

# Friend of Botanic Gardens Forum Newsletter



*Friends of Botanic Gardens*

*Forum*

## Spring 2020 Issue 1



Dear Friend

**‘A Friend, a Booke and a Garden shall for the future perfectly circumscribe my utmost designes’** (John Evelyn, via Cicero)

Well, atlast, you are now in receipt of the 1<sup>st</sup> Friends of Botanic Gardens Forum Newsletter. My apologies for the delay in collating all the interesting contributions you have submitted to me over the past couple of months. No one could have anticipated when I first proposed a newsletter, that we would be facing such ‘unprecedented’ changes to our lives in such a short period of time. I had good intentions of distributing the newsletter at the end of March – but, inevitably, like everyone else, I have found adapting to social isolation is quite a challenge! For all of us, it has meant loss of our old routines – volunteering, looking after grandchildren/elderly relatives, socialising, concerts, theatre, etc, etc. – and now moving into a new routine where all socialising takes place either across the garden hedge/fence or in a virtual world online. I suspect most of you have gardens – and with the exceptionally dry April (until today only 1mm rain in Edinburgh), my approximately one acre of garden has been pulling me out – distracting me from the worries in the wider world and ensuring that I keep going – physically and mentally. The quote which I put at the top of this letter feels particularly appropriate at this time – though it was written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when John Evelyn was only 32 years old!

Our second FBGF meeting was due to take place at the conference for Friends and Volunteers of Botanic Gardens at the beginning of June. It has, as you know, been cancelled, and though, a scaled -down event has been proposed, I suspect that this is unlikely to be pursued, given the extension of social distancing to vulnerable groups in the longer term. I would not like to see the FBGF flounder at this stage, and, therefore, we have to adapt to current conditions and make good use of the time available to us. Our botanic gardens are going to need the support of Friends as much, if not more, in the future. Friends groups will benefit from closer contact with eachother as we explore how to continue functioning in a limited fashion for the foreseeable future – until a vaccine is developed. A positive feature of the enforced isolation has been the increased appreciation of local green spaces – people will want to visit botanic gardens – and they will also want to know more about the world of nature, through plants. Horticulture might be the new ‘must do trend’ for 2020 onwards on social media – and botanic gardens can and do play an increasing role in providing opportunities to acquire knowledge and expertise.

So, ending up on this positive note – I would like to initiate a discussion as how we can continue to communicate and build on what has been achieved so far using what resources we have to strengthen our links with eachother, and with other organisations. I did have a positive meeting (digitally) with the Paul Smith, CEO of BGCI prior to lockdown, and was intending to meet up with him at the Sibbaldia/Plant Network conference which was due to take place in April. I will email you separately to update you on that discussion and how we might progress that relationship. You will see that I have drafted a ‘logo’ at the top of this letter. I hope that this will stimulate ideas as to alternatives! Furthermore, I am keen to develop a website (free!) and would appreciate ideas as to how to progress this initiative. And I hope we can mull over all of this and more at a - ‘yes’ – virtual meeting before the end of May.

Meanwhile enjoy your own gardens, keep safe and I look forward to seeing you soon – virtually! And hopefully in the not too distant future, we can meet up – and shake hands – and even give ourselves warm embraces as we emerge from our period of isolation.

Very best wishes  
Shiona Mackie

Durham September 2020





## Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum

May Morning has been celebrated for over 500 years in Oxford with the choir of Magdalen College singing the Hymnus Eucharisticus at 6 am from the top of Magdalen Tower. Large crowds gather in the High Street and on Magdalen Bridge. There's a party atmosphere with Morris Dancing and impromptu music.

Luckily the Oxford Botanic Garden is bang opposite Magdalen Tower. For a number of years, the Botanic Garden has opened from 5 am for the Friends of Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum to enjoy the celebration in the peace and quiet of the garden.

Nicky Brown describes her experience. 'Spring starts for me on May Morning: a leisurely 4.30am rise and a gentle stroll through Oxford and the revelry on Magdalen Bridge, takes me to the happy haven of the Botanic Garden. Here, a welcoming band of volunteers send a soft aroma of coffee and croissants wafting through the gorgeous greenery as Morris Dancers hop and skip; then tinkling bells give way as 6am tolls, heralding Magdalen choir at the top of the Great Tower. All heads turn heavenwards; new sunlight dapples ancient stonework and in the Garden, there is spellbound stillness.'

