



PRESIDENT – Chard Spicer

Past Presidents: D.M. Ballard, NDH; T. Deans, NDH; S.M. Davies, M.Hort. (RHS), DHE, Cert.Ed., MIHort.;
Dr Susan V. Sherwood, BSc, PhD; Anne Harrison, Kew Dip. Hort; David Black; Will Parks, BSc (Hons), FdSc

NEWSLETTER – Spring 2026

In this Issue

- Editorial
- Summer Outings 2026
- Reports from the February Study Day
- Dates for your Diary
- THEA Committee
- Horticulture in Cadiz

Editorial

Hello.

At long last here is our Spring Newsletter. After a miserable, wet winter we've now switched to very dry weather, but at least we've had some sunshine!

We had an excellent study day in February – both speakers were very good and interesting and we had a lot of positive feedback from members. I think it will be a challenge to top that for our autumn study day. We have included reports on each of the lectures which we hope you will take the time to read. Thank you to Helen for writing up both talks.

The THEA committee has been busy planning outings for this summer – we hope some of these will appeal to you (hopefully, all of them!) and we look forward to seeing you there. Sadly we had to cancel the planned Malvern Spring Festival Trip, but we still have several outings planned.

As ever we are looking for suggestions for gardens to visit, both fairly locally and further afield – if you have any suggestions for 2026, please email us at horticultural.enthusiasts@gmail.com.

Hoping to see lots of you on our outings and at the next Study Day.

Best Wishes to you all

Debbie Holden (Chairman)

SUMMER OUTINGS for 2026

Below are details of our Summer 2026 outings

We asked members for suggestions for garden visits for 2026 so we have taken those in to account – most popular suggestions were The Malvern Spring Show, Powis Castle, Dibley's Nursery and The Laundry Garden so that's what we have planned.

All bookings will be via Ticketsource – they do charge a modest fee for bookings but it makes the whole process so much easier to keep track of and it means you can book online and pay by credit or debit card. Go to <https://www.ticketsource.com/the-horticultural-enthusiasts-association> to make a booking.

When booking, if prompted, you don't need to pay for TicketSource insurance – if you need to cancel your booking just let us know and we can sort it out provided we have sufficient time and we haven't paid for the garden(s) concerned. There is no need to print the e-tickets either – we know who you are!

Any problems or questions, just email horticultural.enthusiasts@gmail.com or contact one of the committee members.

Visit 1 – Coach Trip to the Malvern Spring Festival – Friday, 8th May

Sadly we had to cancel the planned coach trip – fewer members were interested than we had anticipated so we would have made a significant loss had we continued. I know those of you who booked are disappointed but understand our reasons.

Visit 2 – Dibley's Nursery & The Laundry Garden – TBA (Late June or July)

We are hoping to arrange a trip to both Dibley's Nursery and The Laundry Garden. We are still confirming the details and we will notify you when we have this sorted – hopefully in the next week or two. We hope to be able to do both visits in the same day as the two gardens are reasonably close to each other.

Dibley's is one of the top houseplant nurseries in the country, specialising in Streptocarpus, Foliage Begonias and other rare and unusual houseplants.

The nursery was set up in 1976 and is a truly family affair.

All their plants are propagated, grown and packed at their Welsh nursery. Many of their plants have been bred at the nursery too.

They have won over 200 RHS medals at the various shows.

The visit includes a propagation demonstration and talk along with a tour of the greenhouses, and everybody will go home with their own free starter plant. Sounds ideal!

See <https://www.dibleys-shop.com/> for more details.



The Laundry Garden is a unique private garden. a hidden gem located at the foot of the Clwydian Hills, within the breathtaking landscape of North East Wales.

The garden has been lovingly created within and around the old bones of a 1 acre Georgian Walled Garden, set within 3 acres. The owners have been developing the garden at the Laundry since 2008, nothing remains of any original planting or planting plans so they started from scratch and have created something beautiful.

To find out more, see

<https://thelaundrygarden.co.uk/>



Arrangements for the Day

TBA

Addresses

Dibleys Nurseries, Llanelidan, Ruthin, N.Wales. LL15 2LG

The Laundry, Llanrhaeadr, Denbigh, LL16 4NL

How to Book

The cost is to be confirmed but tickets will be available via TicketSource **shortly** – we will notify you by email. Guests are always welcome.

