

Eating the exhibits

Kalmthout is not like other arboretums – visitors are encouraged to touch, smell and even taste the plants



Denzil Walton

One of the reasons for Kalmthout Arboretum's current success is its Conservator and Director Abraham Rammeloo. In the post since 1999, he describes the arboretum's trees with infectious enthusiasm. Listen to him talk about the Chinese Emmenopterys, for example, a sub-tropical tree which recently bloomed: "It is only the fourth time that this type of tree has ever flowered anywhere in Europe. It was a beautiful sight. We erected special scaffolding to allow visitors to get close-up to its flowers."

He also reveals that the Snow-drop Tree (*Halesia diptera*) in the garden is the biggest in Europe and is delighted it is thriving because in its native North America, it is virtually extinct. He is equally proud of the rare Florida Torreya

(*Torreya taxifolia argenticia*), which was planted in 1910 and is still growing vigorously. And he laughs when he recalls the moment two years ago when a visiting botanist discovered a single specimen of a type of Hardy Ghent Azalea (*Van*

in the growing visitor numbers and the range of events guaranteeing that there is always something new to see and experience.

For example, visitors are encouraged to visit the Arboretum even in the depths of winter. In mid-

"The centre of garden design and arboriculture that I aim to create in Kalmthout will be an ornament for the community. Over time, it will have significant advantages for the people of your district, from the working people who will be needed to work on it, the people from outside who will come to visit it, the tests that will be made on foreign species of pine tree and finally the dissemination of useful knowledge concerning the cultivation of fruit trees."

– Charles Van Geert, 1856

Houtte Flora Pleno) in the arboretum that hadn't been seen for 15 years.

That a plant should get "lost" in the arboretum can be explained by Kalmthout's design, which is different from most other botanic gardens, where plants from the same family or geographical region are grouped together. In Kalmthout, plants are positioned more for their ornamental significance. "We are happy to have a North American tree providing shade to a New Zealand shrub, which prefers the ground cover of an Asiatic species," explains Rammeloo. "We mix plants together to create an attractive yet harmonious whole."

But Rammeloo is no dry academic who only has eyes for plants. He is very much a people-person, stimulated by the challenge of communicating the Arboretum's splendours to its 35,000 visitors a year. His success is seen

keen to show off their more exotic colours: "We have Capucines in yellow, red, cream and purple, with all sorts of striped and variegated leaves," he enthuses. And that's not all. Capucines are edible; not just the leaves, but the seeds and even the flowers. "We are encouraging visitors to look at them, touch them, smell them...and then eat them. Children always love our eating activities."

The notion of children eating Capucines was probably a long way from the thoughts of Antwerp dendrologist Charles Van Geert in 1857, when he started a plant nursery in the heart of Antwerp, at the location now occupied by the Zoo and the Central Station. In Kalmthout he found space to extend his activities and test newly-discovered plants – mainly conifers from China and Japan – for their winter hardiness. He also introduced the first Belgian examples of Witch Hazel, Hydrangea, Hosta and many other plants.

After Van Geert's death in 1896, his business was taken over by Antoine Kort, who increased the size of the nursery and planted a number of rare trees, most of which are still visible. However, between the two World Wars the garden was left to grow wild.

Luckily, in 1952, two Antwerp diamond dealers and passionate amateur botanists, the brothers Georges and Robert de Belder, purchased the deserted garden. Under their leadership and the skills of Robert's wife Jelena – a qualified horticulturist – Kalmthout Arboretum grew into one of the world's most prestigious botanic collections.

In 1986 the Antwerp Provincial Authority bought the site, with the independent organisation Kalmthout Arboretum vzw retaining full responsibility for management, upkeep and operation. In 1995, a new visitor centre was built.

Some 20 staff work at the arboretum, with up to 50 volunteers, many of them guides. Tours are mostly given in Dutch, but French,

The Olympics in Kalmthout

Belgian Champions

Scattered around the Arboretum are no fewer than 80 champion trees – the biggest, tallest or rarest in Belgium. A walk leads you to every one of them. Until 15 September.

Botanical Records

A poster exhibition of 15 botanical record-breakers, including the smelliest, the most poisonous, the heaviest and the fastest growing. A special booklet is available for children. Until the end of August.

Chinese Walk

A walk through the Arboretum pointing out 25 trees native to China, including the spectacular Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia*). Until the end of August.

German and English are also possible with advance reservation. On Sunday afternoons and public holidays, guided tours are free.

Rammeloo likes to run the occasional tour himself, which of course he does with his customary enthusiasm. "I love talking to visitors and explaining the delights of the arboretum. On a hot summer's day it's a perfect place to relax and enjoy the cool and shade of the trees. Some people come to identify new plants, others to enjoy the wonderful colours. Speaking of colours, did I tell you about our gorgeous *Amelanchier*, and our stunning *Hortensias*? And you must see our beautiful *Magnolia hypoleuca*..."

Naturally relaxing

After being pitched recently in Antwerp's city centre, the Time Circus wellness tent comes to Kalmthout Arboretum from 15 to 29 August. Lit by candles and heated by solar energy, you leave your valuables in a locker, strip off your clothes, put on a loose gown and simply relax. Actors from Time Circus will supply you with a drink and locally-grown fruit and tell you stories while you bathe in rainwater and enjoy a sauna. Every 10 minutes a group of eight people enter the wellness tent for a 90-minute experience. It costs €12 per person, and reservations are necessary on 03.666.67.41.



Talking trees: Abraham Rammeloo's enthusiasm is infectious

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