In 2019, the event raised almost £3000 at £15 a ticket for which you get a croissant and a cup of coffee, and the unmissable opportunity to visit the garden at dawn.

**Harriet Bretherton**

**Director of the Friends of Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum**

## Belfast Botanic Garden



## A Global Medicine Garden for Belfast Botanic Gardens

In 2019, Friends of Belfast Botanic Gardens were given the go-ahead by our Gardens Focus Group (which has membership from the Friends of Belfast Botanic Gardens, Belfast City Council Management and Belfast Botanic Gardeners) for the creation of a Global Medicine Garden in an enclosed site next to the newly restored Tropical Ravine. A pioneering project, this collaborative initiative between Belfast City Council and the Friends group is the first of its kind in the Gardens.

While much of the detail of the Victorian lay-out has been lost over the years, our enterprise begins to redress this, echoing as it does the medicinal herb collection that was a feature of the gardens under the curatorship of Daniel Ferguson, described and marked on the plan in his guide to the Gardens of 1851. Coincidentally, our new Global Medicine Garden is very close to the site of the original medicinal herb collection.

It is hoped that the Global Medicine Garden will provide a focal point for tours of the Gardens together with generating materials for workshop sessions for school parties and groups, as well as bringing in a fresh range of plant species, most of it donated by the Friends group and individual members.

An additional outcome has been the formation of a FOBBG volunteer 'gardening team' who have enjoyed sociable and productive days as the hard physical work on site has proceeded over the late autumn and winter of 2019.

So far around 80 species (some 200 plants) from around the globe have been planted and accessioned, all with herbal associations. Throughout the project we have benefitted from co-operation and support from council and gardening staff. We look forward to further ground work and planting in spring 2020.

**Adrian Walsh**

**Chair. Belfast Botanic Garden**

## **Friends of the Botanical Gardens, Sheffield; (FOBS)**

FOBS was founded in 1984 at a time when the Botanic Gardens were in severe decline. The gardens are owned by the Town Trust but managed by the city council and funds were already severely constrained. FOBS set about fund-raising to restore the gardens and with a huge grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the restored gardens were reopened in 2007. At the time it was the only public open space where over a million pounds in matched fundings had been raised.

Currently we have around 600 members but only a small proportion are actively involved in the gardens. Many of those who are active, help with maintenance and some of us raise plants both to sell to raise funds and also to plant in the gardens. We have been volunteering since 2011 after returning to Sheffield from our Scottish garden at Kerrachar and have concentrated on raising plants from seed. In particular we have had a special interest in South African species to the point where we were able to plant out a large bed devoted to the country (roughly 25 metres by 4) last summer. This project is in its early stages – 150 species in the ground but another 200 at various stages (ready to plant through to seeds) on the way.



Elsewhere in the gardens FOBS is helping to redevelop the 'Prairie Garden' which was originally a research plot planted by James Hitchmough in 2003, one of the precursors of the planting at the Olympic Park. Although we are not run by the university we do have the benefit of the country's top Landscape Architecture department in Sheffield and last year FOBS persuaded James to restore the area.

We are actively pursuing a project which is currently still a pipe dream. At present we have no Alpine House in the gardens but we have the funds to rectify this if we can secure approval. We do have magnificent 'Pavilions' which are in urgent need of replanting which we hope the recently appointed Head Gardener will undertake once the ravages of lead thieves have been repaired. We also have an area for larger rockery plants which FOBS restored two years ago to which a tufa area was added last Autumn with additional planting only a few days ago.

Our talks programme constitutes a major part of the activities of FOBS. Nineteen talks are already scheduled for 2020 including a recent sell-out all ticket event with Adam Frost and the new Education Centre is pretty packed for every talk. We hold five plant sales per year and host additional educational events as well as supporting a project to develop the use of the Education Centre.

**Peter And Trish Kohn**

**Friends of Sheffield Botanic Garden**



## DEVELOPMENT OF THE TWO DRAGONS GARDEN AT TREBORTH

The Friends of Treborth Botanic Garden have had a key involvement over the last six years with the creation of a Chinese medicinal garden at the Garden. Bangor University secured an initial grant from the British Council to set up a project known as the Two Dragons Garden (referring to the national symbols of China and Wales) in collaboration with the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden in Yunnan, China, and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, with continuing funding from the Confucius Institute at Bangor University. There are two components to the project: the Treborth medicinal garden and a number of training programmes for graduating students to gain work experience in botanic gardens in Wales and China.

