

Stone Lane Gardens

Paul Bartlett, Gardener and Manager

I started working for Kenneth and June Ashburner about ten years ago. Part-time, in both the garden and nursery, just helping out with general garden tasks. And with very little knowledge of Birch or Alder. So at first I didn't understand just how important their arboretum was. To me it was just a garden. A little individual perhaps; with some really unusual trees. But still, in my ignorance, just a nice place to work. The thing is, Kenneth and June don't show off about their garden. There is no air of self-importance or elitism. Here is a truly amazing collection of the world's birch and alder trees, nothing quite like it anywhere else in Britain, possibly the world. And yet you could drive past their home, or bump into them in Chagford and never have an inkling of the achievement created in five quiet acres of sloping, exposed Dartmoor farmland.

And what an achievement. For here at Stone Lane Gardens, near Chagford, are National Collections of wild-origin *Betula* and *Alnus*. Rank upon rank of trees, grouped into provenances of the various species. Some groups clustered around the landscaped ponds, others marching up the hillside. There are trees from North America, from Asia, from the Himalayan range, from Europe, from the Orient, from the Arctic. And here they all are, grown on from seed collected by Kenneth on his travels and later donations by other enthusiastic collectors. To stand in the arboretum on a quiet Devon day, with the moor stretching away to the west, and run your hands over the smooth, peeling, tactile bark of a birch that should, by rights, be growing out of the steep, rocky foothills of a Chinese mountain range. And then to glance across a few metres of grassy slope to another more stunted tree that is normally found in the bright, cold hills of Norway or Iceland. That is what Kenneth and June have achieved. And in doing so, have had adventures in far off lands.

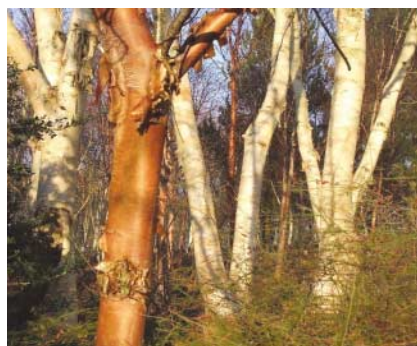
They have met extraordinary people and created life-long friendships with them. They have brought the world back to their Devon garden; to educate and improve our understanding.

There is something immensely satisfying and fulfilling about growing a plant from another, foreign, place. To sow a tiny seed that has travelled hundreds, maybe thousands of miles. Oh, and the excitement of that first morning when you gaze upon the first glimpse of green stem pushing out of the soil, up into the light. And then the proud and anxious first weeks of your new tree's life, as you hover around like a worried parent. For this is no ordinary plant that can be replaced down at the local garden centre. No, this is special. This tree is a living reminder of journeys, places visited, strange food eaten, people met. And it will always be so; always be far more than just a tree. So Stone Lane Gardens is full of memories, as well as trees.



The Gardens have been skilfully landscaped to make the most of the natural contours of the land. There are streams and ponds, boggy areas and little secret corners. The underplanting is unusual and, we hope, interesting. Judging by the comments we get from visitors, it is a garden that seems to inspire; and I think this is partly because of the slightly ethereal quality of the birch with their softly coloured trunks, translucent, peeling bark and delicate, skeletal shape.

Betula albosinensis and *Betula ermanii* (Paul Bartlett)



That is probably why it makes such a good location for our annual Mythic Garden Sculpture Exhibition. 2008 marks the sixteenth year of the exhibition, which is an important showcase for west-country artists and designers. The informal nature of the garden suits most types of sculpture very well;

Betula alboermanii (Paul Bartlett)

and we always have a good mix of media and styles. Most artists are very good at placing their work in a sympathetic location, where the backdrop of shrubs and stems both isolates



Garden Mask by Pauline Leevga (Paul Bartlett)

and frames a sculpture. Often pieces are uncovered on rounding a bend in a path, creating a sense of discovery, which our visitors enjoy. In an age of modern, minimalist gallery spaces, we like to think this is a refreshing and more rewarding way of appreciating sculpture. The trees are sculptural in themselves, with their twisting shapes and attractive colours. So it is really a case of one art form meeting another.

The National Collections highlight the enormous variety of *Betula* and *Alnus* that can be grown in this country if only people can be persuaded to plant in a more adventurous and imaginative manner. The Himalayas are home to some stunning birches, namely the *B. utilis* species. And yet the only one that gets any attention is the massively over-planted *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*, a white variety from the western end of the Himalaya. The *jacquemontii* is a lovely, ghostly tree; but the rest of the *B. utilis* are equally attractive, ranging in colour from pinky-white through orange, red and brown. Usually with a bloom of white betulin overlaying the dominant colour and fresher shades where the bark has recently peeled away. These subtle trees are often found in botanical gardens where their beauty is truly appreciated; but they seldom appear in private gardens. The Orient also has some beautiful birch. *Betula ermanii* is a Japanese birch of stately and elegant form. It has a smooth, creamy-orange bark which peels freely in large sheets, with long lenticels that swirl around the trunk and a rich yellow autumn colour. *Betula albosinensis*, a Chinese birch, is possibly the most impressive of all: a winning combination of beautiful bark colours, delicate leaves and an upright, neat habit. *Alnus maximowiczii* is an alder from Japan and Korea that wows visitors with its amazing spring catkin displays: the long, green-yellow tassels can reach six inches or so and are followed by large, attractive leaves. The mountain alders of America and Europe have an interesting, stunted multi-stemmed habit that is a useful feature as a hedge or as a specimen in their own right. The two main species, *Alnus viridis* and *Alnus crispa* have dainty little catkins, whilst the *Alnus sinuata* has shinier, silver stems.

Here at Stone Lane Gardens we try to educate visitors about the trees they see around them, and their usefulness in gardens, woodland and parks. We hope that some of our enthusiasm will transfer itself to them, so that visitors and customers leave us both better informed and inspired to broaden their horticultural horizons. The Garden is open every afternoon throughout the year; and the Sculpture Exhibition runs from May to September.