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# NEWSLETTER – WINTER 2024

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## **Editorial**

Welcome and a very Happy New Year to you! 2023 was such a wet year, especially November and December. I'm hoping for some dry weather this month as my list of winter jobs needs to be tackled fairly soon!

In this edition of the Newsletter we have reports on our October Study Day and AGM. The meeting was very well attended and it was wonderful to see so many of you. Both speakers were very enjoyable and the feedback we have had was really positive, which is always a relief.

Our next Study Day is on Friday, 23rd February and we have two very interesting speakers. Emily Chandler will tell us about the Winter Garden at Dunham Massey and Ken Black will talk to us about clematis – see below for more details. As a follow-on from the Study Day, we have arranged for a garden visit to Dunham Massey to see the Winter Garden for ourselves. Details will follow but the date is 6<sup>th</sup> March – make a note in your diaries.

We are currently working on plans for our summer visits – thank you to all of you who have made suggestions so far. If you have any other ideas, **please let me know**. Details for the visits will be published in our Spring Newsletter in late April but we are always looking for ideas of unusual places to go.

This month we have included a section where you are able to tell us about the many other gardening groups that members attend. If you are a member of a gardening club/association/group, why not send us a few details about it and we will include it in a future newsletter.

We would be keen to have newsletter articles from our members – perhaps about your own garden or your favourite plants or places you have visited. Why not consider writing a few paragraphs and sending them to us so that we can include them in future editions. Please give this some thought – we'd love to hear from you.

Best Wishes to you all

Debbie Holden (Chairman)

**STUDY DAY PROGRAMME**  
**Friday 23rd February 2024 at Reaseheath College**

We will be holding our next study day at Reaseheath College on 23<sup>rd</sup> February. We will be in the usual lecture theatre adjacent to the restaurant. Hopefully the usual Reaseheath IT issues won't be too much of a challenge this time round and we hope to see you then!

We are planning to have a plant sale, so if any of your plants and cuttings have survived the low temperatures/excessive rain this winter, please bring them along – we would really appreciate it.

The programme for the day is:

From 10:00	Sign in
10:15	Coffee available in Restaurant
10:45	Welcome and introduction followed by Lecture: <b>“The Winter Garden at Dunham Massey”</b> by <b>Emily Chandler</b>
11:45	THEA Plant Sale
12:00	Break for lunch
13:00	Raffle Prize Draw
13:15	Lecture: <b>“Clematis for Year-round Colour in your Garden”</b> by <b>Ken Black</b>
14:30	Close

**More about our Speakers:**

**Emily Chandler**



Emily is the Head Gardener at Dunham Massey and has been there for nearly ten years. She trained at Ness Botanic Gardens and Birmingham Botanic Gardens.

She will tell us about the Winter Garden at Dunham Massey – a garden designed to provide continuous interest throughout autumn, winter and in to spring, using foliage, stems and bulbs.

## Ken Black



Ken has a real passion for clematis and takes every opportunity to persuade more people to grow them and to grow more of them.

He has appeared on national TV; he is membership secretary of the British Clematis Society and is the creator of prize-winning stands at RHS shows. Ken also presents his own YouTube series.

Ken gives us some down to earth advice and a practical demonstration on how to get the most from these versatile climbers. It is possible for clematis to provide colour and interest in your garden all year round.

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### Reports from the October Study Day and AGM

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#### **“Making the most of your Garden” by Christine Walkden**



Christine did not use slides, but her talk was interesting and informative, and often interactive. She started by saying that making the most of your garden requires thought and attention to detail. Often, we don't get the best from our plants, putting up with mediocre results.

Each plant is a life – a theme she returned to several times.

Foliage is important, and the most successful gardens have structure, repetition and so on, not just impulse purchases. Thinking about the gardens we enjoy visiting most can provide lessons for our own gardens.

She then moved on to talking about seeds. A seed packet is a packet of hope. Each seed is a life, and seeds deteriorate as time goes by. How best to store them? They are alive and respiring, so slowing down respiration prolongs viability. Ideally keep in the fridge in airtight containers, so they are cool, dark and dry. Moisture reduces viability drastically.

Christine then emphasised the importance of reading seed packets and following the instructions, especially about sowing conditions, whether to cover etc. We are the custodians of these little lives, and must think about the conditions they need, such as temperature and moisture. We don't need to sow the whole packet, only what we need. Successional sowing and intercropping are useful techniques.

Important information on the packet also includes the cost and count (number of seeds). There will also be a barcode or batch number. If the seed fails, you can contact the seed company and they can trace the batch. Vegetable seeds are covered by legislation concerning germination rates. Flower seeds are not, so seedsmen are not obliged to test the germination rates.