Visit 3 – Powis Castle – Thursday, 13th August

This year we are visiting Powis Castle – a splendid garden in an impressive setting. One of the garden team will give us an introductory talk on arrival and then we will have freedom to wander.

Depending on the tickets you buy, you may also visit the castle itself, which looks jolly impressive.



Note, this event is “self drive” and public transport really isn’t an option. If travel is a problem for you, then let us know and we can see if we can facilitate some car-sharing. Now it gets more complicated:

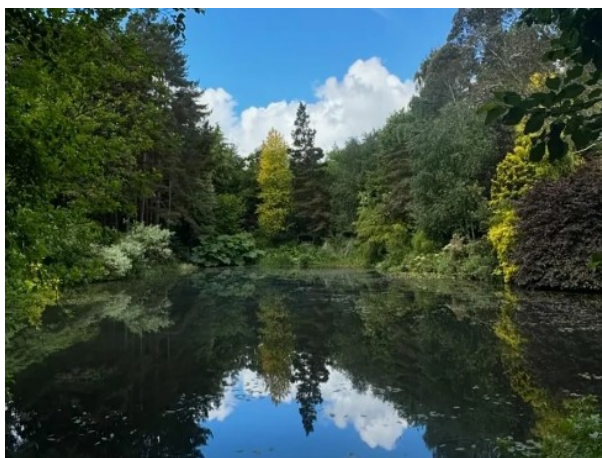
- For **National Trust Members**, entry into the gardens and the castle is **free** (you will need to present your NT membership card)
- For **RHS** members, entry into the **garden only is free** – the castle is not included (you will need to present your RHS membership card)
- If you have a Gardeners' World 2-for-1 garden discount card and **you are booking two tickets** then you will just pay for one at full entry price of £20.50 and it will give you entry for two to the gardens and castle (you will need to bring your 2-for-1 card with you)
- Otherwise, the group entry rate is **£19.50** which gives entry into the gardens and the castle

The four options will be available on TicketSource so make sure you choose the right one!

If you want to make a day of it, there is the **Dingle Garden and Nursery** fairly close by and you might wish to visit there too.

Cost of visiting the Dingle garden is **not included** in the price of this trip – it's "pay as you go" if you decide to visit the garden. Access to the nursery is free.

The Dingle is an RHS partner garden so members will get in for free, otherwise the cost is £3.50.



Arrangements for the Day

We are aiming to arrive at Powis for 10:45 ready for entry at 11am.

Tea/coffee and cake and light lunches will be available in the cafe.

For more information, see

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/wales/powis-castle-and-garden>

and

<https://dinglenurseryandgarden.co.uk/>

Addresses

Powis Castle is well signposted and its address is Welshpool, Powys, SY21 8RF

Dingle Nurseries, Frochas, Welshpool, Powys, SY21 9JD

How to Book

Tickets for Powis Castle are available via TicketSource at www.ticketsource.com/the-horticultural-enthusiasts-association. There is no need to print the eTicket or opt for insurance unless you really want to.

Dingle Nurseries – no need to book.

Reports from the February Study Day

Our February Study Day was very well attended with over 80 members and guests. IT worked perfectly and everything seemed to go according to plan – always a relief.

We enjoyed both lectures enormously – both speakers were excellent. We had really good feedback after the event, which is really nice. Below are write-ups of some of the main points of the two lectures.

“A Gardener's Story: a career in estate gardening” by Chris Pilkington



Chris Pilkington is Head Gardener at the Plas Cadnant Gardens on Anglesey. During his career in horticulture, he has worked at some of the finest gardens the UK, including Ashridge House, Waddesdon Manor and Thenford House. For those of us who visited Plas Cadnant on the THEA trip last year, when Chris was our guide, it was a treat to hear his talk.

Chris began by telling us that, although he has been head gardener at Plas Cadnant Garden for eight and a half years, his route to North Wales hadn't always been in horticulture. He qualified as a teacher at Crewe and Alsager, taught in Frodsham, Flint and Italy, coming back to teach in Buckinghamshire, but realised that wasn't what he wanted to do.

