

A garden safari *Rita Lees*

When we first asked Pat Matthews whether we could visit her garden, she queried whether it would be worth our journey from west Wales to Monmouthshire. We readily accepted her suggestion that we combine a visit with the Village Open Gardens Day at Skenfrith nearby. We arrived on a wet Sunday morning in June, but the rain could not detract from the beauty of her east facing garden, with its extensive views over the Herefordshire hills. Pat kindly provided tea and coffee for us and later, armed with brollies, we ventured into the garden. A profusion of plants filled the borders, flanked by a lawn, a small pond, several inviting places to sit in finer weather and a productive vegetable garden. The summer colour was abundant and included *Digitalis*, *Nepeta*, *Astrantia*, *Alchemilla mollis*, *Campanula latiloba*, geraniums and a flowering *Sambucus nigra* 'Black Lace'. We noted many roses, including *Rosa* 'Pat Austin' and the orange climbing rose, *R.* 'Warm Welcome,'. We all admired the garden shed, smothered with more roses and clematis, the prettiest shed we had seen!

Pat was presented with a tray of cottage garden plants, beautifully prepared and grown by Carol Greenhalgh. A vote of thanks was given by our Chairman, Roy Weston, as without Pat's help, the West Wales group would not exist. (Pat had given us much advice and support when we formed in 2008.)

It was then time to go on safari firstly to another charming cottage garden, owned by the American gardening writer, Charles Elliott. From here, we went to Pat's former garden. Choice specimens included *Gleditsia* and *Buddleia alternifolia*. The vegetable garden had been impressively terraced with shingle paths for easy working. The lovely overall effect paid tribute to the care and plantsmanship of its original creator, now well maintained by the present owner.

Down in the village, the local gastro pub opened its organic kitchen garden, where much use was made of companion planting. Across the road, a froth of *Alchemilla mollis* and *Geranium endressii* surrounded the door of the first cottage and the second was a miniature delight of cottage favourites. Roses, including *R.* 'Zephirine Drouhin', were everywhere as we wended our way through more gardens of varying sizes. At the Old Vicarage a cup of tea and piece of cake revived us as we listened to the pealing bells of the early 13th C St. Bridget's Church with its most unusual square and squat tower - proceeds of the Open Gardens Day were to go towards urgent repairs to the church. We explored the ruins of Skenfrith Castle and after a dive into the local shop for home produce, it was time to say good bye to this picturesque village and to Pat Matthews and her husband Austin. At the end of the day, we were gardened out, but tired and happy in the company of like-minded and congenial people, brought about by a shared love of cottage gardening. Long may it continue!

Rita Lees is secretary of The CGS West Wales group.