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NEWSLETTER – Autumn 2026

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Editorial

Hello.

At long last here is our Autumn Newsletter. What a hot and dry summer we've had. I didn't like it and neither did most of our gardens – lawns like shredded wheat and crispy borders. It's too early to tell what plants will have been lost. We have an article in the Newsletter about which plants you have found to be successful this year so they might provide suggestions for replacements for any casualties.

In this edition of the Newsletter we have our programme for the Study day on 30th October. Our two speakers will be Lisette Davies and Nigel Hopes. We will also have our AGM, which we will keep brief. If you have any issues you would like to raise then please let us know. The AGM papers will be sent out shortly.

Also included in the Newsletter are reports on our garden visits this summer. The conditions might have been scorching but the gardens still looked good. A big thank you to all our members who joined us on our visits.

Rozy Barnes, one of our members, opened her lovely garden for charity this year and we are really pleased that she has written an article for the newsletter. A real inspiration and I have a case of garden envy now!

As ever we are looking for suggestions for future speakers and for gardens to visit, both fairly locally and further afield – if you have any suggestions for 2027, please email us at horticultural.enthusiasts@gmail.com.

Hoping to see lots of you at the Study Day.

Best Wishes to you all

Debbie Holden (Chairman)

STUDY DAY PROGRAMME
Friday, 30th October 2026 at Reaseheath College

Here is the programme for our next Study Day, which includes our Annual General Meeting (AGM). We will be in the usual lecture theatre, next to the restaurant. Please assemble there from 10:00 a.m. onwards to sign in. If you haven't yet paid your annual subscription, we will be happy for you to pay the £15 when you sign in.

Please make sure you are in the lecture theatre by 10:45 – once the speaker begins we will not allow people to enter the lecture theatre as this has proven very disruptive at previous study days and is unfair on the speaker. If you are late, please wait in the Restaurant until we reopen the doors after the speaker has finished.

Coffee can be purchased in the Restaurant before the start of the meeting and lunch will be available in the Restaurant from 12.00.

We are planning to have a plant sale, so please bring along any plants and cuttings that you can spare – we would really appreciate it.

Both the raffle and plant sales are **cash only**, so please bring plenty of cash with you. Proceeds from the raffle and the plant sale really helps us keep our association going, so we hope you will support us.

From 10:00	Sign in
10:15	Coffee available in Restaurant
10:45	Welcome and introduction followed by Lecture: “Bulbs: a Dutch heritage” by Lisette Davies
11:45	THEA Plant Sale
12:00	Lunch available in Restaurant Plant Sale – continued
13:00	Raffle Prize Draw
13.15	48th Annual General Meeting
13:30	Lecture: “Autumn in the Garden” by Nigel Hopes

More about our Speakers:

Lisette Davies



With a wealth of experience in horticulture – including serving as the first female Head Gardener of the Grade II* listed gardens at Plas Newydd in Llangollen – Lisette Davies brings a deep passion for garden history to every talk. Combining academic insight (with a Master's in English Language and Culture) and practical expertise supported by RHS qualifications, she is known for delivering engaging, accessible talks in venues ranging from art galleries to community spaces.

In this fascinating talk, she explores the rich history of bulbs, from their ancient origins to their lasting cultural significance, with a special focus on Dutch traditions shaped by her upbringing in the famed “bollenstreek.”

Discover how tulips and other bulbs have influenced art, economy, and national identity in the Netherlands in a talk that is as informative as it is entertaining.

Nigel Hopes



Nigel's passion for plants started as a boy, when he was inspired by a family friend and the promise of free plants thanks to some fuchsia cuttings! Since then he was hooked! He did his work experience at Ashwood Nurseries, and then went on to study Horticulture at Rodbaston College to National Diploma.

From there he became a student at Birmingham Botanical Gardens and Glasshouses, where he later took on the role of Rock and Alpine Supervisor, and ultimately Senior Outdoor Supervisor over 10yrs.

He built up a huge knowledge in that time, enriching his work with placements at the RHS Garden Wisley, a plant hunting trip to South Africa, funded by the AGS and Merlin Trust, and building a National Plant Collection of Cyclamen at the Botanical Gardens.

He left in June 2018 to take on a new challenge as Head Gardener for John Massey in his Private Garden at Ashwood Nurseries. Nigel can often be seen on open days, or giving guided tours, sharing his knowledge in Master Classes and explaining the new projects and developments that are currently underway.