Instead, he took on a six-month volunteer role at the gardens of Canons Ashby House, an Elizabethan property in Northamptonshire now owned by the National Trust, which sparked for him an interest in garden history. At the time an archaeological team were using ground penetrating radar to identify the historical layout of the garden, enabling the garden team to reinstate the original garden layout.

After that Chris became a member of the Professional Gardeners' Guild (a professional body for head and deputy head gardeners) where he did a three-year traineeship, one year in each of three gardens, thus gaining a huge amount of experience in a relatively short space of time.

The first of these was Ashridge House, a Grade I listed historic country house in Hertfordshire, a former monastery and royal residence for Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, now a conference, wedding, and events venue. The grounds at Ashridge House were designed by Humphry Repton and cover 160 acres. Chris was previously used to garden tasks, such as strimming, taking hours – here they took days, if not weeks. He said the way to approach this was to break large jobs up into tasks.



His second PGG placement was at Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire. Previously the family home of the Rothschild family, now owned by the National Trust and managed by the Rothschild Foundation. The grounds comprise 600 acres of gardens – a massive undertaking for the team of 27 gardeners and 200 volunteers.

Chris said one of the key takeaways was that of scale. The parterre, which is only a fraction of the bedding display, was changed twice a year, each taking 200 person days and using 20,000 plants. He said it was extraordinary how much can be done when enough money is thrown at something. The suppliers would design the display, which was planted up in trays and the tray just planted in the bed according to the plan.

The manor is home to a dedicated facility, the Rothschild Foundation Archive Centre, housing 150 years of records regarding the Rothschild family, the estate, and its collections. Chris was involved in the landscaping, including the placing of a large Amelanchier, whose rootball was 1.5 m diameter and required a telehandler to manoeuvre it into place, and needed to be cm-perfect.

He also told us about “the saga of the hedge”. During the awful winter of 2010, when temperatures reached -20C, the gardeners put in new planting that had to be ready for the opening party. They planted a hedge using 200 precut yew trees at £100 each. This took a week, planting into frozen ground using pickaxes and an earth mover.

Lord Rothschild said he didn’t like the scruffy brown hillside behind hedge – and suggested they make the hedge taller, which was impossible, so they lowered the hillside. They took away 1000s of tonnes of hillside and seeded the area. When the grass had grown Lord Rothschild said it was all very well but he couldn’t see the hill, and they should cut the hedge, but he still wasn’t happy with the result, so the gardeners had to start again by replacing the hedge with new trees. Chris compared it to Versailles, where avenues of trees were moved overnight.

The third placement as part of the PGG traineeship was at Thenford House, the country house of Michael Heseltine. This was Chris’s first experience of working with a really good plant collection and he said that Lord Heseltine approached the garden with a collector’s mindset. The garden has several national collections, including oaks, and snowdrops.



Chris then became deputy head gardener at Thame Park, Oxfordshire. He said it was an interesting garden, though it doesn’t open to the public. It was a Capability Brown landscape, onto which was superimposed a modern garden. This was Chris’s first leadership position and was a baptism of fire. He described how he crashed machinery, made mistakes handling the garden team and liaising with the owners and said it was not a happy placement. However, he said it was a wonderful experience in terms of learning.

After that he was head gardener at The Studio at Lord’s Wood, Buckinghamshire, set within the Chiltern Hills. The property was once a meeting place for the Bloomsbury Group and was bought by art dealer David Messum in 1974. When Messum moved in, he found Lytton Strachey’s entire library inside.

The house was designed by Edwin Lutyens, and David Messum decided on an Arts and Craft theme for garden. Divided by hedges and oak pergolas, the garden was adapted for displaying sculptures, and Chris became expert at displaying sculptures in the garden to their best advantage. He became used to moving priceless artworks, including a John Singer Sargent piece worth £6 million. Chris had no idea of its value at the time but was just told to be careful; only later did he find out how much it was worth. Chris stayed as head gardener there for four years and was very happy there. But house prices in Buckinghamshire were extortionate, and he looked for another option.

That was when Chris came to Plas Cadnant. The house was built around 1804 by John Price. In 1928 it was sold to the Fanning-Evans family. However, they didn't maintain the estate and it fell into disrepair. By the time the current owner, Anthony Taverner, bought the estate in 1996, the garden had not been touched in 50 years, and was a complete wilderness. The area where there are now lawns and topiary needed a chainsaw to clear the undergrowth. After 20 years of reclaiming the land, the owner wanted to step back and took on Chris as head gardener.



