Castle in Cornwall. Charles stood his ground and pushed for a compromise that would allow him to replace the rhododendrons over time with different shrubs. As a result almost every garden of significance in Cornwall and beyond has Charles to thank for saving their woodland areas. But then many of those gardens probably also have Charles's family to thank for many of their woodland plants.

His great-grandfather, John Charles Williams, better known as JC, planted the shelter belt and much of the woodland garden at Caerhays. JC was the patron of the plant hunter George Forrest, one of the first botanists to explore China's remote and botanically diverse province of Yunnan. By 1912 JC was funding Forrest's expeditions entirely on his own to the tune of £3,100 (more than £400,000 in today's money). Thanks to Forrest thousands of packets of seed flooded into Caerhays. In 1900 there were just 50 species of rhododendron known in western Europe, by the 1920s there were 325 species growing at Caerhays alone.

JC wasn't just growing rhododendrons at Caerhays he was also hybridising, although perhaps the most famous plant he raised was the x *williamsii* camellia hybrids that, as Charles puts it, brought the camellia out of the conservatory and into the garden. That simple cross, between the recently discovered *C. saluenensis* and *C. japonica* has shaped gardens all over the world, as the plant brings strong and hardy hybrid vigour, and a four-month flowering period. Hybridising has continued at Caerhays. Charles's father, Julian added several magnolias to the garden, including *M.* 'Caerhays Surprise' and *M.* 'Caerhays Splendour'. Caerhays now holds National Collections of *Magnolia* and *Podocarpus*. "The legacy of being able to create something new for future generations to enjoy is something my father took great pride in," says Charles.

Growing up at Caerhays Charles spent many hours in the garden, much of it in the company of the estate's head gardener Philip Tregunna, creating small gardens and soaking up knowledge on plants and planting. "My first passion was for

growing fuchsias," he remembers. "In 1973 I won my first First Prize at the Geranium and Fuchsia Society Mid and West Cornwall Show." After graduating from Oxford, he worked in the City, rising through the ranks of Lazards merchant bank before the lure of the gardens and Caerhays pulled him back to Cornwall.

In 1984 Charles bought into a small tree and shrub nursery, South Down, persuading its owner David Knuckey to move the business to the empty walled garden of another Williams family home, Burncoose House in Redruth. Renamed Burncoose Nurseries the nursery is now one of the best-known suppliers of magnolias and rhododendrons, and the winner of numerous gold medals, selling plants to customers across the UK and beyond. "Cornwall had very good head gardeners but no way of selling anything," says Charles. "I knew this had to change."

Ever mindful of his immense responsibility and enabled by his nursery, Charles has increased the size of the planted garden at

Caerhays to 140 acres. As he says: "This garden was decaying in the 1960s and 1970s, and the average lifespan for rhododendrons, for example, is 60, so we had to start again." The number and breadth of additional species and cultivars at Caerhays has increased by truly eye-watering numbers. There are 650 hybrids and 80 species of the magnolias alone. This is unprecedented on any level anywhere.

A man of phenomenal energy, Charles is up most mornings at 5am and often in bed by 8pm, and still finding time to maintain the Caerhays Garden Diary (now in the form of an online blog), the fourth generation of his family to do so without a break. He is a member of the RHS Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group, chairman of the Great Gardens of Cornwall, and in 2018 he was awarded the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour in recognition of his achievements at Caerhays and Burncoose – a fitting honour for such stalwart service to history and horticulture. "Continuing a hundred years of work in breeding magnolias and rhododendrons is part of the excitement of gardening here at Caerhays," he says. □

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USEFUL INFORMATION

Caerhays Castle, Gorrán, St Austell, Cornwall PL26 6LY.
Tel 01872 501310, caerhays.co.uk. Open 18 February to 16 June.
There's a chance to take an expert-guided tour of the gardens at Caerhays, as part of the *Gardens Illustrated* tour of Cornish gardens in April (see page 8 for details).

NEXT MONTH Defra's chief plant health officer, Professor Nicola Spence.

