

# BOTANIC GARDEN NEWSLETTER



UNIVERSITY OF  
LEICESTER

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Friends of the Botanic Garden

## WINTER 2024

## ISSUE 47



## A second successful Botanic Garden Festival

Over a thousand people gathered in the Botanic Garden to enjoy live music, arts and crafts, food and drink, and much more.

There was a variety of live performances on Knoll Lawn with the O'Driscoll collective, String Beats, Contrast Steel Band, Wigston Brass Band with a resident DJ keeping the show on the roll.

There were other activities for families to enjoy, with autumn-themed arts and crafts workshops, a bouncy castle, face painting and food from local vendors

Inside Beaumont House, the Alumni engagement team had organised a range of informal learning activities aimed at inspiring young minds including Robot Wars and making ice cream with liquid nitrogen.



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Professor Nishan Canagarajah, President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester said: "This year's Botanic garden Festival was a wonderful way to see out the summer and it was heartening to see so many people come together to enjoy the beauty of the gardens.

The Festival is a testament to the University's commitment to community engagement and providing enriching experiences for all".

Photo credit to: Jason Senior of RedPix photography

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## Digitisation is on our doorstep:

**The University no longer to produce  
paper newsletters.**

It should come as no surprise that with rising costs for both printing and postage that your Committee has discussed the idea of producing a paperless Newsletter on a regular basis over the past couple of years, but we always drew back from making a decision on the grounds that our Members may not be able to access a digitised newsletter. During this time my doctor started sending me texts, Boots sends an email to tell me my prescription is ready, and I shop and pay bills online without giving it a second thought. Even better, I can see and talk to my grandchildren on a zoom call to

Luxembourg without paying for a long-distance telephone call. Gradually, even my 'older generation' has come to realise the benefits to being connected to the outside world, without needing to use pen, paper, or stamps!

Similar conversations about digitisation have been taking place in the University which has recently decided that it will no longer produce paper newsletters. Because the Friends of the Botanic Garden shares a newsletter with the Botanic Garden, this means our newsletter would also be digitised.

We considered having our own print Newsletter, but the cost of printing an eight-page newsletter and posting to all Friends is now £1500 for each edition. That is £6000 per year, which could be spent on achieving the primary goals of our constitution-- 'to further the development of the amenities and educational services of the Botanic Garden, including the provision of equipment, plants, and other features and volunteer support'

As an organisation that supports environmental causes, we also have to consider the environment costs of the trees cut down and made into paper as well as harm caused to the environment by paper producing industries. After much consideration the Committee decided that this would be our final printed edition of the Botanic Garden newsletter before we move to a digital version. This gives us time to ensure a smooth transition.

Reducing both costs and possible damage to the environment are not the only considerations for making this decision. With a digital Newsletter each Friend of the Botanic Garden can become an ambassador for the Friends and the Garden. You will be able to send a copy of the Newsletter to a friend or family member, to members of a local book club, a gardening or allotment group, in order to let others know about the Botanic Garden and the Friends' events and encourage others to visit, enjoy and contribute towards the future of the Botanic Garden. Digital messages should also gradually reduce the need for flyers as more people find out about our events from our Newsletter events page.

Research shows that digitised publicity reaches out to a younger cohort of individuals, which will be of great benefit to the Friends for the future of our organisation.

We expect a few people will find this change difficult, and the enclosed letter from our membership secretary explains how you will be able to access help to get your newsletter. We will do everything we can to ensure that all our members continue to receive and enjoy our Botanic Garden Newsletter.

**Mary Campbell**  
Co-chair Friends of the Botanic Garden



## Evening talk for Friends at Beaumont Hall October 17th

The banana family provides one of the world's most important food crops. Some 125 million tons of dessert bananas are traded commercially each year in addition to the plantains and cooking bananas which are locally consumed staples in many parts of the world. In recent years this valuable commodity has been seriously threatened, notably by the soil-borne fungus *Fusarium*. Banana wilt from this cause has led to major crop losses in China and Taiwan and threatens other important areas of production in Africa and Central America.