Nigel will talk to us about “Autumn in the Garden” – the onset of Autumn doesn't mean your garden is going to sleep. Nigel will talk about the range of plants you can use to continue interest garden right through till winter. From trees to bulbs there is something to light a fire in any size garden!

Memories of our Summer Visits 2026

This year we planned three visits, though the coach trip to the Malvern Spring Show had to be cancelled as we didn't get enough people to sign up. The other visits were well attended. Our first visit was to Dibley's Nurseries and the Laundry Garden and our second visit was to Powis Castle.

Dibley's Nurseries and The Laundry Garden – Tuesday, 23rd June, 2026

In late June, we visited Dibley's Nurseries in Llanelidan, near Ruthin, and The Laundry Garden, Llanrhaeadr, near Denbigh, on what was one of the hottest days of a very hot summer.

Dibley's Nurseries

At Dibleys we were met by Paul Dibley, who gave us an introduction to the nursery before taking us on a tour of the greenhouses. The nursery was started by Paul's father, Rex Dibley, in 1976, and is now run by Paul with his sister and brother, Lynne and Gareth. They exhibit their famous streptocarpus collection at all the shows, including the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, and this year won their 36th Chelsea Gold Medal.

Paul started the tour with a demonstration of streptocarpus propagation. Their method is to remove the midrib of the leaf and insert the two halves in compost, which gives them a row of plants. He said an alternative would be to just insert a leaf into the compost. Dibleys don't use rooting powder for streptocarpus – Paul says that although plants root quicker, it delays the production of leaves. They use a peat-free compost because, although this is not a government requirement, it needs to be peat-free to meet the RHS show requirements if nurseries are to exhibit at RHS shows. To incorporate air into the compost, they use coir in the mix, to which they add vermiculite or perlite.

	
Paul Dibley demonstrates Streptocarpus propagation.	Nematanthus: one of the more unusual plants grown by Dibleys.

The nursery has about an acre of greenhouses containing many unusual flowering and foliage plants, including the main Streptocarpus greenhouse, which holds about 30,000 plants. The nursery also grows varieties of begonias, plectranthus (which belongs to the mint family), tradescantia and nematanthus. They also have 40 varieties of ivy. These originally came from nearby National Trust property Erddig Hall, which holds the national collection of ivies.



The greenhouses hold 30,000 plants at the height of production.

The greenhouses' vents and irrigation drip lines are computer controlled and the nursery uses foil in the roof for heat retention. The plants are placed on capillary matting from which they draw up the water. After everything is hydrated, feed is run through the system. The nursery uses biological control such as parasitic wasps as a natural way to control pests like greenfly.



Streptocarpus 'Sirius' – shortlisted for the RHS Chelsea Plant of the Year.



The very successful Streptocarpus 'Falling Stars'.

In the streptocarpus greenhouse Paul showed us their new variety *Streptocarpus* 'Sirius', which was shortlisted for RHS Chelsea Plant of the Year at this year's Chelsea Flower Show. We also saw Dibleys' well-known pale blue *Streptocarpus* 'Falling Stars', a natural sport discovered in the 1980s that is very floriferous. It has been very popular and most of the streptocarpus that the nursery has bred since then have this variety in their ancestry.

The Laundry Garden

From Dibleys we travelled to Llanrhaeadr to see The Laundry Garden, so called because the house used to be the laundry for the adjacent Llanrhaeadr Hall (which is now a nursing home). Since they started work on the garden in 2009, Jenny and Tom Williams have created a stunning garden in the old walled garden, which once belonged to the hall, as well as the beds and borders nearer the house.

The 250-year-old walled kitchen garden covers an acre, and has been reworked to include herbaceous borders, specimen trees, a cutting garden, large central lawn, greenhouse, orchard, and wildflower area. The planting is predominately cottage-garden style, including roses, ceanothus, cotinus, nepeta, centranthus, alchemilla, lychnis and euphorbia.

Jenny and Tom took us on a tour of the garden, very considerably stopping in shady areas to tell us about the different features. A particularly lovely shady area was under six plane trees, which have been trained to form a canopy over a seating area.



The group of trained plane trees provided welcome canopy of shade.



The Mediterranean section of the walled garden with drought-resistant planting.

The couple have used a lot of reclaimed material in the garden, for example, the four stone pillars in the west border in the walled garden. Tom told us that these were once part of the porch on the main hall, but in the 1950s his grandfather pulled them down and they lay around for nearly 70 years before they found a use for them.