Chris described it as a shock to the system, in particular the weather. In his first three months, he could count on the fingers of one hand the days it didn't rain, and described brushing snow off hydrangeas to prune in the morning and being in short sleeves in the afternoon.

He said that Anthony, like Lord Heseltine, approaches the garden with a plantsman's mindset. The garden contains 50 different rhododendrons, including *R. pachysanthum*, which has grey foliage with a brown felted underside. Other stand-out plants include *Stachyurus praecox* with glorious, arching stems and racemes of yellow flowers; *Magnolia kobus* – one of few plants to survive the previous incarnation; and *Scilla peruviana* (so named because it was brought on a ship called The Peru – it is actually from the Iberian peninsula).

Chris said he loves the history of the garden and the design influence. This is picturesque garden – typified by drama, whimsy and seeing new vistas. He also loves the legacy: curating and caring for the work of generations who have gone before and leaving the garden for the next generations. Chris feels he's come full circle – he left teaching for horticulture, and is now teaching again: to new horticulturalists and gardeners, and falling in love with teaching again.

By Helen Gardiner

“How to be a 21st Century Gardener” by Timothy Walker



Timothy Walker is a lecturer in plant biology at Somerville College, Oxford, and was previously director of the Oxford Botanic Garden, the oldest botanic garden in the UK. Timothy took us on an entertaining journey of “How to be a 21st Century Gardener”. By way of anecdotes, he gave us an amusing array of advice and useful stories to illustrate his talk.

He divided his talk into 10 main points:

1. Look after your soil
2. Choose plants that like your soil
3. Grow native plants
4. Grow more fruit and veg
5. Reduce watering
6. Reduce pesticide use to a minimum
7. Adapt to a rapidly changing climate
8. Look after plants that are struggling to survive
9. Garden for nature
10. Encourage new gardeners

1. Look after your soil

Timothy said he was taught that you can improve soil but not change it. He has a small garden, which has heavy clay soil at the back, and sand and gravel at the front. He extolled the value of making compost: the sight of the compost heap steaming was one of the best sights. He advised to keep the compost moist and to add nitrogen – you could use ammonium nitrate or a sodium-based ammonia to accelerate the composting process. Timothy said the one important thing to do in late winter/early spring was to apply general fertiliser to the soil. He used 6X, which is halfway between a compost and a pelleted fertiliser.

2. Choose plants that like your soil

He said we shouldn't fight the soil. However, often when the books say you can't grow something, you can – Timothy grows *Hamamelis mollis*, which is said to like an acid soil but it can be grown on a soil with a high pH. Plants often adapt to the soil. Timothy has a *Phlomis tuberosa* 'Amazona', which grew to 5 ft in his previous garden. In his current garden it grows to 3 ft, which he said is fine.

3. Grow native plants

Timothy's top 10 plants would include *Viburnum opulus*. It provides flowers, fruit and autumn interest. Other good natives include honeysuckle, hawthorn, *Corylus avellana* (hazel) and *Rosa canina* (dog rose). Some of these plants make excellent hedging. For a good book on hedges, Timothy recommended 'Hedges and Hedgelaying' by Murray Maclean. Timothy sowed a meadow mix in front of his hedge, which included yellow rattle, clover, ragged robin, clovers and brambles, all of which were good for pollinators.



Viburnum opulus provides flowers, fruit

Some species such as crocosmia and *Fuchsia magellanica* are claimed to be invasive species in places like Ireland. But Timothy questioned how much ecological damage these were doing and wasn't sure they should be eliminated. However, he did think we should banish *Rhododendron ponticum* – he said it even stops brambles from growing.

4. Grow more fruit and veg

Timothy commented on how more people were growing fruit and vegetables, and that waiting lists for some allotments were seven years long. He described how he took on a derelict allotment and made it productive within two years. He discovered the Eco Biofourche by Spear & Jackson – a large fork that aerates the soil without digging – otherwise, he practises 'no dig' gardening.

He grows quince (*Cydonia*), which he says looks a bit scruffy but had a unique flavour. He has replaced his pyracantha with raspberries and recommends the autumn-fruiting variety for healthy plants and ease of pruning. He tries to grow heritage varieties and looks for unusual flavours.