There are only a handful of seed growers, who supply the various seed companies. These different companies charge widely different prices for the same seeds. Christine mentioned D.T. Brown and Kings Seeds, both cheaper than other firms.

The preparation of a seed bed is vitally important. If sowing in pots or trays, always use fresh compost of a type suitable for seed sowing i.e. with particle size suited to seed size, and appropriate fertiliser content, which can affect conductivity and osmosis action.

There should be information on the compost bags about how long the fertiliser included will last. Generally, for new types of peat-free compost, it's about 4 weeks. For peat-based, 6-8 weeks. Loam-based (John Innes type) 10-12 weeks. After these intervals, you need to feed the plants or pot them on.

The plant's place of origin also affects the conditions it needs.

The depth of covering is important. When a temperature range is quoted, this is the temperature of the sowing medium, not the air.

Water content is vital, so it is essential to water carefully. Watering from above washes the nutrients out. Do not allow plants to dry out, especially cuttings.

Before pricking out or potting on, water the day before to protect the root hairs. Use a finger to check the moisture content before starting. Don't be rough!

Pot on in stages, avoiding over-potting which can "drown" plants. Also, use feed appropriate for the age and size of plants (as you would with children.) The colour of the leaves etc will indicate which nutrients the plant may be short of.

When planting out or thinning in situ, follow the recommended distances apart as per seed packet. The space between plants in rows is more important than the space between rows. The same applies to weeding – keep the rows weed-free.

Some plants may need specific fertilisers at specific stages of growth. Always read the labels for the N, P and K contents. We could test the effects by feeding some plants in a batch and not others to see if it makes a difference.

Take care of your soil; don't squeeze it to death. Compacted soil has little air content, A good soil should retain moisture, have the right pore space and particle size (hence air content), contain the right nutrients and be suitable for the particular plants grown.

Feed the soil rather than the plants. Use as much organic matter as you can – compost, leaf mould etc. These can be made for free – collect leaves from the street, compost kitchen and garden waste. British soils are quite fertile. If you add plenty of organic matter, you should not need artificial fertilisers.

Moving on to pruning, be sure it's the right time. Is it necessary? Understand the plant's flowering pattern and the significance of new growth versus old wood.

It can be useful to talk to neighbours and share issues and knowledge of local conditions.

F1 hybrids are designed to produce uniform plants, to be harvested at one time. This can be useful if the breeding confers resistance to pests and diseases, but otherwise is not necessary for domestic gardeners. Open pollination gives more variability and a staggered maturity.

Christine summarised by saying, "Look after your plants as you would look after yourself."

Many questions and answers followed:

- Christine's famous bulb borders? She feeds with home-made compost, plants bulbs in layers, and does not need to replace most.
- She recommends B&Q tomato fertiliser for a high-potash feed. It's equivalent to the market leader, but much cheaper.
- Christine has not used a "hot composter". She makes a heap and turns it often, using a good mix of ingredients, mixing "Browns" (carbon-rich, woody) and "Greens" (nitrogen-rich, fresh leafy waste). One audience member swears by her hot composter!

- Christine uses home-made compost in the bottom of planting holes. Having a light soil, she also finds finely-chopped natural sponges good in the bottom of planting holes to conserve water. She also uses several layers of newspaper, or old cotton pillowcases etc, to line clay pots which can lose moisture too quickly.
- She grows species tulips and doesn't need to replant every year. As a general rule, we need to plant bulbs deeper than we often do. Growth is initiated every year by moisture in the soil.
- Christine doesn't use perlite for seed sowing. She uses vermiculite, grit or compost to cover seeds when appropriate.
- More advice about watering: We must saturate the whole root ball. For plants in containers or pots, it's best to water 3 times to ensure the growing medium is moistened thoroughly. The new peat-free composts can be problematic. When trying to soak a seed tray of compost before sowing, it can take 4 hours soaking to get wet through.

Christine finished with some remarks about the history and future of potting composts. Peat revolutionised the industry, but now we must protect and restore the peat bog habitats but new ingredients must be environmentally-friendly.

***Report by Hilary Robinson***

**“Breathing New Life into Old Walls – restoring the old walled kitchen garden at Haigh Hall” by Sylvia Travers**



Dr Sylvia Travers gave us a fascinating talk about the history of Haigh Hall in Wigan and the current restoration project. Her wide-ranging lecture and Q&A also covered issues like horticultural apprenticeships and ‘seed sovereignty’ politics.