Members the Friends of Treborth have been closely involved in both the design of the Chinese Garden and in its creation. The site chosen for the Chinese Garden was an overgrown border in a prominent position near the main buildings. The Friends took part in some brain storming sessions, which included the Confucius Institute, to come up with ideas for the planting and the layout. The border already included spectacular mature specimens of the Hubei crab apple (*Malus hupehensis*) and the architectural multi-stems of an *Aralia undulata*, but most of the rest of the plants needed to be taken out. The whole site was landscaped into three curved sections, one larger front area and two smaller shadier pockets forming a nest around the *Malus*. As anyone who has been involved with such a project will know, it all looked like a bomb site for many months and for a while we despaired of ever moving on to the exciting stage of planting it up! However, while the contractors were busy, we were able to make progress with ideas for the design. One of our volunteers, Berta Rosen, has taken a keen interest in Chinese medicinal plants and the design of Chinese gardens, and came up with lists of potential plants, and their uses in Chinese medicine. We also considered structural features that reflected the Chinese theme but which would also blend in with the rest of the Garden. So we rejected the idea of a pagoda, but did decide to have a moon gate at the entrance. Berta also designed 'penjing' elements, using pieces of Welsh slate chosen so that their colours complemented the planting. Overall, it was important that the design would appeal to plant specialists and those with particular scientific interests, but also to the wider public of all ages.

When at last the planting could start, a team of volunteers worked with staff to dig in large quantities of compost and then carefully place the plants according to the design. There are structural trees and shrubs including *Betula ermanii*, *Prunus serrula*, *Cornus kousa* var. *chinesis* and architectural species including *Tetrapanax papyrifer* and *Rheum palmatum*. Then these are underplanted with smaller shrubs and perennials such as *Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *digyna*, *Ilex crenata*, *Lamprocapnos spectabilis*, *Kirengeshoma palmata* and a variety of *Epimedium*, *Astilbe chinensis* and *Podophyllum hexandrum*.

Over the last couple of years the Two Dragons Garden has really started to mature and show colour and structure. It has been a pleasure to see how the garden attracts visitors who like to sit on the green oak benches and enjoy the peaceful surroundings. The Friends bought one of the three blue lily bowls, using money donated to us in memory of the mother of one of our members.

Nothing stands still, however, and Berta is now working on an extension to the garden - a Welsh medicinal garden, which will complement the Chinese garden but will have a very different design to reflect a more local theme. As a Welsh garden it will reflect early Celtic and Druidic traditions, as well as the herbal remedies of the medieval Physicians of Myddfai.

**Sarah Edgar**

**The Friends of Treborth Botanic Garden**



## Thwaite Gardens, University of Hull

Thwaite Gardens covers an area of approximately 2.5 acres and has been owned by the University of Hull since 1948. It is maintained by the University along with volunteers from The Friends of Thwaite Gardens. A number of open events are held each year for the general public to view and enjoy the gardens.

The gardens comprise lawned areas, herbaceous borders, winter border, herb garden, bog garden, alpine beds, sub-tropical beds, *Salvia* bed, Mediterranean and Antipodean beds. The glass-houses contain an evolution-themed display, a cacti collection, tree fern collection, two fern houses, two Southern Hemisphere Houses, a carnivorous bed, an *Agave* bed and a South African bed.

The gardens were formerly part of Thwaite Hall which has been noted as a Grade 2 Garden of Special Historic Interest, with a lake and woodland in a further 28 acres. The Thwaite tree collection is an important collection of mature rare trees containing four National Champion Trees and 31 Yorkshire Champion Trees. More information can be found at: <http://thwaite-gardens.hull.ac.uk/>



**Hawthorn at Thwaite**

**Steve Howe, Chair, Thwaite Gardens**

**Victor Swetez and Lindsey Atkinson, Thwaite Gardens**

## Friends of Glasgow Botanic Gardens

The first meeting of the Friends of UK Botanic Gardens in Durham Botanic Gardens was educational in many ways, not least because it both showed how alike and yet how different the Friends organisations were.

We all have the value of Botanic Gardens at the heart of our endeavours but because the history, ownership, management and funding is so variable, so does the way we operate on a daily basis.

