

## **President's Annual Report for the year 2017**

The many accomplishments of 2017 demonstrate that the association has witnessed its most successful year to date:

- We introduced our Anniversary Card and expect to add more gardens in 2018. The fact that we can boast of having some of France's most beautiful and well-known gardens, including Le Vaux le Vicomte, is quite extraordinary.
- We witnessed a new departure called 'Community Gardens' whereby two of our coordinators encouraged as many people as possible in a small area to open their gardens and we anticipate that this will be copied in at least one other area this year
- Thanks to the owners of the Arboretum de la Sedelle, we had our first musical event – an Irish music evening in this beautiful Jardin Remarquable. It will be repeated this year but with a varied theme offered by 2 groups and a rather lovely choir.
- 4 intrepid cyclists raised a mammoth €1266 towards our funds and they have already promised to do so again this year
- We added 2 more sponsors: Credit Agricole Britline & our first main sponsor Leggett Immobilier
- We had stands in at least 10 plant fairs, including 2 national events Chantilly (twice) & Nantes
- We made several presentations to gardening groups and other similar organisations in various parts of France, the most successful being a presentation to the AGM of the Parcs et Jardins de l'Oise, which had over 150 attendees
- We made donations to an additional 3 charitable groups and increased the total donated over the previous year by almost 50%
- We added a new team of coordinators in the Hérault and they are forecasting to have at least 12 gardens in their area in 2018

And these are just some of the events that are noteworthy.

The amount of work that goes into organising the association is phenomenal. Above the surface, all may appear to be serene and calm, but I can assure you that beneath the water level, there is an awful lot of paddling going on. This starts, of course, with

the conseil and I am hugely indebted to the members for their unstinting generosity, loyalty, commitment and straightforward hard work. I won't tell you exactly how much work is undertaken on a regular basis because I don't want to scare off any prospective volunteers from our audience here today, but to those of you who I have managed to persuade, cajole and otherwise lure with false promises into our conseil, I say an unreserved and heartfelt thank-you.

Our coordinators are the next link in the chain and, without their constant search for new gardens and efforts to publicise the association, our development would be severely curtailed and their role in further expansion, is pivotal. All of these efforts would be meaningless without our garden owners throughout France who open their gardens to the public. Their dedication to the cause, by spending hours and days in the garden, removing offending weeds and generally making their garden a place of beauty, is to be applauded. They bake cakes and serve tea, they show visitors round their garden, they pot up plants for sale, put up signs, distribute leaflets, complete the paperwork, and do it all with a willing heart and a winning smile.

And finally let us turn to our visitors, whose purchase of membership cards, refreshments and plants is the main source of revenue for our donations. I am pleased to say that we have never received any adverse comments following visits; indeed, all of the feedback tells us that they thoroughly appreciate the efforts made on their behalf. The most encouraging and most frequent comment is that they are delighted to have the pleasure of making such visits in the full knowledge that, by so doing, they are helping worthy causes in France.

To all of you, I say a huge thank you. I hope your reward comes in knowing how much your efforts are appreciated by those less fortunate than ourselves.

I would like now to turn to the future of the Association.

It hasn't been a good time for charities recently. The adverse news concerning some of the best-known, and indeed much-admired, organisations have come as a shock to us all. We are all aware that such things go on in the wider world but it was the fact that it was happening in the charitable sector that came as a particular body blow.

We rightly expect charities to be exemplars of decency and propriety and, to find them lacking, has had severe repercussions. I mentioned at last year's AGM that there was growing concern that charities are spending an increasing percentage of their income on what they call "admin" and less and less on supporting their adopted causes. The recent revelations will only have added to the concern.

Managing bodies of charities have a responsibility and a duty to ensure that as much money as possible is being donated to their beneficiaries and this means looking at all of the expenditure from the salary of the Chief Exec to the amount spent on postage. In its simplest terms, the best way to save money, is not to spend it. I am proud to say that the conseil is one of the meanest I know and donors may rest assured that money is never spent needlessly or thoughtlessly. It took us over 3 months to agree to the purchase of the projector that I used today. The determining factor in that decision was that we are confident that the expense will be more than recovered from talks and presentations made to other groups. It is fair to say, as well, that it professionalises our association, something of which we are mindful as we continue to grow.

There is, however, an added problem about such developments - it doesn't just erode the confidence that people have in those particular organisations; they start wondering if all charities are tarred with the same brush. It is, therefore, incumbent on us all to ensure that we maintain the highest standards and scruples in all our actions and deeds and the most effective way to do so, is by transparency. One of the biggest mistakes the aforementioned charities made was trying to conceal the fact that things had gone wrong. As I have said many times, our association strives to be as open as possible and we welcome comments or queries about our systems and processes.

