



Textural Beauty

Sean Harkin Head Gardener



Arbutus menziesii



Arbutus menziesii bark

Last autumn was particularly beautiful with the Garden's special tree collection doing its best to cheer our spirits with painterly shades of gold, yellow, orange and red. But our trees also provide an array of barks, each with their distinct characteristics of texture, form and beauty. Winter provides the ideal conditions to appreciate them. There is something unique and worthy of admiration of all the barks within our tree collection, but for this article I will draw attention to two of my favourites.

To start, the Pacific Madrone, *Arbutus menziesii* located at the top of the Garden by the sundial, has the most glorious bark in rich shades of copper. Native to the Pacific North America, this is a rarer species of the more well-known strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*), its Mediterranean relative.

As the fresh red bark matures it begins to peel, revealing the copper smooth layer beneath. The best way to showcase this is in a multi-stemmed form and to 'limb up' the lower branches as it matures, taking the evergreen foliage away so the trunk can be enjoyed unhindered. This tree thrives on the heat and dry conditions we can provide here in the City. Our specimen is starting to mature to provide a structural elegance and with a trunk reminiscent of a Henry Moore bronze.

Another tree worthy of close inspection is down on the eastern side of the Garden, just on from the entrance gate at King's Bench Walk: the wondrous Dawn Redwood, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*. The genus of *Metasequoia* was known only through fossil records dating back ninety million years

ago. A close relative of the North American Giant Redwoods (*Sequoiadendron*) and Swamp Cypress (*Taxodium*), *Metasequoia* was thought to be extinct until discovered in 1943 by Chinese botanist Wang Zhan in Sichuan province, China. This was considered one of, if not the most, significant botanical discoveries of the twentieth century.

This led to further expeditions and seed

stripped back and I would encourage all to get as much as possible and do this.

I realise that many may already be spending too much time on Zoom, but for those interested the dark evenings may provide a good opportunity to enjoy one of the Kew Mutual Improvement Society Lectures. Since 1871, the Kew Mutual Improvement Society has been running an annual lecture season to boost



Metasequoia gluptostroides



Metasequoia gluptostroides bark

was collected and distributed to botanical institutions by the late 1940s. Later it was discovered that it also propagates well from cutting and that it can tolerate urban pollution resulting in them being used as urban street trees. There is a row planted behind the Royal Courts of Justice on Carey Street opposite the Seven Stars pub. While I enjoy them as street trees, I find that they look more wondrous in a garden surrounded by other plants such as our specimen here. The trunks and bark of these magnificent deciduous conifers is like something from 'The Magic Faraway Tree', all gnarled, wise and hinting at the history of this ancient genus. Do take a moment to enjoy its beauty and rich story. Winter provides the perfect opportunity to enjoy the detail of the Garden with it largely

knowledge of the plant and fungal kingdom. Traditionally the lectures would take place at Kew but for the first time in their history the series is moving online, resulting in them being more widely accessible. Having attended these lectures since my trainee days back at Wisley, it was a great honour to be asked to present as part of this year's lecture series. On Monday 22 February at 6pm you are welcome to join me for an hour where I will be presenting *Tales of the city: Revealing London's Secret Garden*. The lecture series is organised by the Kew Diploma students, is only available live and costs £3 with the proceeds going back into education (Full details at www.kew.org/learning/talks-and-lectures/kew-mutual-improvement-society).