Glasgow Botanic Gardens is entirely owned, funded and managed by the City Council although its history goes back 200 years with the University of Glasgow at its heart. However, many things have changed with minimal direct involvement by the University at the present time other than on a personal basis

The Botanic Gardens increasingly relies on volunteers for its daily activities, mainly in the outdoor operations, and these are organised and managed by the Gardens staff and of course, some of the volunteers are members of the Friends.

The role of the Glasgow Friends largely focuses on the educational/information value of the Gardens and providing financial resources to promote community engagement with those groups who would not normally use the Gardens.

This includes art classes with refugees using the plant collections to interpret their homelands, primary/pre-primary woodland activities for those not normally experiencing the great outdoors, through to more formal Practical Horticulture courses using the RBGE material and everything in between!



We work closely with the local Waitrose Community engagement staff and as a result of their support we received an award of almost £20,000 from their “bag scheme” and below are photographs of the “before and after” results:



We organised a photo-call in the Gardens with the local Waitrose manager, together with some of his staff and a few Friends. He was then able to promote his local community engagement to his seniors and we benefited from a major cash injection – a win win all round. So, what did we use the money for – see below!



This area of the Gardens is used for practical horticulture courses. The Waitrose funded paving, new hedging, a new composting area, and planting for pruning demonstrations. It also allows the general public closer access to see what is being achieved.

The remaining funds will be used to train local teachers who are engaged with their schoolchildren responding to the Glasgow “Grow your own” project as part of the activities associated with the Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in 2020 (now postponed to 2021) – Teach the Teachers and the skills multiply.

As an update on the Teach the Teachers project we were engaging with the Royal Horticultural Society and their work with the schools to introduce a slimmed down RBGE Certificate in Practical Horticulture for Environmental Teachers and Assistants. We have approx. 80 lined up and will be progressed as soon as health restrictions permit.

To assist us with the funding for this we have been successful in obtaining a grant from the Wee Green Grants fund that is managed by the Friends of Glasgow Parks Forum. The Friends of Glasgow Botanic Gardens are closely involved with the development and running of the Forum and the funding has been provided by the City Council's work on Participatory Budgeting (PB budgeting) which created a sum of c £150,000, the use of which is determined by the Forum.

Th PB work is a requirement for all local authorities to make 1% of their budgets available to local groups to determine how it should be used.as part of Community Engagement. I have summed up the process in a simple sentence but in practice it has taken the Forum 12 months to structure the way in which a transparent scheme could work and there will be a continuous development of the work over the coming years.

**Brian Atkinson**

**Chair, Friends of Glasgow Botanic Gardens**

# University of Leicester Botanic Garden

Like most of the Botanic Gardens throughout the UK, the University of Leicester Botanic Garden has been closed to volunteers and visitors. So as I read about their events in the winter issue of their newsletter, I noted that the interesting series of talks, the AGM in May, the visit to Transylvania (this sounded very exciting!) and of course, fund- raising efforts, e.g. the Plant Sale and Family Days will all have been either cancelled or postponed. I know we can all share the Friends of Leicester Botanic Gardens frustration at not only, not being able to raise much needed funds, but also the inability to visit the garden, particularly during spring when our gardens come to life again after the winter period. The newsletter did highlight to me how useful it is to share information across our nascent Forum. It introduced to me a number of interesting houses and gardens which the Friends had planned to visit during the summer – Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire, Hanbury Hall in Worcester, and Stonehouse Cottage Nursery and Garden in Kidderminster. These were all new to me and I will certainly squirrel away the information for future reference should the Friends of the RBGE venture down to that part of England in the future! We would, of course, want to visit the University of Leicester Botanic Garden as well and meet up with the Friends! (written by Shiona Mackie based on information from Leicester BG newsletter)



Crocus Sunday 2019

Gay Dent

University of Leicester Botanic Garden

# Friends of St Andrews Botanic Garden

Friends of St Andrews Botanic Garden are busy with preparations for their 40th Anniversary! Founded in 1980/81, we can look back over four decades of solid and enthusiastic support for St Andrews Botanic Garden. Originally owned by the University, the Garden is now run by the St Andrews Botanic Garden Trust, and as the Garden changed so has the nature of our support. With a membership of approx. 800, we focus on fundraising and see ourselves very much as ambassadors for the Garden in the community and beyond. With a new director, Harry Watkins, in place since February, that aim will become ever more a focus for us. Some of our anniversary plans are currently on hold, but commemorative mugs will shortly be for sale. We have commissioned some merchandise to raise funds, and we will plan a range of events for Friends members as soon as the Garden reopens its gates. Soon, we all hope.

