

Oak Open Day in Belgium

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The fog had invaded the valley of the Ourthe that morning of the 4th of September. Béatrice Chassé, our Franco-American president, had driven up from the Dordogne to spend the night here before our planned visit to Daniel Dumont's oak collection. I did not know Daniel Dumont until my return from the IOS conference in Dallas in 2006, although early members of the IOS had known him for some time. He had heard that I had come back from the conference and a pre-tour organized by Guy Sternberg with quite a few acorns. And it is with great pleasure that I gave him acorns from the lots he was interested in. In the summer 2007, I finally visited Daniel's "Belgian" collections (see below) and I was happily surprised by the number of trees it included and that it was relatively unknown in local dendrological circles. Moreover, it was less than an hour away from the Arboretum Robert Lenoir, an arboretum I myself am taking care of in my free time.

As we left the valley to drive to Daniel and Arlette Dumont's place, we also left the fog behind us. Up on the plateau the skies were blue and the sun was shining. This would prove to be the finest week-end of the latter part of the summer.

Soon after we arrived, we were joined by about 15 other people, mostly from Belgium (many of these were members of the Belgian Dendrology Society) and from the Netherlands.



Daniel Dumont welcomes the group at the gate in the deer fence at Arboretum Willerzie. Photo©Charles Snyers

Introduction

Before starting the visit, Daniel gives us a brief overview of the history of his collections and the reader will quickly realize that Daniel clearly suffers from a severe case of tree compulsion!

It was in the early sixties that Daniel planted his first trees in the small garden of his grandmother in Ciney, a city in the French-speaking part of Belgium. A few good trees are still to be found in this garden today, for example, *Taxodium distichum* L., *Sassafras albidum* (Nutt.) Nees, and *Cedrela sinensis* A. Juss. Soon, in 1963 and then again in 1965, Daniel acquired two small plots in Chapois (near Ciney), of 0.27 and 0.51 hectare respectively (Haute Famenne, altitude 290 m and 310 m). The soils on these sites are acidic.

In 1976, after a very hot and dry summer in Europe, Daniel acquired yet another 3 hectare piece of woodland, farther south, near the French border, in the massif of La Croix Scaille, near Gedinne; the soil is again acidic and boggy in part, at an altitude of 360 meters.

In 1981 he invaded the garden of his in-laws in Moustier sur Sambre in the Valley of the Sambre and acquired another hectare of land nearby, in Lesve, where he can spend time when his wife visits her parents. This land is partly ferruginous, partly calcareous (cave of Lesve and dolines) and partly acidic (Haute Marlagne). We will be visiting Lesve in the afternoon. The garden in Moustier had a good specimen of *Quercus tomentella* Engelm. which I saw and photographed two years ago. Unfortunately, two consecutive severe winters (2009 and 2010) killed all aerial parts of the tree; it is now slowly re-growing from basal sprouts. Three magnificent specimens of *Sorbus domestica* L. are also growing there.

In 1986, the Dumont family moved to a new house in Scoville (Hamois en Condroz) in the Valley of the Bocq, just about 10 km away from Ciney, from which we set out this morning. The house is surrounded by a garden of 2 hectares where we are standing as we listen to Daniel. The soil here, he says, is limestone, with a high pH. The altitude is 300 meters.

Daniel further expanded his collections into France in 1999. He wanted a warmer climate in order to be able to plant tender plants. After having considered the south of France, he concluded that what was really important were the minimum temperatures, and that he might as well buy land much farther north, in Brittany, where minimum temperatures are about the same as in the area of Nice, on the French Riviera, even if maximum temperatures are far from being as high as on the Riviera in Summertime¹.

Daniel tells us that both of the arboreta that we will visit today (here in Scoville in the morning, Lesve in the afternoon) have endured two severe winters, with temperatures as low as -25° Celsius (-10F). Furthermore, a disease probably caused by two very wet years in 1999 and 2000 has decimated his collection of pines. Daniel also admits that the double hedge of spruces that he has planted all around his garden might also be detrimental to his pines. He has started to plant pines in Brittany also, where there is more wind along the coast, to duplicate his initial collection in Belgium.

