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NEWSLETTER – Winter 2025

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Editorial

Welcome and a very Happy New Year to you! I hope you all had a lovely Christmas although it seems like quite a distant memory already.

After all the rain we had in 2024, 2025 started off extremely wet – almost an inch of rain in one day. Then there was snow . . . it would be very tempting to hibernate until March, I think!

Anyway, welcome to our Winter Newsletter – we hope this will bring a bit of cheer to January. In this edition we have reports on our November 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, 21st February and we have two very interesting speakers. Matthew Wilson is a garden designer and regular panellist on BBC Radio 4s Gardeners' Question Time and will be talking about Dynamic Planting. Rosie Irving, a TV producer of horticultural programmes, will be talking about Great British Gardens.

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, especially specialist nurseries.

We would be keen to have newsletter articles from our members – perhaps about your own garden or your favourite plants or your favourite British gardens. 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 21st February 2025 at Reaseheath College

Here is the programme for our next Study Day on Friday, 21st February. We will be back in the usual lecture theatre (now refurbished and renamed to the **FE Lecture Theatre**) at Reaseheath, next to the restaurant, which is good news.

Please assemble there from 10:00 a.m. onwards to sign in. **Coffee** can be purchased in the Restaurant before the start of the meeting. **Lunch** will be available in the Restaurant from 12.00 and we are hopeful that there will be fish and chips!

We are planning to hold a plant sale and if you have been busy propagating over the summer, then please bring samples of your efforts along. Plants sales and our raffles make a big contribution to THEA funds and enable us to keep our membership fees down. We really appreciate your support with this - thank you. 😊

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: “Great British Gardens - what makes them great - will they withstand the test of time?” by Rosie Irving
11:45	THEA Plant Sale
12:00	Break for lunch
13:00	Raffle Prize Draw
13:15	Lecture: “Dynamic Planting: Combining Plants, Materials and Place” by Matthew Wilson
14:30	Close

More about our Speakers:

Rosie Irving



Rosie trained in Garden & Planting Design at Capel Manor College and, after gaining her degree in horticulture, taught Plants & Planting Design at Kingston Maurward College, Dorset. She is an organic gardener with a deep love of nature. Her other great love is putting together great colour combinations in the garden and she has a delightful approach to the subject.

For the past 15 years Rosie has worked in the TV industry on numerous gardening programmes and, as a Horticultural Producer, has gained a reputation as the ‘go to’ person for consultancy within the industry. In 2021 Rosie co-funded TOD Garden Tours with her partner, world rose expert, Michael Marriott, where together they guide people around a selection of carefully chosen, beautiful gardens.

In keeping with that, Rosie will be talking about ‘Great British Gardens - what makes them great - will they withstand the test of time?’.

Matthew Wilson



Matthew Wilson is well-respected garden designer, writer, broadcaster and lecturer. He runs his own garden and landscape design practice - Matthew Wilson Gardens (MWG) – working on a wealth of projects ranging from domestic garden schemes to master planning for commercial, heritage and hospitality clients. He designed award-winning gardens at the prestigious Chelsea Flower Show, including Welcome To Yorkshire’s 2016 garden ‘God’s Own Country’, which won the coveted People’s Choice Award.

When not designing gardens, Matthew writes extensively in the media. He has been a panellist on Radio 4’s Gardeners Question Time since 2009 and is a regular contributor to the Financial Times.

Matthew will be talking to us about “Dynamic Planting: Combining Plants, Materials and Place”, which examines how plants can be used to maximum effect whatever the shape or size of the garden. Using examples of gardens designed by Matthew over the last 20 years, this talk considers the use of plants in relation to materials, place and vernacular, the architecture of plants and the importance of the garden in the wider environment.

For more information about Matthew, please see <https://www.matthewwilsongardens.com/>

Reports from the November Study Day and AGM

“A Short History of Flowers; The stories that shaped our gardens” by Advolly Richmond



Advolly Richmond entertained us with a look at the stories behind some familiar garden plants: how they came to be in circulation and the background to the names by which we know them. As a past student at Reaseheath,

Advolly began her talk by acknowledging her debt to her lecturer Harry Delaney. Without him, she said, she wouldn’t have followed the path she has. After Reaseheath, Advolly studied at Pershore College for six months and had started a course at Hestercombe when she heard that Bristol were closing their MA in Garden History. She managed to get onto the last intake of the course and has since focussed on historic gardens.

While a plant’s scientific name is important, Advolly said often the common name gives us an indication of use. She used the example of *Bergenia crassifolia* (crassifolia = thick leaves) – among its common names (elephants’ ears, pink squeak) is Siberian tea. In its native habitat of Siberia, it is used by the indigenous people to make a caffeine-free drink. As the leaves die, they go through a natural fermentation that removes caffeine.

Using 10 plants, Advolly illustrated how seemingly ordinary plants have a story embedded in cultural history. She wanted to know “How did they get here – what’s their story?” Many of the flowers Advolly featured in her talk were familiar to us all, and it was interesting to learn about their backgrounds.

***Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’**

The shrub was first recorded in 1910. Two sisters in Anna, Illinois, USA, noticed a hydrangea with unusually large flowers and took cuttings, which they gave away, and the plant became popular locally. Some time later a Dr Joseph McDaniel named it Annabelle after the town and the ‘belles’ who discovered it, and it became commercially available in the 1960s. The town of Anna now holds an annual Annabelle Festival.

***Eschscholzia californica* – Californian poppy**

Originating on the Pacific coast of America, *E. californica* was used by indigenous people as a mild sedative when boiled, and the pollen was used for cosmetic purposes.

In 1792 Archibald Menzies (the ship’s surgeon and naturalist on HMS Discovery) brought seeds back to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. The plant disappeared until 1816 when German poet and botanist Adelbert von Chamisso travelled to the Pacific coast and named the plant after his fellow passenger Johann Friedrich Eschscholtz. However, he missed out the ‘t’, therefore the name that was registered was misspelt.

E. californica also features in the coat of arms of Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex.

***Vinca minor* – Lesser periwinkle**

Marion Cran was a gardening radio broadcaster in the 1920s and 30s, when she came across a periwinkle growing under a hedge that was an unusual reddish wine colour. She transplanted a clump into her own garden in Benenden, Kent. The plant was first recorded in 1629 by botanist John Parkinson who described it as blue, but with some that were a reddish-purple colour. In Cran’s final broadcast in 1931 she shared the story of the red periwinkle and offered it to listeners with the stipulation that it must always be gifted but never sold. One day she came across a man growing it who told her his daughter had had it ‘off the wireless’.

***Crocasmia x crocosmiiflora* – Montbretia**

In the 1870s George Potts, Edinburgh, received a consignment of plants from South Africa, which included corms, and the plant was given the name *Crocasmia pottsii*. Victor Lemoine from Nancy, France, developed a new hybrid, a cross between *C. pottsii* and *C. aurea*, and he proposed the name *Montbretia crocosmaeflora*. The name *Montbretia* was to commemorate a French botanist and plant collector Coquebert de Monbret. Monbret was friends with A P de Candolle from Switzerland (who later coined the word ‘taxonomy’) and was assistant to the scientific team of Napoleon on his Egyptian invasion in 1798. However, Monbret succumbed to the plague in 1801 at the age of 20 and de Candolle named the variety after his friend. The name *Montbretia* has fallen out of favour but it recollects the French botanist.

***Papaver orientale* – Oriental poppy**

Advolly demonstrated that luck can also be a factor in plant discoveries. In 1903 nurseryman Amos Perry spotted a salmon-pink seedling among the typical red flowers, which he named *P. orientale* ‘Mrs Perry’ after his wife. He had set his heart to breeding a white one but without success. Then one of his customers complained that they had a white one in amongst the pinks and reds, which they said spoiled the display, and Perry took the plant away in exchange for a handful of *Montbretia* corms. This he named *P. orientale* ‘Perry’s White’.

***Romneya coulteri* – Matilija poppy**

The native people on the coast of California valued this poppy to treat skin conditions and the digestive system. According to legend, Chief Matilija’s daughter was in love with a handsome warrior who was killed in battle. She was inconsolable and laid herself on his body and died. The poppy is said to have grown on that

spot. Irish botanist Thomas Coulter explored California and brought back seeds of the plant. When he died, his colleague Professor William Harvey at Trinity College Dublin named it *Romneya coulteri*, after Coulter and his friend Romney Robinson.

***Euphorbia robbiae* – Mrs Robb’s bonnet**

Advolly noted how the Victorian era produced several intrepid, self-funding women plant hunters. One of these was botanist Mrs Mary Anne Robb. She was an early pioneer of photography and had a 180-acre garden in Hampshire. In 1891 Mrs Robb travelled to Greece for a friend’s wedding and visited Turkey. Her carriage passed a clump of *Euphorbia robbiae*. She had nowhere to store the plant so turfed out the wedding bonnet from her hatbox and put the plant in instead. Back home she shared the plant with friends, one of whom was E A Bowles and he named it ‘Mrs Robb’s bonnet’.

***Phlox drummondii* – Annual phlox**

In 1835 Scottish botanist Thomas Drummond travelled to America and discovered the annual phlox growing as a wild flower in Texas. Drummond was suffering with acute ill health but set off for Cuba, having sent the seeds back to W J Hooker, the first director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. As well as the seeds, Hooker received Drummond’s death certificate – Drummond had died in Cuba – and named the plant *Phlox drummondii* in the plant hunter’s memory. The plant took the horticultural world by storm. Seeds of the improved strain of *P. drummondii* were welcomed by Americans, little knowing that this new bedding plant was a descendent of their native Texan wildflower.

***Antirrhinum majus* – Snapdragon**

A typical cottage garden plant, snapdragon also the plant has a darker side as the dried seed capsules are said to resemble skulls and their ghoulish appearance have been likened to a sheep’s head. The plant was important in folklore as it was said to protect against being poisoned. Not only that but, during the Italian Renaissance, if you wore a snapdragon at the royal court, it was said to guarantee charisma.

