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NEWSLETTER – Winter 2026

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Editorial

Welcome and a very Happy New Year to you! I hope you all had a lovely Christmas and the snow we had didn't cause you too many problems.

I'm sorry not to have seen you at the last study day, but as you may be aware, I've been having treatment for cancer and as such I had to avoid contact with people. I had hoped to be at our February meeting but, sadly, I have an appointment with my consultant that day - typical! I will miss you but I'm sure you will have a good day.

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 October Study Day and AGM.

Our next Study Day is on Friday, 20th February and we have two very interesting speakers. Chris Pilkington is the Head Gardener at Plas Cadnant – some of you will have met him if you went on our summer visit there. Timothy Walker is a botanist and lecturer at Oxford University.

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 20th February 2026 at Reaseheath College

Here is the programme for our next Study Day on Friday, 21st February. We will be in the usual 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: “A Gardener’s Story: a career in estate gardening.” by Chris Pilkington , Head Gardener at Plas Cadnant
11:45	THEA Plant Sale
12:00	Break for lunch
13:00	Raffle Prize Draw
13:15	Lecture: “How to be a 21st Century Gardener” by Timothy Walker
14:30	Close

More about our Speakers:

Chris Pilkington



Chris has been Head Gardener at the award winning Hidden Gardens at Plas Cadnant for the last eight years. Chris has had a varied career at some of the finest gardens the UK, including Ashridge House, Waddesdon Manor & Thenford House.

Besides telling us about Plas Cadnant, his talk will give an overview of the various gardens he has worked in and the lessons he has learned along the way.

Timothy Walker



Having graduated in Botany at University College, Oxford, Timothy trained at the Askham Bryan College, York; The Savill Garden, Windsor; and Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. In 1985, he was awarded a Master of Horticulture by the Royal Horticultural Society.

Timothy worked at Oxford Botanic Garden from January 1986 to July 2014, and was its Director from 2002 to 2014. Between 1992 and 2000, Oxford Botanic Garden won four gold medals at the Chelsea Flower Show London. In 2009 the Botanic Garden was one of seven Oxford collections to be awarded a Queen's Anniversary Prize for providing imaginative educational programmes for adults, students, children and the general public.

Timothy left Oxford Botanic Garden in August 2014 to take up the position of Senior College Lecturer in Plant Biology at Somerville College, Oxford, and now holds similar positions at Pembroke, Hertford and Worcester Colleges, Oxford.

Tim's talk has been stimulated in part by the changes that we are seeing in our weather and climate. Gardeners are perhaps more aware of these changes than other groups in society. This talk looks at the many ways that gardeners can reduce their impact on the world's natural resources and at the same time help those plants whose habitat is evolving faster than they can. It is about much more than global warming and using peat

Reports from the November Study Day and AGM

"Euphorbias - All You Need to Know" by Don Witton



Don became interested in euphorbias (commonly called spurges) due to his love of perennial plants and the euphorbias' lovely foliage, which is often enhanced by red stems and variegation. This has led him to having the national collection (along with Oxford Botanic Gardens) on his 800 sq. yard allotment near Sheffield.

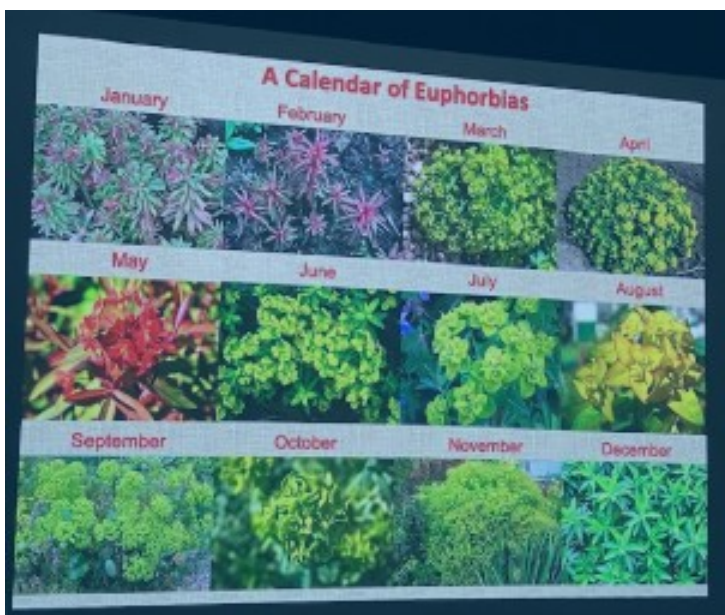
He started his talk by addressing the four common complaints about the genus that discourage their use in British gardens.