5. Reduce watering

Timothy said the only plant he waters in his garden was a gunnera, bought at Trebah Garden in Cornwall at his wife's insistence. It was priced at £19.99, however, the pot was worth £20 – they managed to fit it in their small car for the journey home. He said we have far more droughts now than used to. He uses a hose snaking across the ground – last year it was only used on three occasions. Great Dixter waters its borders to keep the wildlife going, but Timothy only waters when the soil cracks.

6. Reduce pesticide use to a minimum

Pesticides don't really work, he said – there is nothing available for treating rust, for example – so Timothy doesn't use them. To combat slug damage on hostas, Timothy has frogs and thrushes in the garden, and goes out at night with a torch and stamps on the slugs (but put your shoes on first he said!). He also thinks that copper tape is good, and Whichford Pottery recommends Vaseline.

7 Adapt to a rapidly changing climate

The Met Office has predicted that this year will be the hottest on record. However, the changes are not uniform. At the Oxford Botanic Garden, they noticed the seasons are changing and the garden has altered its open days, e.g. the bluebell wood is now open two weeks earlier than previously.

Some people suggest using Mediterranean plants, but these need poor soil and won't grow if the soil is too rich. An example of a successful Mediterranean garden was the Delos Garden at Sissinghurst, designed by Dan Pearson, which Timothy said has got the planting right. Plants that can now be grown in this country that were previously too tender include *Lobelia tupa* (the Oxford Botanic Garden has a huge clump), *Fascicularia bicolor* (Timothy said this is bombproof in his garden) and *Sophora Sun King*, which has yellow pea-like racemes.



Delos Garden at Sissinghurst, designed by Dan Pearson

8 Look after plants that are struggling to survive

The Oxford Botanic Garden has the national collection of euphorbia, which Timothy said is an extraordinary group of plants. The garden wanted to propagate *E. stygiana*, an endangered species from the Azores, but wasn't able to get the plant to self-seed until they discovered that the seeds were being predated by wrens. Wrens are normally insectivorous but, in the Oxford Botanic Garden, they were vegan! The high fat content of euphorbia seeds attracted the birds.

Apium repens (creeping marshwort) was a plant that used to grow on Port Meadow in Oxford but had disappeared. The garden propagated the plant from seed and re-established it. Another plant that had been declining in the UK was *Viscum album* (mistletoe) but this has been increased by people sowing it in their gardens. Timothy said it grew well on rowan trees.

9 Garden for nature

Gardens are now places where wildlife thrives. Purists would say that you shouldn't plant foreign species, but the pollinators don't care. In the autumn especially, non-native plants are filling the nectar gap. Timothy showed pictures of some fascinating wildlife, including the buff-top moth, which looked just like a twig.

Like a lot of people in the UK (Timothy said British gardeners spend £350 million a year on bird feed), he enjoys seeing birds in the garden and showed a picture in his garden of where a pied wagtail had built its nest in his watering can. Timothy recommended *The Garden Jungle* by Dave Goulson for an insight into the wildlife in our gardens and how to protect it.



The buff-top moth

10 Encourage new gardeners

Like a lot of people, Timothy became interested in gardening through his parents. He maintains that children are well suited to gardening because they're nearer the ground! And how many fingers do they really need?! Get them gardening – and the future of gardening is going to be a happy place.

By Helen Gardiner

Other Items of Interest

Gardeners' World two-for-one offer

Every year, Gardeners' World magazine offers a card giving garden entry to 100s of UK gardens on a two for the price of one basis. For a keen garden visitor it is a must have! This will be available with the May edition of the magazine which should be available from 10th April. Although the cost of the magazine is a bit of a shock, it will soon pay for itself.

Dates for your diary

- THEA subscription renewal will be due on 1st September 2026 (don't worry, I'll remind you nearer the time!). There will be an increase in price from **£10 to £15** – while this might sound like a jump, we have kept our membership price at £10 **for the last 10 years**. We have kept it at this level as we had quite a large bank balance, so we have let that gradually reduce to subsidise the study days. At £15 it is still excellent value for the four lectures we get per year. **IMPORTANT** – if you pay automatically by standing order, please notify your bank in plenty of time.
- Autumn Study Day – 30th October 2026