Zinnia elegans

African American folk artist Clementine Hunter was inspired by zinnias. Hunter was born on a cotton plantation in Louisiana and picked cotton before becoming a servant at Melrose Plantation, a retreat for artists. While cleaning there, Hunter found discarded paint tubes and taught herself to paint. At the time, zinnias were undergoing an intensive breeding programme, which inspired her art. Hunter’s work was exhibited at the Delgado Museum (now New Orleans Museum), although, because of segregation laws, Hunter was not allowed entry! She died in 1988 aged 100 and her home state has named 1st October as Clementine Hunter Day.

Advolly concluded by saying that plants and gardens are full of stories. She hoped this talk would help us look at plants in a different light – and hopefully marvel at their journey into our little part of the world.

Report by Helen Gardiner

“Fabulous Fungi (and Malicious Moulds)” by John Scrace



This was a fascinating talk about a much-overlooked but very important lifeform. There are currently 150,000 known species which could be as little as 10% of what actually exist. Of those there are about 15,000 in the UK.

They have many functions and uses and John broke these down into a number of categories.

Saprophytic Fungi

Saprophytic fungi are a type of fungi that feed on dead and decaying organic matter. They break down complex organic materials into simpler forms, releasing essential nutrients back into the environment allowing new plants to grow. Without these, trees would never rot down and our attempts at

composting would fail.

Mycorrhizal Fungi

Mycorrhizal fungi generally have a mutually beneficial relationship with the roots of a plant. In many plants, mycorrhiza are fungi that grow inside the plant’s roots, or on the surfaces of the roots.

The fungus facilitates water and nutrient uptake (especially phosphorous) in the plant, and the plant provides food and nutrients created by photosynthesis to the fungus. Mycorrhizal fungi, being very tiny, can get into areas too small for roots to penetrate.

Research has shown that in woodland the mycorrhizal fungi enable the connection of trees providing a chemical signalling network, for example allowing trees to communicate the presence of caterpillars to its neighbours.

Edible Fungi

The most obvious examples of edible fungi are mushrooms; truffles are also a fungus often found by foraging with pigs and dogs and are highly prized.

Saccharomyces is a genus of fungi that includes many species of yeasts which have been exploited by man for years in the production of bread, beer and Marmite.

Fusarium venenatum is a microfungus with a high protein content. One of its strains is used commercially for the production of the single cell protein mycoprotein which is used in the production of Quorn; bound with egg or potato it is a staple of many vegetarian meals.

Medicinal Fungi

Antibiotics, for example, penicillin is obtained from the *Penicillium* mould and has been in medical use since the 1920s.

Other fungi can be used to provide statins, anti-rejection drugs, immunosuppressants and drugs to treat depression.

Spectacular and Amazing Fungi

Some fungi just look spectacular . . .



Clathrus ruber – the red cage or lattice fungus



Clathrus archeri – devil's fingers or octopus fungus



Xylaria polymorpha – dead man's fingers

Some fungi glow in the dark - *Panellus stipticus*, commonly known as the bitter oyster, is luminescent



The largest organism on earth is a fungus - *Armillaria ostoyae* – found in the soil of the forests in the Blue Mountains of Oregon covering 2,384 acres. It was confirmed as one organism by DNA testing and is estimated to be at least 2,400 years old.

Damaging Fungi

It's not all good news on the fungi front . . . many diseases are fungal.

Bananas – Panama disease is caused by a fungus called *Fusarium oxysporum* and it has destroyed the commercial viability of many banana varieties

Coffee – coffee rust, devastating foliar disease of coffee plants caused by the fungus *Hemileia vastatrix* resulting in reduced yields and eventual death of coffee plants.

Potatoes – potato blight is a fungus called *Phytophthora infestans* (as you might remember from your RHS course days). It affects potatoes and tomatoes and attacks the foliage and tubers causing rot.

Humans – there are several fungi that affect humans:

- Ringworm - is a fungal infection caused by fungi called dermatophytes, which live off tissues in your skin causing inflammation and itching
- Athlete's foot – infection of the skin on the foot caused by several different fungi
- Thrush – yeast infection caused by candida fungi
- Farmer's lung – lung infection from mould spores often from agricultural products
- Ergotism – St Anthony's Fire – can cause seizures, hallucinations and other symptoms and is a result of fungus-contaminated cereal crops

Report by Debbie Holden

THEA 46th AGM Report

The minutes of the 45th AGM were accepted by the members attending the meeting.

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

Debbie Holden (on behalf of Paul Brickwood, our treasurer), also gave a report on the THEA Annual Financial Statement.

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 if you would like a copy now. Otherwise, they will be emailed out to all members a month before our 47th AGM which will be held on 31st October 2025 (TBC).

Report by Debbie Holden

Dates for your Diary

Only one date at the moment:

- Autumn Study Day – Friday, 31st October 2025 (TBC)