1. Limited flower colours – "just yellowy green". Don showed in his slides that this is far from the case across the genus. As well as the zingy lime green beloved by Don, there was a range of yellow through orange, amber and even red-toned flowers, often made more interesting with the contrasting darker-coloured nectaries in the centre of the flower bracts. He pointed out that the red Christmas Poinsettia was part of the euphorbia family. Since the 'petals' are leaf bracts this gives many euphorbias a very long flowering season.

2. Deadly sap. Don acknowledged that care did need to be taken with the milky sap which is very alkali and can irritate the skin – particularly tender areas – but he pointed out that wearing gloves when pruning or taking cuttings largely eliminates the risk. He said that the sap does mean that euphorbias have very little pest damage from insects or slugs.
3. They are a weedy plant. Although some varieties can be vigorous spreaders through explosive seed dispersal they can be easily controlled by weeding. Overly large varieties for your garden can be made more manageable by putting them in shadier spots.
4. They are not hardy in the UK. Don explained that although some varieties from warmer climates may need to be overwintered inside, most of euphorbias from temperate regions will come through all but the harshest winter outdoors, particularly if the soil is not too wet. His experience of growing them on his windy Yorkshire allotment proves that the adage ‘of not north of Birmingham’ no longer applies particularly with the impact of climate change.

Don explained that euphorbias are found in every continent apart from Antarctica – although those that come from the temperate areas of Asia, Europe and the Americas are more suited to the UK garden. Due to the plants’ very wide geographic spread, there is a wide variety of different forms of euphorbias.

Some come from very dry arid areas around the Mediterranean and Australasia. Some are succulents that look like cacti, e.g. *Euphorbia canariensis* from Tenerife or *E. glauca* from New Zealand, while others are low growing with small leaves e.g. *E. acanthothamus* from Crete. Given their origin they are not winter hardy in the UK.



Our gardens tend to have euphorbias that are small bushes with stems supporting a dome of flower bracts e.g. *E. characias* ‘Redwing’. In some varieties these stems are herbaceous, dying back in winter after their leaves have been shed in autumn. Others are evergreen, staying in leaf through the year e.g. *E. rigida* ‘Sardis’. There is a great deal of variety with regards to their shape and size.

Some e.g. *E. myrsinites* are suitable for small scree/rock garden, whilst others reaching 4ft can be placed at the back of the border e.g. *E. griffithii* ‘Dixter’ and *E. schillingii*.

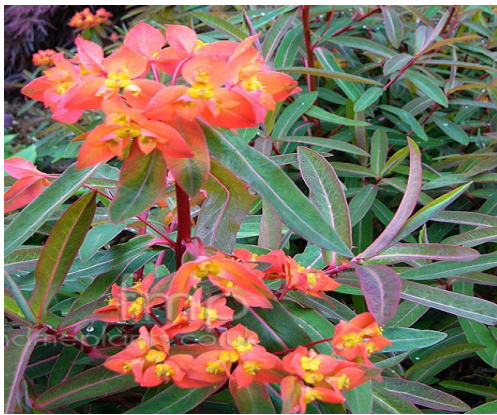
Some euphorbias have developed woody stems and can grow over 8 ft tall e.g. *E. mellifera* (honey spurge). This variety of foliage, stems and flowers means that it is possible to have euphorbias providing interest throughout the 12 months of the year.



Euphorbia. canariensis



Euphorbia rigida 'Sardis'



Euphorbia. griffithii 'Dixter'



Euphorbia characias 'Redwing'

Euphorbias are relatively easy to grow although with some exceptions e.g. *E. palustris* (marsh spurge), they like free-draining friable soil. The deciduous euphorbias can be cut down in October or November when next years buds should be peaking from the soil. The shrub and evergreen euphorbias are best pruned after flowering. They can be propagated from tip cuttings taken after flowering from new growth. Many deciduous euphorbias can also be successfully divided. However very few euphorbia varieties come true from seed given the tendency towards hybridisation.

Overall it was a fascinating talk which brought out the rich diversity of this genus of plants.

Report by Paul Brickwood

Unusual Urban Edibles by Nick Bailey



Nick Bailey began his talk by setting out his background as head gardener in Chelsea Physic Garden which had given him his interest in unusual edibles that can be grown in an urban setting. The Physic Garden shared many of the challenges of an urban garden. It can often be very hot and dry with the heat island effect of being in a city. Quite a lot of the garden had shade from neighbouring buildings and had a considerable level of air pollution from traffic. However, the positives from its location included the warmth, making frosts rare and good protection from the wind. As a result, the Physic Garden was able to grow the most northerly

unheated grapefruit tree in Europe.