After a brief description of her career in horticulture, she went on to describe the history of Haigh Hall and its estate. In the possession of the Lindsay family since the 12th century the house and gardens went through a number of transformations, with the house and formal gardens in 18th century engravings being replaced by the current building in the middle of the 19th century which boasted substantial woodlands (partly to hide the collieries which were the source of the families wealth as well as to provide a landscape more in keeping with the styles of the period) as well as two walled kitchen gardens with greenhouses and accommodation for the gardeners. The academic interests of the Lyndsey's were not only reflected in the artworks contained in the house but also an enormous library which occupied a whole floor of the Hall and provided work for 9 librarians!

After the Hall stopped being used as a hospital during World War Two, the nationalisation of the coal industry in 1947 meant that the family could no longer maintain it, so they gave the estate to Wigan Borough Council in 1949. The Council used the Hall and its land to provide a range of leisure facilities (which included a zoo) to the people of Wigan and to grow its own floral displays. However, the constrained council budgets from the 1970's on, has meant that many parts of the Hall and its estate have become run down and neglected. The woodland for example has problems



with Japanese Knotweed, Ash Dieback and Phytophthora whilst all the old glass houses have either disappeared or are dilapidated.

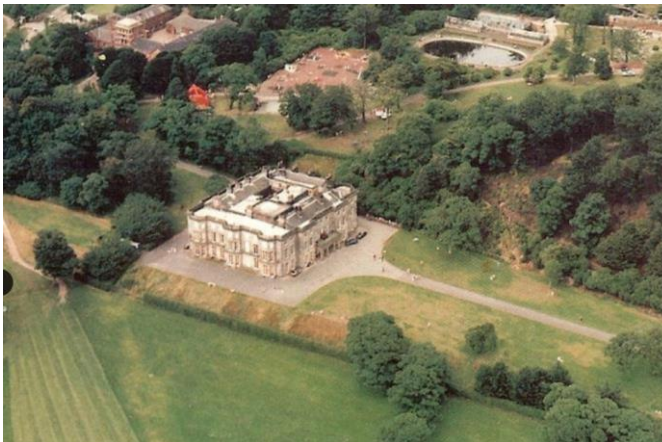
In 2018 the Council took the opportunity to put in a bid for £40m of Lottery Heritage funding to restore the Hall and its outbuildings. This was in part to provide a gallery for the work of the famous Wigan artist Theodore Major which has been given to the Council by his daughter.



*The imposing frontage of Haigh Hall*

But it is also an opportunity to provide educational and other cultural opportunities to the local community.

As part of this, a refurbishment of the walled cottage garden together with the wider estate landscape is proposed which Sylvia is heading up. The intention is to grow crops for a restaurant and café on the site and to build a new greenhouse/event space which will try and combine modern materials (like photovoltaic glass and a laminated wood structure) with a Victorian aesthetic in keeping with the walled garden site.



Haigh Hall and part of the estate from above



Part of the walled garden – the walls have been repaired but there is still a lot to do



Old gardeners' cottages to be renovated



Old picture of the greenhouses which were behind the cottages

Although work has started on the restoration of the main hall plans are still at an early stage and funding still has to be found for the work needed on the grounds. Sylvia plans to start recruiting volunteers for site clearance in January. She also hopes to recruit a woodland manager to start undertaking a condition and diversity survey of the estate woodland. The timeline for the completion of the main parts of the project is 2027, although this will partly depend on funding.

A major element of Sylvia's plan is to provide apprenticeships using a syllabus she is developing with Wigan College on regenerative horticultural food production combining 5 subject areas:

1. Craft and history
2. Skill and techniques
3. Plant and soil science
4. Ecology and biodiversity
5. Politics and social context for horticulture

Sylvia then went onto talk about how horticultural food production is changing with the introduction of more intermixing of crops and spaces with techniques like alley cropping (mixed crops between rows of fruit trees), forest gardening with its 7 layers of productivity. She also talked about the need to promote good soil health using ramial wood chippings (un-composted woodchip made from smaller diameter younger tree branches) and green manures to maintain soil coverage and water retention. She also mentioned the need to increase efficiency in small holder settings by using new types of horticultural equipment (e.g. Jang seeder machine to speed up and make sowing more precise).

Lastly, she touched on the issue of how politics and the social context did impact on horticulture. She discussed the importance of local seed collection, to ensure that not everything was in the hands of the 5 globally dominant seed companies. She made the point that home grown seed was likely to be the best adapted to the conditions in your garden – particularly if the lack of variety consistency likely from free pollinated seed is not an issue.

The breadth and interesting subject matter of the talk was evidenced by the large number of questions from the audience fielded by Dr Sylvia Travers at the end.

See the web site <https://www.haighwoodlandpark.co.uk/index.aspx> to find out more about Haigh Hall.

*Report by Paul Brickwood*

## **THEA 45<sup>th</sup> AGM Report**

The minutes of the 44<sup>th</sup> AGM were accepted by the members attending the meeting.