Stepping in at very short notice to replace a speaker who was unable to attend, Professor Pat Heslop-Harrison gave a well-illustrated overview of the biological and commercial context in which this threat to food security is being tackled. The Cavendish cultivar, which dominates the banana market, is a sterile hybrid which produces no seeds and crops heavily. A billion-pound industry has developed to package, transport and ripen this specific variety so that it can be distributed over long distances yet reach the consumer in optimal condition.

Substituting another cultivar, could one be identified with better resistance to *Fusarium* wilt, would cause major disruption to world trade. Professor Heslop-Harrison described two broad approaches which he and international colleagues have been pursuing to counter the looming threat to banana cultivation.

The first revolves around biosecurity, where growers are helped to implement detection and eradication strategies to stop the spread of disease in their crops. This is showing results in a number of important areas of production but will require sustained effort by crop scientists, government agencies and growers to maintain disease control in the long term.

The second promising area of research is in genetic modification of the banana plant to give it resistance to fungal infection. The domesticated banana cultivars have some cytogenetic peculiarities; most are triploid hybrids of the wild progenitor species *Musa acuminata* and *Musa balbisiana*. Any introduced genetic modification should be specifically targeted on disease resistance, so that desirable phenotypic features are preserved. That requires a detailed understanding of the plant-pathogen relationship at the molecular level.

For many years, research on the genetic modification of food crops has been held back by proscriptive regulation, particularly in Europe. Investment in this area has fallen far behind the United States. The UK Government has very recently announced measures to support the development of new genetic technologies in agriculture and food production. Secondary legislation to implement the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 will open a route to market for gene edited products in the UK. The announcement this month of the launch of a new Regulatory Innovation Office also gives encouragement that new technologies offering real benefits to society will not be subject to unnecessary delays before they are deployed.

**Sir Kent Wood Emeritus Professor of Therapeutics**

## Rainforests, snakes, children and student teachers

October started with a wonderful workshop for fifty children from Buswell's Lodge Primary School, who came to the Botanic Garden to find out more about Rainforests. These 7- and 8-year-olds were joined by thirty student teachers from the School of Education, whose focus for the day was on mathematics across the primary school curriculum, linking maths with literacy, science, geography and environmental issues.

We started with an excellent introduction from Seema, one of the team of teachers who work in the garden, which gave children a chance to show what they already knew and to think about what else they wanted to find out during the day.

The garden itself, of course, is in a temperate climate, and the children compared this with their experience in the desert and tropical glasshouses, sketching plants and leaves to help them see how plants are adapted to different climates.

We used our large map of the world to pinpoint the equator, to practise compass points and to see where the major rainforests are. Children joined up photos of plants and animals to make food chains and food webs, and measured snakes – especially comparing our scale models of a British grass snake and a green anaconda, from the Amazon.

Only a small number of the children and grown-ups involved had been in the Botanic Garden before, and there were many, many comments from children and adults alike about how beautiful the garden is, and how much they would like to visit again. As one child said, 'I'm telling my mum about this place – it's magic, and she'll really like it!'

**Rose Griffiths (Prof of Education) and Ruth Godfrey (Education Officer)**



# Rewilded Shakespeare



Think of nature in Shakespeare and you might think of formal and elaborate Elizabethan knot-gardens, or perhaps of the magical and mysterious forests of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*. But there are wilder places in Shakespeare's drama too: the 'blasted heath' of *Macbeth*, for instance. And just occasionally, the playwright also conjures up an image of what happens when humans leave nature to re-wild itself.

There's a surprising description of this process at the end of Shakespeare's history play *Henry V* (1599). Against the odds, the English have defeated the much larger forces of France at the Battle of Agincourt. Afterwards, the French king and his court meet the victorious Henry, and the Duke of Burgundy tries to broker a peace deal.

He describes the devastating effects of war on France:

"Her vine, the merry cheerer of the heart,  
Unpruned dies; her hedges even-pleach'd,  
Like prisoners wildly overgrown with hair,  
Put forth disorder'd twigs; her fallow leas  
The darnel, hemlock and rank fumitory  
Doth root upon, while that the coulter rusts  
That should deracinate such savagery;  
The even mead, that erst brought sweetly forth  
The freckled cowslip, burnet and green clover,  
Wanting the scythe, all uncorrected, rank,  
Conceives by idleness and nothing teems  
But hateful docks, rough thistles, kecksies, burrs,  
Losing both beauty and utility."

