

THE PLANT COLUMN

Martin Stimson



Bowled over by Tree Heaths

Martin Stimson Head of School of Horticulture Writtle College continues his very personal accounts of plants that mean something to him.

All photographs were taken on the isle of La Gomera by Martin

A friend of mine used to turn wood on a lathe. He did this as a hobby, not for a living. It's an absorbing pastime, demanding concentration, skill and creativity. Any scrap of reasonably sized timber from any tree or large shrub would be considered a research challenge for him, and fair game to lock onto his lathe and produce a bowl. At one point in my career I was responsible for a large plant collection. This meant that occasionally a wind-blown tree provided a free source of timber to research its potential as a bowl. I have a reminder of my friend's activity via 4 bowls, which sometimes gather dust on a cabinet and sometimes get functionally deployed and to generate horticultural conversation.

Like streetlights in a dark alley, these bowls light up a memory for me, both of my friend and the tree or plant from which they are made. The Oak bowl has its origins from the 1987 hurricane, a storm-fallen oak not as it happens from the collection, but from my local park which takes its name from the tree (Oaklands Park). The second is made from a Swamp Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) which grew on King John's Hunting Lodge, an archaeological site on the edge of Writtle Village. *Taxodium* thrives in water and swamps and as such grows quickly. The cells are large and the wood is so light it resembles balsa. *Taxodium* grows so fast compared to the oak, whose bowl by comparison is dense and finely grained. The third bowl is from a Laburnum in my father's garden and has the characteristic of a yellow centre. A tree that was once common place, but now almost lost due mainly to our inability to educate children about poisonous fruits.

These bowls bring back memories in the way that old songs do, but the bowl that gets me most excited is the least attractive but the most experimental one that we did. It comes from a small tree heather, *Erica arborea*. The *Erica* in question was being removed from an old island bed, the plants were about 2 m high and the stems approximately 125 mm across. Not large enough my friend told me to do a bowl properly.

I'm reminded of the bowl because I've just completed a day long trek in the volcanic hills of La Gomera, a small island an hours boat ride from Tenerife. I've spent the day walking in the hills under a canopy of mist laden tree heathers which are among the oldest and probably the tallest in the world. I'm actually surprised to find the tree heather growing so large. I've used tree heathers in landscaping, I've propagated them and I've severely pruned them when they've outgrown their space, but I never imagined I would witness them in such large numbers and at such a size. A number of well known sources will tell you tree heaths grow to 1.8 m high, and in many cases in the UK that's true. But in their natural environment 5-6 m is more typical. Like so many of natural wonders its not till you experience things at first hand that you actually appreciate the scale. Both the height and the girth come as a shock, as does the amount of bare stem or trunk. The largest I've seen in the UK were at the time impressive, but in the **Garajonay**, National Park on La Gomera size really does mean everything.



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The floor of the Tree Heath forests are also largely bare where, the density of the heather needles close the roof of the canopy.

At the mention of heathers we tend to automatically think of low growing plants on moor land and heath land. A natural scene we sometimes try to replicate (often without success) in our gardens. Heathers when left can become scruffy especially if not pruned immediately after flowering. The wood on which the flowers are borne does not easily make new growth, so old plants eventually become wirery and hence the reason they burn so well.



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The tree heath (*Erica arborea*) is perfectly named, and is often multi stemmed. I remember reading once that the wood is very hard and that traditionally it was used to make smoking pipes or briar pipes. The bowl my friend turned for me was difficult because we broke 'wood turning rules' apparently by turning with the grain rather than across it. The Tree heaths I've just walked through typically had trunks 20 and sometimes 30 cm across and stood 5 or 6 metre high. Garajonay National Park covers most of the top of the island which while I was there was covered in mist and cloud. The National Park was designated a world heritage site in 1986 and covers 37800 hectares. This comprises Tree heaths and Laurels. Unlike the UK the tee heaths live with 600-800, rain which is doubled by condensation. This water gathering capacity of the trees is recorded in fable. This means the trees collect water and develop a complete covering of moss and lichen which festoons the stems. The atmosphere created resembles hobbit country, the wild wood feel, the stuff of fairy tails and

horror stories. The heaths were coming into flower so occasionally a sweet scent hung in the air, and the cool fresh mountain air stung your cheeks. This not the normal expectation a Canary Isles! In the peace and quiet of the mountains, the sound of bees and crowing cockerels were all that could be heard as all over the hillside the heathers were breaking into misty white blooms.



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At home my heather bowl is changing, its cracking along the rings in the grain just as my friend said it would and now my experience on the heather forest is changing my view of these plants. In England its traditional to use tree heaths in the centre or to the rear of a heather bed to create height and interest. I've also seen them planted in a line for a hedge.

In La Gomera they relish the misty moisture laden cloud that hangs in their tiny leaves and then drips down their trunks. At home in Essex one of the driest counties in England they grow less quickly, than in the moist south west. Cold winters like 2009/10 can cause them to brown off or die completely.

The beauty of the *Erica arborea* is in its ability to rejuvenate from the base. Most heathers respond positively to pruning after flowering so that bare shoots where flowers once were don't remain and create legginess and clumps of dead stems. Pruning can be followed by copious fresh green shoots. With larger shrubs like the tree heaths the severe pruning is tantamount to stooling. This is similar to the actions professional horticulturalists take with willows. I walked through plenty of plants where the tree heaths had been forested, then

severely pruned in some case down to the ground. The burgeoning warmth of spring and the moist warm conditions were causing the hard wooden stems to break with strong fresh shoots just like the moorland heathers in England.

We tend to think of the Canary Islands island as the sun laden playgrounds for families with beaches fast food and new build time shares. With a reputation for cheap and cheerful hot destinations where sun sea and sand are in ready supply. In most cases the southern sun baked shore provide this stereotype, but often the more northerly or exposed edges provide a plants persons dream



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