**This then is our first challenge - to maintain and develop confidence and respect for our charity over the course of the ensuing years.**

When Open Gardens/Jardins Ouverts first started in 2013, there were more members on the conseil than gardens. In 2017, we opened 150 gardens in 28 départements and our aim is to have 200 in 33 départements by the end of 2018. Our association is no longer a small, tightly-knit group of volunteers, organising a few local events but a growing charity which operates in almost a third of France. Whilst this is a major achievement, it carries significant responsibilities and inherent dangers, the biggest of which is that the cart starts overtaking the horse. The worst thing that could happen was that we fell victim to our own success and it was in recognition of this that the conseil agreed to recruit staff to take on many of the association's responsibilities. Without going into too much detail, this exercise hasn't been quite as easy as we expected, although we are starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The particular areas of responsibility are:

Garden Manager Coordinator's Manager Website Manager Social Media Manager  
Accounts Manager Membership Manager Publicity Manager

Although we haven't even finalised the paperwork to pay these people (in other words, they aren't yet being paid), they are already in post and developing their role and I am hugely indebted to them for their commitment and support.

**This constitutes our second challenge – to develop a sustainable model for what has become a popular, and increasingly recognised charity, whilst, at the same time, retaining our commitment to donate as much of our revenue as possible to worthy causes.**

At the outset, the perception of Open Gardens/Jardins Ouverts was as a British group, importing a British concept to France. In the early years, French participants were very hard to find and this, of course, confirmed still further the notion of Britishness. It is fair to say, however, that it was always our intention that this would be a Franco/Britannique enterprise and I am delighted to tell you that in 2017, approximately 40% of our garden owners were French and I dearly hope that I will be able to stand before you next year and tell you that figure has increased to 50%.

We have made great efforts to demonstrate that this is a partnership: our website is in both languages, with French as the first language; I have made several presentations to French only groups, one of which, in the Oise, resulted in an additional dozen gardens in 2017, all of which were French owned; most of our publicity is bi-lingual and those that aren't, are in French only; the local and national shows we attend almost always have a French national present, or at the very least, a French-speaking Brit.

**We are fully committed to the notion that Open Gardens/Jardins Ouverts can only develop and grow if we attract increasing participation from the French sector and this is our third challenge.**

One of the biggest targets for the foreseeable future has to be to attract more sponsorship. I cannot express strongly enough how important it is to have supportive and loyal sponsors whose generosity offsets the increasing burden of overheads.

During 2017, we were financially supported by Leggett Immobilier, Blevins Franks, Vivara, the Connexion Newspaper, Credit Agricole Britline & Credit Agricole Normandie. I must, however, make particular mention of Leggett Immobilier which, last year, became our first major sponsor and whose magnificent donation paid for all of our publicity leaflets (60,000) and a new website, something we could only have dreamed of, without their support.

I am delighted to tell you that all of these companies have again expressed their commitment to supporting us again in 2018. As we grow even larger, so will there be an increasing dependency on increasing our network of sponsors in order to maintain our commitment to the ideal of donating 100% of the income derived at the garden gate.

**This then is our fourth challenge: to continue to attract sponsors who understand and appreciate our raison d'être and who recognise that a connection with our association will be mutually beneficial.**

In the early days of our existence, it was difficult to persuade members of the media to give over column inches to our association, most probably because it was an unproven concept and still in its infancy. Today, the situation is much different: magazines chase us, from Gardens Illustrated to French Living; and in France and the UK, editors are asking us to write articles about our success. However, it is a different story with the French media and, although we were delighted that France Inter picked up our story and ran with it twice a day for a week, this is the exception rather than the rule. If we are serious about becoming a national association, we must get the French media on board. If we can do this, our future is guaranteed.

**So our final, and most immediate, challenge is to promote the success of our association with the French media and get them to understand that their support will result directly in more financial support for French charities.**

It is good to have challenges; they test our resolve and remind us constantly that there are greater things to aim for. Complacency is incompatible with our continuing determination to improve and enlarge. One of the words that is used most consistently by our main beneficiary, A Chacun son Everest, is 'defi' – challenge. The whole emphasis of this wonderful organisation is on facing up to the challenge of life after cancer and it is wonderful to witness the strength and determination of the young people I saw in Chamonix who were taking part in one of the courses.

I am supremely confident that our volunteers will demonstrate the some fortitude and commitment in tackling the challenges I have outlined above and, just as importantly, thoroughly enjoy doing so. We have had enormous success with Open Gardens/Jardins Ouverts and we will constantly strive to make a bigger and better organisation. If I may finish on a personal note: many years ago, my father taught me a couple of lines from Robert Browning's poem Andrea del Sarto:

"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for"

With this as our guiding principle, we will rise to our challenges.

Mick Moat

President Open Gardens/Jardins Ouverts