Jenny showed off their new greenhouse in the south border, next to an area of Mediterranean style planting in gravel, which contained plants that were thriving in this summer's heat: verbena, verbascum, opium poppies and alliums.

Near the house, a circle of pleached *Malus* 'Evereste' encloses an area of cobble, slate and millstone laid by Tom and edged with *Erigeron karvinskianus*. In one of the gardens close to the house the couple have erected a metal gazebo – 'an eBay purchase one evening after too much wine,' said Tom, but which takes its place nicely in the corner of the garden.



A circle of pleached apple trees around an old millstone



The gazebo in the corner of one of the gardens: 'a drunken eBay purchase' according to Tom.

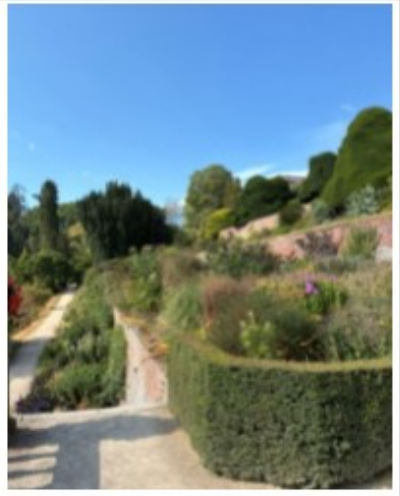
At the end of the tour, we were very grateful to sit down under the shade with cups of tea and a slice of excellent Victoria sponge.

By Helen Gardiner

Powis Castle – Thursday, 13th August

The last day trip organised for THEA for 2025/2026 was to Powis Castle in Wales, renowned for its terraced baroque gardens with enormous cloud-pruned yew hedges. The day was hot and dry, and although some areas of the garden had suffered from the drought there was still plenty of colour throughout the terraces.

A brief introductory talk was arranged for the 22 THEA members who made the trip to Wales. The talk covered the history of the site from medieval fortress through the construction of the terraces and the baroque gardens of the late 17thC, through to the early 20thC garden style revamp carried out by Lady Violet Lane-Fox – a follower of Gertrude Jekyll.

		
The giant yew hedges	Powis Castle and the Orangery	The terraces

The Herbert family, who transformed the fortress into a stately home and created the gardens, were granted the property in 1580. Although alterations were made to the castle, the famous Baroque gardens did not start until 1680. William Herbert, 1st Marquess of Powis, ordered the construction of the terraces and the celebrated yew hedges were planted. However, work stopped when the Marquess, a Catholic supporter of King James, went into exile in France with James in 1688. The 2nd Marquess returned from exile in 1703 and resumed construction of the gardens. The family was much influenced by the French Baroque garden style they had seen at Versailles. They hired the French master gardener Adrian Duval to oversee the work – which involved the balustrading of the terraces, the creation of the water gardens in the flat area below the Castle, the introduction of many statues (cast from lead from the Herbert estates) and the building of the Orangery into the terraces. It became one of the finest Baroque gardens in England and Wales as a result.

		
Baroque statue & balustrading	View into the lower garden	Colour from planters

During the Victorian period the importance of Powis as a home to the family declined. As a result, the gardens went into decline. However, at the beginning of the 20thC Lady Violet Lane-Fox married the 4th Duke Herbert. She brought considerable wealth and a passion for garden design, influenced strongly by the Arts and Craft movement and particularly by Gertrude Jekyll. Lady Violet revitalised the planting scheme with new beds featuring roses and drifts of hardy perennials in carefully graded colour harmonies. She also created an orchard of heritage apple trees and built the 8 bedroomed half-timbered Bothy House in the lower garden.



Bothy and apple orchard



Drifts of perennials



The sub-tropical top terrace border

In 1952 the House and Gardens were given to the National Trust. The Trust's stewardship of the gardens does not attempt to preserve the original planting scheme from any single period. Consequently the top terrace now contains sub-tropical plants like bananas which flourish in the warm microclimate created by the castle walls, which would have been unavailable when the terrace was first laid out.



Cuttings and stock plants



The over-wintering space

Conversations with the gardeners – many thanks to Dave and Ben – provided a fascinating insight into the current horticultural practice at Powis. Many plants are maintained through the regular taking of cuttings

and by clump division but new varieties are introduced if they are complimentary to the required colour palette and offer advantages such as improved disease resistance. A look behind the scenes revealed the areas where the cutting stock plants were kept, propagation was carried out and where the tender plants were over-wintered. Although the gardeners spend a lot of time producing new plants – both annual bedding and replacement hardy perennials, trees and shrubs; it is not economic to produce plants for sale in the Powis Castle shop.