¹ I thank Daniel for having sent me a summary of what he told us in the introduction.

Daniel ended his introduction by describing the storm of July 14th, 2010. On that day southern Belgium was hit by a major storm, especially harsh in the region of Ciney and the garden suffered some losses (The church in Ciney lost its bell tower). I would notice later in the garden that Daniel had done a lot of work in preparation for our visit, removing fallen trees since my pre-visit at the end of July. And although the gales were probably a disaster for the trees that were felled, they may have done a favor for the remaining trees: the latter will now have more room, which is a scarce commodity in this garden.

The Garden in Scoville

After his introduction, Daniel invited us to walk down to his garden. The visit started out as a field trip of the Conifer Society, with assembly around an *Abies squamata* Mast., a Chinese fir with remarkable bark. The group then moved on to *Abies vejari* Martinez, a Mexican fir that does very well in collections in Europe and North America. There is indeed an excellent specimen at Thenford House, the garden of IOS member Michael Heseltine in England. (This tree grew initially in the garden of Keith Rushforth.) Next we saw *Abies pindrow* (Royle ex. D. Don) Royle, *Athrotaxis laxifolia* Hook., and many juniper species and cultivars.

But come on! This is the Oak Society! So the group eventually began to focus on oaks. The first one is a specimen of *Quercus graciliformis* C.H.Mull., an oak native to the Chisos Mountains in Texas, growing here in an area comparable to USDA zone 6. Daniel Dumont belonged to the network of people around Steven Roesch who eventually brought about the creation of the International Oak



Daniel Dumont with IOS President Béatrice Chassé at Arboretum Scoville, located at Daniel's home
Photo©Charles Snyers



Tour participants examining *Quercus canariensis*

Photo©Charles Snyers

Society, and he grew this oak from seed received through that network, as is the case with many of his oaks. This *Q. graciliformis* was sown in 1994.

Next we moved on to a *Q. robur* L. 'Fastigiata'. Daniel believes that this tree belongs to a species distinct from *Q. robur* proper because it comes true from seed. He collected the seed from which he grew this plant on a tree at the Castle of Dave, in Belgium, which was a property of the Spanish Duke F. Lunez. Daniel said that he saw a whole stand of the very same oak in Ustarritz, in the French Basque country, all fastigate like this one. The stand in Ustarritz has since disappeared. Daniel believes that the mother plant of his tree might have come from that area close to Spain (Note: Some of us thought that the tree was a fastigate form of *Q. petraea* (Matt.) Liebl.)

Next we came to a specimen of *Q. kelloggii* Newb., grown from seed which Daniel received from Steven Roesch. This oak from the Pacific Coast of North America is not doing well in Belgium. As far as I know, all other specimens of this species in Belgium are younger than Daniel's tree and none are really happy in the Belgian climate.

Farther down in the garden we came upon three good plants of *Q. trojana* Webb (grown from acorns bought from Schumacher in the USA) and a specimen of *Q. acerifolia* (E. J. Palmer) Stoyhoff & W. J. Hess. This plant came from seed originally gathered from a well-known specimen growing at the Morton Arboretum in the United States. This handsome oak is not often seen in Europe. We then saw *Q. dentata* Thunb. and nearby a vigorous *Q.* 'Vilmoriniana', which is a hybrid between *Q. dentata* Thunb. and *Q. petraea* (Matt.) Liebl. This came from what was a chance seedling noticed by Maurice de Vilmorin at the Arboretum des Barres at the end of the 19th century.

Daniel has planted a double line of Norway spruce, *Picea abies* (L.) H. Karst., all around his garden. These were planted as a windbreak. Over the years they have grown to be tall trees and they take a lot of light from the trees they are supposed to protect. At one point during the visit I walked through the hedge to examine a lacinate form of *Quercus cerris* L. growing beyond the windbreak. Here I caught a bit of sun at last, and I noticed how beautiful the countryside is. None of that can be seen from the other side. The Turkish oak is doing very well even though it is outside the enclosed area. I wonder if Daniel could be persuaded to thin this double hedge a bit, maybe first right here at the *Q. cerris*?