Burgundy paints two pictures side by side: one of France's countryside as it should be, and one of the neglected France of wartime. On one hand we have a productive, well-husbanded and cared-for land: vineyards, neatly plaited ('pleached') hedgerows, and productive grass meadows rich with wildflowers and clover. But intertwined with this we have the vision of what the land has become. Untended by the people who have gone off to fight, it's become overgrown with darnel (rye-grass), hemlock, fumitory, docks, thistles. The word 'kecksies' doesn't appear anywhere else in English writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but Leicestershire people still call cow parsley 'keck' today.

Shakespeare, of course, was from Warwickshire, and perhaps he enjoyed putting some Midlands dialect in the mouth of the Duke of Burgundy.

Shakespeare knew the countryside well, and his picture of the land run 'fallow' is precise. If you've ever tried no-mow, you might know that what grows first is tussocky grass, docks, nettles, and thistles, because the ground is still very fertile. It takes time, and periodic cutting and removal, to create a wildflower meadow. In Burgundy's speech, the French countryside is 'rank' because it has been recently abandoned. It is haunted by the ghosts of agricultural labourers lying dead at Agincourt. Their absence is made all the more poignant because they are represented only by the tools they used: the scythes they swung, the now-rust 'coulter' (plough) they steered.

One person who recognised how powerful and moving this speech was Laurence Olivier.

In Olivier's film of *Henry V* (1944), Burgundy speaks this words lingeringly, as the camera pans over a bleak, empty, and ruined landscape. The speech, like the film, serves the propaganda of a very different wartime: reminding viewers of the need both to fight for, and to care for, the land against 'savagery' – and to keep Digging for Victory.

**Prof. Mary Ann Lund, University of Leicester**



Holly Brooks as Celia  
with Silvius the sheep  
Photographer: Colin J Smith



# Tours of the University of Leicester Botanic Garden (May – October 2024)

“.....lovely Autumn colour.....it was very informative about both the gardens and the history of the beautiful houses which we found most interesting”

The quote above is part of the message we volunteer guides received from a group who had taken a pre-arranged tour recently and had much enjoyed refreshments after it. Group sizes this year ranged from 10 up to 40 and some 258 people in total explored at least part of the 16 acres that this diverse garden occupies.

2024 heralded the acquisition of a young Field Maple, 'Queen Elizabeth'. King Charles had granted funds to each of the United Kingdom's Lord -Lieutenants to plant one tree in the area they represent. Mike Kapur OBE CStJ had selected the Botanic Garden as the ideal place to plant the sapling as a lasting legacy of King Charles III's Coronation. From the newest addition to some of the oldest like the Giant Redwoods, there is much delight in seeing the towering specimens that have been in the garden since Edwardian times.

No matter what the season, there is always something different to see and the volunteer guides will make a point in showing off anything that is looking particularly special or unusual. Maybe the spectacular Alliums in the much cherished herbaceous border or the profusion of colour when the Rhododendrons burst into flower? One of the guides actually works in the garden and keeps the whole team up to date with any significant changes. Though a few volunteers have guided for many years, we were delighted this year to welcome two enthusiastic newcomers. Do come and introduce yourself if you would like to join us.

Visit on any weekday and the tour can include one of the greenhouses onsite. The Desert House or Tropical Greenhouse, for example, recreate different environments on the globe and exhibit an exciting range of plants designed to thrive there. This is as much fun for adults as it is for the many school children who visit the Garden during the year.

Groups taking a pre-arranged tour come from many different backgrounds and areas of interest. As one might expect, some stem from Gardening Clubs with much horticultural expertise within, but others include those with links to the U3A, WI, Twinning Associations, Charitable organisations or simply groups whose members take an avid interest in experiencing something new.