Given the hot dry conditions the gardeners were asked about how the team of seven gardeners and garden volunteers coped with the drought. They explained the beds were mulched deeply on a rotating cycle – the team producing roughly 3 tons of compost a year. In addition, close planting of the beds is used to minimise exposed soil and reduce moisture loss. Lastly, watering was carried out daily for the more vulnerable plants – like those in pots and planters. The gardeners do collect rainwater and have access to a borehole to reduce reliance on mains water, although this year's extreme heat is proving to be a significant challenge.

The visit was both enjoyable and informative, offering THEA members an excellent opportunity to appreciate not only the beauty and history of Powis Castle but also the skill and dedication required to maintain such an outstanding historic garden in increasingly difficult climatic conditions.

By Paul Brickwood

Dates for your diary

- Next Study Day – 19th February 2027

Rozy's Garden – Opening Our Garden for Charity

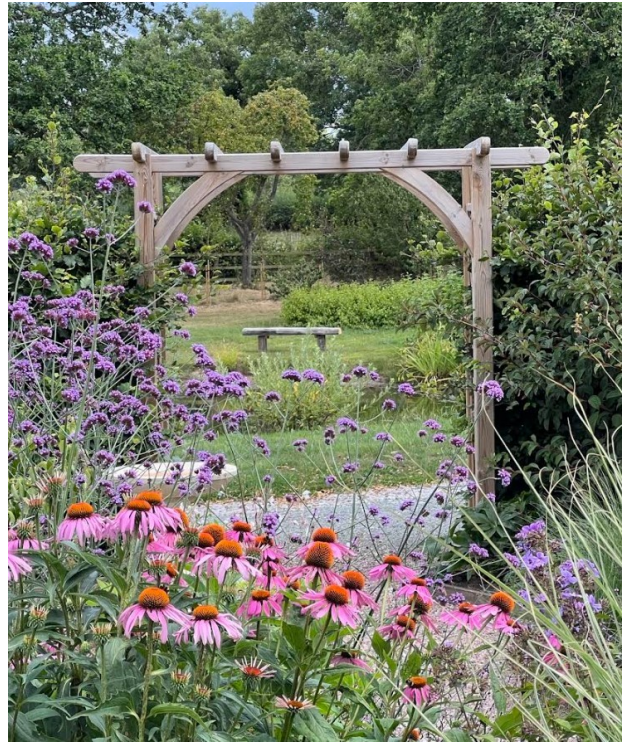
When I was approached last year and asked if I'd open our garden for charity I was secretly delighted – it was something I'd always wanted to do. I had plenty of doubts – what on earth was I thinking? It is a relatively new garden, a two-acre blank canvas three years ago. But I'd said yes, was now committed and had to go for it.

We purchased our plot on a country lane in Smallwood during the pandemic in 2020 – an old smallholding with some land and the remnants of an abandoned farmyard with derelict buildings and lots of concrete, no garden to speak of apart from a beautiful mature acer and a hosta or two. But I had a crazy dream to create a whole new garden from scratch . . .

I had to wait a couple of years while we demolished and rebuilt the house, which gave us time to plan and design the garden, drawing on everything I'd learned from my studies at Reaseheath and years of trial and error in our previous gardens.

Before the house was built we excavated a large pond, put up a greenhouse (rather precariously located in the midst of a building site) and I started growing plants in earnest. We dug some nursery beds and I propagated and bulked up the perennials I'd brought from my old garden. Once the concrete and old farm buildings were cleared we relocated the precious acer, planted trees and hedges, did the main garden build and started planting it up in the autumn 2022. Just the two of us, with occasional help from our daughters and supervised by our dog Pringle, who dug a lot of holes, not always where we wanted!

Roll on to 2025 – the garden was becoming more established, with perennials growing like rockets in the borders that we'd filled with copious amounts of home produced compost (our horses earned their keep!!) I'd gone to visit a local garden which was open for The Christie and it was there that one of the fundraising team who'd seen my photographs on Instagram asked me if I'd consider opening mine in 2026.



Once the date was set I started to worry about the weather, what the garden would look like the following June, would anyone actually come and see it, and how many cakes would we need? Should I have a plant stall and would I have enough plants to fill it? But I realised that whatever happened, people would see the garden as it truly is, warts (weeds) and all and if we made any money at all for charity that would be brilliant.