Sabine Hotho

Chair. Friends of St Andrews Botanic Garden



*Caltha palustris* var. *alba*  
(St Andrews BG Twitter photo)



## University of Dundee Botanic Garden

### The Sycamore Tree

If you were to browse the Aerofilms Collection for the West end of Dundee in the 1930's, you would find four photos showing an open area in precisely the location of today's botanic garden. To the north, west and east lie the grand houses that can still be seen today, and a single sycamore tree stands alone with an unrivalled view of the river Tay. Its origins are unknown and why it was still standing in an area cultivated for vegetables for years is not clear. Directly to the north there is an entrance road – Eildonhurst Street – which is no more. To the east lie the gardens of other fine houses. All this land was owned by these adjoining houses and some 40 years later would become the University Botanic garden. One notable homeowner was Lord Provost of Dundee between 1940 and 1946 – Sir Garnet Wilson. His house, located directly to the east of the above street, is of some interest to this writer, as my grandmother, before her marriage after World War I, was employed 'in service' in this house. He would have viewed the sycamore every day from the front of the house and perhaps reflected on its isolation.



In the mid-to-late 60's, members of the botany department of the newly independent University of Dundee (formerly University College, St. Andrews University) pressed for a botanic garden within the boundary of Dundee so the department could become self-sufficient in plant material, which was at the time coming from Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. At the same time, it was becoming untenable for the above land to remain so unprofitably used. In 1966, the late Dr Hugh Ingram put forward a proposal for a garden to use this land and after a not insignificant number of years a memorandum of understanding was signed between the adjoining homeowners and the University in 1971, with a formal legal agreement in 1972. The Garden was officially inaugurated by Principal James Drever in 1972. At the express wish of Sir Garnet, the sycamore tree was to remain untouched. Its birth was probably spontaneous, and it had survived; it was the link to the past. Today the sycamore towers majestically above the southerly footpaths withstanding all that the elements can impress on it. Sir Garnet did not live to see the Garden develop, but his contribution is remembered on a plaque placed directly beneath.



Mark McGilchrist

Chair, Friends of Dundee Botanic Garden



## Friends of the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh

2020 marks the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh. The celebratory year for the Friends began very appropriately with a lecture by Sutherland Forsyth, who led the Botanic Cottage rebuild at the RBGE in 2014/15. Sutherland is now the Learning Curator, Palace of Holyroodhouse, Royal Collection Trust, and his talk, therefore, focussed on the origins of the Gardens at Holyrood Palace in whose grounds Robert Sibbald and Andrew Balfour established a physic garden in 1670. This garden originally grew plants with medicinal properties, and provided pharmacists with new material. This garden is being recreated at the Palace as part of a redevelopment which will include a learning centre. The garden will be planted with 17th century plants of interest throughout the year.

We had been looking forward to holding the lecture in the new education centre in the sanctuary buildings over looking the original garden site. However, a delay with the building work meant that we were unable to go meet there. Instead Sutherland organised for us to have our lecture inside the Palace itself. We entered up the grand staircase, walking through the state apartments to the grand audience chamber, where we enjoyed a fascinating lecture from a master story teller in the very room where Robert Sibbald and Andrew Balfour received their knighthoods from James VII, then Duke of York. Huge portraits of James and his brother Charles II who were hugely supportive of Sibbald and Balfour's enterprise adorn the audience chamber walls.

Right from the beginning the Gardens were outward looking, collecting and exchanging plants and ideas from the greatest minds of the day from across the known world. Soon the original 40x40 foot plot was teeming with 900 plants and further space had to be found. Initially further up the High Street and then on the site of platform 11 of Waverley Station (look out for the plaque!) before finally the collection was consolidated at a new site off Leith Walk. The Edinburgh gardens moved from Leith Walk to the present site in 1820 with the gardener's (Botanic) cottage, finally joining the plants in 2016.

Many physic gardens were founded around the same time as RBGE but what allowed these gardens to flourish when others did not was the original vision that the gardens should be open to the world. While other gardens were maintained for the exclusive use of a university or guild the leaders of the Edinburgh gardens continued to share access and information. This approach continues to this day with projects currently running in 35 countries. You can find out more about this international outreach at <https://www.rbge.org.uk/about-us/our-work-around-the-world/>



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**Patricia Barclay**

**Convener, Edinburgh Friends of the RBGE**