Maybe you belong to, or know of a group who might enjoy one of our tours? The tour usually takes an hour and a half although it can be shortened to an hour if need be. Perhaps book for some refreshments as well? Tea/coffee with cake is always most welcome as the tour ends!

Perhaps I shall see you there next year?

## Rosemary Hall, Botanic Garden Tour Guide

### 'As You Like It':

#### I liked it

On 19th and 20th June 2024, Attenborough Arts Centre blessed us with The Duke Theatre Company's rendition of Shakespeare's world renowned 'As You Like it.' The playfulness of this production, with seven spectacular actors and a sheep under the direction of the great Kevin Bennett, made it an enjoyable experience for people of all ages and interests.

Actors Holly Brooks as Celia, Sam Claridge as Orlando, Sorrel Jordan as Rosalind, George Prové as Touchstone (and Amiens and smaller roles), Duncan MacInnes playing both Duke Frederick and Duke Senior as well as Corin, Beatrice John as both 'Charlotte' the wrestler and Phoebe, and Ben Simon as Oliver provided a first class ensemble to entertain audiences, using skills such as stage combat song and dance and musical instruments to capture the lightheartedness of the play. Ben Simon had suffered an injury and was wearing a foot cast, so in the wrestling match there was only one wrestler, and Beatrice John wrestled brilliantly with herself.

The set design by Piran Jeffcock featured folding doors to change the settings from the Forest of Ardennes to the court of Duke Frederick in a matter of seconds, multiple entrances and exits allowing for seamless exits and transitions throughout the play and slats of wood doubling as trees really immersed the audience into the lives and the environment the characters survive in.

One of my favorite parts of the show has to have been the use of a remote-control sheep playing the role of Silvius. The sheep added a comedic nature to the play and allowed the pace of the play to move along quicker.

The only mishap in the entire show was a microphone failure which was handled professionally, the audience still being able to hear the entire performance clearly.

This first-class revival of a Shakespeare classic provided a wonderful watch for all audiences. Elaine Claxton's ability to condense the play into just 2 hours and 18 minutes at the same time keeping the clarity and emotional intensity of the play at a high allowed it to be easy viewing for all lucky enough to witness this show live.

Keira, GCSE student, Sir Jonathan North Girls' College

# Friends of the Garden holiday 2025 Gardens of Dorset and The New Forest

**Monday 2nd to Thursday 5th June**

As a contrast to the gardens of Wiltshire that so delighted us this year, your Holiday team have decided to visit gardens in this coastal area of considerable scenic variety, featuring famous star gardens, small hidden gems and seeing something of The New Forest National Park. Come and join us.

Our visits will include:-

## RHS Wisley



World class garden with new borders designed by Piet Oudolf and other great attractions.

## Abbotsbury Subtropical Garden

One of the UK's foremost collections of Mediterranean plants and flowers in formal and informal settings. Great view over Chesil Beach to the Jurassic coast for the mobile.

## Mapperton



A Grade II\* garden in a combe overlooked by a grand house. Includes light lunch. Optional guided house tour Choose when booking to ensure place on appropriately timed tour (£6).

## Exbury

The de Rothschild's unrivalled rhododendron collection in their great park by the Beaulieu River.

## Bucklers Hard

Photogenic and historic site of an 18c shipyard which built ships for Nelson's navy from New Forest oak trees. Entry to the small museum and a boat trip on the Beaulieu River to see and hear more about this National Park and its natural delights are both included.

## Compton Acres

A small but multi-faceted garden jewel amid the mansions of Canford Cliffs, Poole.

Once more we have asked Success Tours to make the arrangements. They have recommended the Marsham Court Hotel high on the cliffs of Bournemouth with an open-air swimming pool and grand views over the pier and towards the Isle of Purbeck. We will travel with Paul Winson Coaches as usual, with departure and return at Glebe Road.

This tour, with three nights dinner, bed and breakfast, a light lunch, all travel and fees for visits (including gratuities for the tour manager and driver) is good value at £567 per person, with a supplement of £75 for single occupancy of a room. Some rooms are available with a sea view (+ £90 per room) and balcony too. (+ £120 per room).