So we made posters and spread the word, tidied and weeded, mowed and edged, turned the garage into a tea room and set up a plant stall, and crossed our fingers that it would all be OK. As it turned out the weather was kind to us, the borders bloomed and we had around 450 visitors over two days. The Milk Maid Marchers, a lovely group of farmers' wives who do fundraising events for The Christie, made hundreds of cups of tea and baked exceptional cakes, friends donated plants for the plant sale and we made a whopping £4,850 for The Christie charity.

It was lovely to see so many people enjoying the garden. Gardeners, non-gardeners, people affected directly or indirectly by cancer, family, friends and neighbours – everyone made it a very special weekend. I would do it again, but maybe need a year or two to recover!

By Rozy Barnes

Plants to Withstand Drought – Members' Suggestions

Thank goodness for the rain! After such a hot dry summer I was beginning to despair. I tried not to do much watering as I have a large garden, so most things had to just put up with it. It wasn't just the lack of water, of course; the intense sunlight and heat took their toll too.

I suspect I have lost a camellia, one hydrangea (despite some watering), a spiraea and a skimmia - interestingly all of these were in one area of the garden which was in semi shade . . . that has me slightly puzzled as other similar plants elsewhere in my garden just sulked and have since recovered.

Some other plants in my garden that suffered surprised me. *Crocsmia* 'Paul's Best Yellow' which I thought was bomb-proof and *Persicaria* 'Fat Domino' went brown and gave up very early on though both are coming back now. Some established trees really suffered too, both in my garden and my neighbourhood – birch (*Betula pendula* specifically – other birches lost some leaves but were OK), *Sorbus aucuparia* and sycamore looked decidedly crispy.

I think it's fair to say that a lot of plants did OK but went over quickly, with the result that it feels like an early autumn.

Anyway, enough about me and on to the emails I received with members experience. Thank you to Rachel Norwood, Sue Plowright, Alex Radley, Jane McKenna, Mary Pole, Christine Arnold, Sandie O'Brien, Julie Grundy and Di Geraghty for telling me what did well in their gardens – well worth making a note for plants we might need to replace!

Shrubs

- Choisya
- Cornus
- Elaeagnus
- Euonymus (all varieties)
- Hebe
- Itoh intersectional peony 'Lemon Chiffon'. The flowers had finished by the time the heat arrived, but the shrub itself seemed to thrive on the heat
- *Magnolia stellata*. Flowers were finished of course, but the leaves stayed fresh and green.
- Mahonia
- Philadelphus
- Shrubby Potentilla
- Roses – generally agreed that they put on good show this year
- Rosemary
- Viburnum
- *Weigela* 'Florida Variegata' didn't flinch, though other *Weigela* fared less well

Perennials

- Agapanthus
- *Alchemilla mollis*
- Asters, especially *A. frikartii* 'Mönch'

- *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Jack Frost'
- *Calamintha* 'Blue Cloud'
- Crocosmias did well in some gardens (but not mine)
- Echinacea
- Echinops were really happy
- Epimediums, various large-leaved kinds
- *Erigeron glaucus*
- Eryngium (although they finished earlier),
- Geraniums, especially *G.* 'Johnson's Blue', *G. macrorrhizum* and *G. cantabrigiense*
- Grasses generally seemed to do well (except for the lawn which has been awful!)
- Hakonechloa
- Heleniums, especially *H.* 'Sahin's Early Flowerer'
- Hylotelephium (Sedum)
- Lavender
- *Lychnis coronaria* (finished earlier)
- Nepeta
- Penstemon
- Perovskia
- *Persicaria* 'Red Dragon' (in partial shade)
- *Potentilla* 'Etna'
- *Salvia nemorosa* and other salvias generally, but not so much the larger-leaved ones
- *Stachys byzantina*
- *Verbascum chaixii* 'Album'
- *Verbena bonariensis*, *V. hastata* and *V. 'Bampton'* absolutely thrived
- *Veronicastrum* 'Album'

Sue Speed pointed me at the following link from House & Garden magazine. It lists some interesting drought-tolerant plants, many of which I've never heard of:

<https://share.google/CLPEoesT1KpfsrED5>

Also, the RHS have some recommendations:

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/trials-awards/using-award-winning-plants/10-award-winning-drought-tolerant-plants>

Finally this link has some suggestions:

<https://horticulture.co.uk/blogs/growing/drought-tolerant-plants>

Here's hoping everything recovers and we have a kinder summer in 2027!

By Debbie Holden