Nick went onto talk about tips for the urban gardener, such as trying to match plants to the best spot within the garden e.g. cucurbits love the heat coming off walls, top fruit will tolerate wind-tunnel effects as they come from windy plains in Asia. He promoted the capture of rainwater and the use of hand-watering, as his experience with small pipe irrigation systems suggested they quickly silted up with calcium deposits if fed from mains water. The use of pots, hanging baskets, green-wall pouches and overhead wires all gave opportunities to multiply space and suitable microclimates within the confines of the urban garden. He did suggest that problems with peat free multi-purpose compost could be reduced by mixing half and half with garden soil.

Nick went on to talk about the need to diversify our plant food species. Of the 6,000 plants edible to humans only 20 are eaten. Of these many have very little genetic diversity. He used the example of bananas all being from the single Cavendish variety. Brassicas, despite their many forms and varieties, have all been bred from an original weedy plant growing on Italian limestone cliffs (hence the brassica tolerance for wind and alkaline conditions). This lack of genetic diversity makes these crops particularly susceptible to a single disease or pest. Currently there is concern that a bacterial disease ravaging Italian olive trees may be able to jump the species barrier and affect brassicas.

Nick went on to suggest that UK gardeners should move away from crops and varieties easily available in supermarkets and instead grow relatively expensive, short shelf life or unusual crops that cannot be easily purchased. One of these was microgreens which can be grown indoors all year round with the use of an LED grow light. He went on to describe a list of such plants that, from his personal experience, performed very well in terms of productivity and flavour and, in many cases, looked good as 'edimentals'. Also because of the unusualness they tended not to suffer from pests. These were as follows:

1. **Szechuan Pepper** – A lovely small tree (3.5m x 2m) that has fragrance and attractive edible pepper berries.

2. ***Tetragonia tetragonoides*** – Also known as New Zealand Spinach this plant can be used like spinach – so eaten raw or cooked – and has a high vitamin C content. It can be sown in full sun or dappled shade, producing a largish ground cover plant.
3. ***Oxalis tuberosa*** – Known as oca it produces small potato-like tubers in August to September which work well with lemony flavours. It has yellow daisy-like flowers and is pest free.
4. ***Acca sellowiana*** – A climber which can be grown up a wall or in a pot. It produces attractive edible red flowers over a long season followed by berry fruits which have a flavour that is a cross between pineapple and strawberry. It is a perennial which can withstand temperatures down to -5°C.
5. ***Fuchsia boliviana*** – A beautiful, elegant plant that produces long, red fuchsia-like flowers which turn into edible red-purple fruits. It can be grown in shade and will survive temperatures down to -4°C for short periods.



Acca sellowiana



Fuchsia boliviana

6. ***Acmella oleracea*** – A useful compact pot or ground-cover plant that produces flowers for 4-5 months. These are followed by unusual yellow-red berries which have a sour zingy lemon flavour which are great in salads or used as a condiment if dried and crushed.
7. ***Citrus trifoliata*** – This is a small tree or shrub citrus which can survive down to -20°C. Whilst the very seedy fruit is too bitter to be eaten raw it can be used very successfully in cooking.
8. ***Citrullus lanatus*** – The watermelon can be grown in a sunny warm spot such as up against a wall. It doesn't need a much nutrition but does require plenty of water.
9. ***Solanum sisymbriifolium*** – It produces red-yellow fruits which are seedy but have a great tomato-crossed-with-coriander flavour. The plants are spiny and Nick suggested that growing them through through plants made them more attractive.



Acemella oleracea



Fragaria vesca 'Yellow Wonder'

10. ***Fragaria vesca*** 'Yellow Wonder' – A wild cream-coloured strawberry that has a long season. Because of their colour birds don't eat them as they think they are not yet ripe. They have a slightly mild flavour and the plants will need to be renewed every 4-5 years.
11. ***Basella alba*** – Known as Malabar spinach, this has large edible leaves 2-4mm thick on ruby-red stems. It is a self-clinging tropical plant, so it is an annual which needs to be started in a greenhouse.

Nicks fascinating talk gave everyone encouragement to grow edibles from outside the normal.

Report by Paul Brickwood

THEA 47th AGM Report

The minutes of the 46th AGM were accepted by the members attending the meeting.

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

Paul Brickwood, our treasurer, 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 made 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 48th AGM which will be held on 30th October 2026 (TBC).

Report by Helen Gardiner

Dates for your Diary

Only one date at the moment:

- Autumn Study Day – Friday, 30th October 2026 (TBC)