Booking will again be on-line. To read the full illustrated brochure, including more information on each of the gardens, accessibility, detailed costs etc, go now to: [www.successtours.com](http://www.successtours.com) home page, click on "Your unique code" and enter LBG0625. From Wednesday 27 November the same route will take you to the "Book now" button which will lead you through the booking process steps.

Because demand is usually so high, we limit booking on these holidays to paid-up members of The Friends of the Botanic Garden. The booking process will ask you to confirm that you are a member. If you aren't, why not join now?

If you are not confident about using the technology, and do not have a friend or family member who can help, then ring Tim & Catherine Watt on 0116 270 6042 and they will arrange for someone from Success Tours to call you and take you through the process.

Places will be allocated in the order in which bookings are received by Success Tours, and once each room type is sold out they will maintain a first come, first served waiting list.

Do come and join us for what promises to be another interesting and enjoyable holiday.

**The Holiday Team (Dianne Bang, Barbara Spence, Sally Towers, Tim & Catherine Watt).**

# Friends of the Botanic Garden

## Off-street parking available for Friends

Where you are likely to find a parking space on busy event days

Please note that

Beaumont parking is reserved as mobility spaces or for load-carrying visitors

### Walking time to Beaumont from:

Beaumont Car Park - 3 min

Lasdun - 2 min

Rocklands House - 4 min

Southmeade - 2 min

The Coppice - 4 min

Spinneys - 8 min

(enter front left of John Foster Hall)

### Walking time to Knoll Gate from:

Lasdun - 6 min

Southmeade - 8 min

Spinneys, Manor Road - 15 min



**Nos** Parking spaces available

**B** Walking time to Beaumont

**K** Walking time to Knoll Gate





## Friends' AGM advance notice

The Annual General Meeting of the Friends of the Garden will be held on 13 March 2025. .

### Venue and time:

Beaumont House, 7 p.m.

### Agenda:

1. Apologies for absence
2. Minutes of previous AGM (14 March 2024)
3. Chair's annual report
4. Treasurer's report
5. Proposal re subscription rates
6. Membership Secretary's report
7. Election of Committee for 2025/2026  
We welcome nominations: please send them to Margaret Neill, [fulbgsecretary@gmail.com](mailto:fulbgsecretary@gmail.com) by 14 February 2025.
8. Any other Business

### The AGM will be followed by a talk by Dr Tom Robinson

Head of the College of Life Sciences and Chair of the Botanic Garden Board, who will talk about the Future of the Botanic Garden

Light refreshments will be served at the conclusion of the meeting.

## Crocus Sundays



### Crocus Sundays are 16 and 23 February Botanic Garden 10am-4 pm

Once again we will be encouraging Friends and guests to come and admire the crocus displays as well as the other early-flowering plants in the garden --including the often-overlooked hellebores in the wooded area just before you get to the pond. Voluntary donations will be collected at the gate in support of this year's partner charity. The Friends of the Garden will be providing light refreshments in Beaumont House.

## Future Talks

18.11.2024 Morning Talk 10.30 am  
Economic and Ecological ideas for the garden

28.11.2024 -Evening Talk 7 pm  
Dr Moya Burns  
Citizen Science for Research Well-being and Education

6.2.2025 Evening Talk- 7 pm  
Paul Cooper - Gardening Behind Wires  
Friends only

All talks in Beaumont

## An invitation to join the committee

We are looking for new Friends to join our Friends' Committee to help plan and deliver our expanding events programme. For example, we would like to find someone willing to work alongside Hugh Robertson Smith, our Trips Organiser, to help with the management of our applications and bookings for Friends and guests. Anne Ratcliffe who has organised the event volunteers for many years has been trying to retire for some time, and says 'she really means it' this year, and so we need someone who is willing to recruit and support volunteers to support our events. There are other positions vacant, for example, our publicity post, but we are happy to share expertise and responsibilities as long as we have a few more people keen to help us achieve our objectives. There are many ways to help, and if you are keen to help keep the Friends of the Botanic Garden as a thriving and forward-facing organisation, please contact Mary Campbell ([mary.campbell703@gmail.com](mailto:mary.campbell703@gmail.com)) for further details.