The chairman's report (read by Debbie Holden) described the three successful and well-attended study days and three popular garden visits that we had in the preceding 12 months.

Paul Brickwood, our treasurer, gave a report on the THEA Annual Financial Statement.

Since the last AGM, Ann Pinnington and Alex Radley have volunteered to join the committee, for which we are very grateful. All other committee members have agreed to stay in their current roles for the next twelve months. The AGM finished with another plea to members to assist on the committee to help organise the study days and outings.

Minutes of the AGM are available – please email [horticultural.enthusiasts@gmail.com](mailto:horticultural.enthusiasts@gmail.com) if you would like a copy now. Otherwise, they will be emailed out to all members a month before our 46th AGM which will be held on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2024.

*Report by Debbie Holden*

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### **Dates for your Diary**

- Trip to Dunham Massey – Wednesday, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2024 – following on from Emily Chandler's talk we will have a tour of the Winter Garden. More details will be published a bit nearer the time.
- Autumn Study Day – Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2024

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### **Garden Clubs & Societies**

A few weeks ago, we asked you to let us know about any local gardening clubs or societies you are a member of, which might be of interest to our other members. Most of us need a bit more of a "gardening fix" than THEA alone can satisfy!!

Here are the replies we've had – **if you would like to add your club or society to a future edition, then please send us the details** at [horticultural.enthusiasts@gmail.com](mailto:horticultural.enthusiasts@gmail.com). Thank you.

#### **Alsager Gardens Association**

Our main purpose/activity is to manage the allotments in Alsager on behalf of the Town Council.

We also organise the annual show at the start of September, which includes classes for fruit, flowers, vegetables, handicrafts, cakes, jam, etc, children's classes and photography. We also run a trading hut which is open on Sunday mornings from Spring to Autumn.



We don't have meetings with speakers, or trips. The committee meets monthly.

Website is at <https://www.alsagergardensassociation.org.uk/>

Annual subs are £4 - most of this goes to the National Allotment Society who provide insurance cover etc and an interesting quarterly magazine.

### **Cottage Garden Society**

Cottage Garden Society meets at 7.30 pm on the 4th Thursday of the month at Sandbach Methodist Church Hall, Wesley Avenue, Sandbach, CW11 1DG. Our next meeting is 25th January with a talk on the gardens of Brittany and Normandy by Jeff Bate.

We also organise summer trips to various gardens and create a show stand for RHS Tatton Park Flower Show, which featured on TV one year!

We have a website, [www.thecgs.org.uk](http://www.thecgs.org.uk) and our national Chairman is Sue Clarke (a THEA member).

### **Kingsley Garden Club**

Based in Kingsley, near Frodsham, the club meets on the second Monday of the month from September to November and from February to May. Each month we have a guest speaker or demonstration followed by tea/coffee and biscuits.

New members and guests are always welcome – membership costs £12 a year and guests cost £4.

We meet in Kingsley Community Centre, Smithy Lane, Kingsley, WA6 8ED.

See <https://www.kingsleyvillage.co.uk/index.php/clubs/gardening-club> or email [KingsleyGardening@gmail.com](mailto:KingsleyGardening@gmail.com) for more details.

### **Nantwich Garden Guild**

The club meets in the Parish Hall, Nantwich on the 2nd Tuesday of the month between October and April. Refreshments are served from 7.00pm and at 7.30pm a talk commences until 9.00pm.

Between April and September, afternoon, evening and day visits to gardens are organised.

Subscriptions cost £12. A programme is issued to each member and the meetings are advertised every month in the Nantwich Link magazine. Further details, Mrs. Janet Platt on 01270 665845

### **Tattenhall Gardening Society**

TGS has an active speaker programme, usually on the second Wednesday of the month from October to April, usually in person and occasionally by Zoom. Yearly membership is £14 for a single person and £20 for a couple.

We also arrange visits to gardens normally not open to the public, hold a large Plant Sale in May and organise the Village Show in September.

Member discounts are available at local nurseries and Dobies Seeds. More details from [tattenhallgdnso@gmail.com](mailto:tattenhallgdnso@gmail.com) or see <https://tattenhallgardensociety.co.uk/>.

#### **Upton by Chester Horticultural Society, Chester**

Friendly gardening club, meeting the first Wednesday of the month, February to June and September to November, with talks from guest speakers, three shows a year with lovely displays of flowers and vegetables, visits to gardens and an annual plant sale.

New members and visitors welcome (free entry for members, membership £15/year, visitors £3 entry). Meetings held at Upton Village Hall, Chester CH2 1HX.

See <https://www.uptonhorticulturalsociety.co.uk>