We finished the visit to the garden in Scoville with a *Picea chihuahuana* Martinez, a recent introduction with needles as sharp as thorns. We then headed back to the house, where we had lunch on the terrace in the sun. This was also an ideal time to thank Daniel and Arlette for their hospitality and to present them with some gifts: oak seedlings mostly, but also Mexican pines, brought by Béatrice for the occasion.

The Arboretum in Lesve

After lunch, we drove to Lesve, which is about 40 km away from Daniel's house and a 45 minute drive over various back roads of Wallonia (French Belgium). We crossed the valley of the Meuse in Burnot before driving up to Profondeville and Lesve. Daniel's field there is about half the size of the garden in Scoville. It is also fenced by a double hedge of *Picea abies* and because its area is even smaller than at Scoville, one feels oppressed by the darkness of the place. The sun is shining, but the trees do not get much of it.



Quercus aliena within the spruce windbreak (left) at Arboretum Lesve

Photo©Charles Snyers



Measuring *Quercus xruncinata* at Arboretum Lesve

Photo©Charles Snyers

Darkness notwithstanding, Daniel has some interesting trees here. Some of the people in attendance, also members of the Belgian Dendrology Society, started measuring some of the trees for the national tree inventory (BELTREES), which was established and is maintained by the Society (Circumference is measured at 1.5 meter high).

The first tree of note, right at the entrance, is a spectacular *Corylus columna* L. (138 cm in girth and about 15 meters high). A few meters away, are an *Acer triflorum* Kom. (58 cm) and a small birch, labeled *Betula davurica* Pall. It was quickly decided that the label is incorrect, and some of the participants got very excited trying to identify it (Actually the birch is not yet identified. Since it came from a nursery, it may be a hybrid.)

Nearby is a good specimen of *Quercus xruncinata* (A. DC.) Engelm. (137 cm in circumference and 17 meters high), seemingly quite happy here. The next oak is *Quercus xcalvescens* Vukot., a naturally occurring hybrid between *Q. petraea* (Matt.) Liebl. and *Q. pubescens* Willd. Daniel collected this one in a natural stand in Ave et Auffe, not far from Lesve. The collection also contains *Q. pubescens*, collected by Daniel Dumont in the Gard region in France. *Q. pubescens* occurs here and there in southern Belgium always with populations of hybrids, *Q. xcalvescens* already mentioned and *Q. xkernerii* Simonk. (*Q. pubescens* x *Q. robur*). The latter is much rarer, but found a bit farther north in the Province of Brabant but in the absence of *Q. pubescens*. Other oaks recorded are *Q. aliena* Blume (74 cm), *Q. cerris* L. (143 cm) and *Q. macranthera* Fisch. & C. A. Mey. ex Hohen. (65 cm).

For the record, in addition to those already mentioned, other trees which were measured in Lesve (thanks Marc Struelens for the list) are *Abies concolor* (Gordon & Glend.) Lindl. ex Hildebr. 'Candicans' (83 cm), *Betula costata* Trautv. (81 cm), *Betula szechuanica* (C. K. Schneid.) C.-A. Jansson (45 cm), *Calocedrus decurrens* (Torr.) Florin (127 cm), *Castanea sativa* Mill. 'Argenteo-marginata' (170 cm in girth and 15 m high), *Cupressus arizonica* Greene (80 cm), *Fraxinus excelsior* L. 'Jaspidea' (80 cm), *Fraxinus latifolia* Benth. (80 cm), *Juniperus squamata* Buch.-Ham. ex D. Don 'Meyeri' (38 cm), *Pinus lambertiana* Douglas (138 cm and 17 m), *Pinus taeda* L. (51 cm and 12 m), *Pinus virginiana* Miller (76 cm and 10 m), *Robinia pseudoacacia* L. 'Unifolia' (97 cm), *Salix candida* Flügge ex Willdenow (164 cm. Note: this one needs to be checked as *S. candida* is a North-American shrub), *Salix pentandra* L. (98 cm and 15 m, collected in Switzerland), and *Tilia americana* L. (113 cm).