



Newsletter 26/3 Autumn 2020

President's Report

What a summer! As the old saying goes "you don't know what you've got till it's gone"! Not being able to open gardens this summer has been sad for us and made us realise what we appreciated so much about doing it. This has made us recognise and become acutely conscious of the benefits of the activities we offered.

For those of us fortunate to have our own gardens we have been glad of the opportunity to spend the time in them that has been afforded to us. Notably the ability to be outdoors in a beautiful space, to calmly appreciate the changing and unfailing beauty of the natural world. But what we have missed is the social links to keep up our spirits and avoid a descent into depression and isolation. The things we always took for granted.

Thinking it through you appreciate anew the joy to be had from sharing in someone else's endeavours, hearing of their trials and tribulations and the thrills of getting their project to that point; the chance to meet with friends and to make new ones, to share a convivial moment over tea and cakes.

In wandering around a new garden, you take in the smells, the colours, the shapes and textures of your surroundings. You unconsciously absorb other people's enthusiasm. You find yourself going home pleasantly relaxed and at the same time fired up with ideas, possibly even with a tray of young plants to incorporate into your own garden. So many things to appreciate from such a simple activity.

Some people have still enjoyed the pleasure that comes from giving. We have received generous personal donations; some have held socially distanced private events and we raised some money from a few openings before lockdown. We are delighted therefore to be in a position to make donations to a few of our chosen charities which will enable them to provide the extra facilities and activities that their young people need.

So... next year, with protocols in place as necessary, we are all going to take advantage of the hard work that has been put in this year by many of you gardeners and enjoy the Open Gardens visits once again. There are many aspects of what we can offer that line up perfectly with the newly established way of life. As long as we are all aware of the things that are off limits then we should embrace the things that are still there to be enjoyed and appreciated.

In the meantime, we can take the virtual path. Equipped with just a mobile phone you can take a walk around your own garden, filming and commenting as you go. We can share this on Facebook and when our new website is finished, we will be able to share it there too. Great autumn photos can be shared on our Instagram page too. It will give inspiration to other gardeners and perhaps viewers will feel moved to make a small donation in appreciation.

Thank you all as ever for your support. Take good care of yourselves and those close to you, we look forward to seeing you next year.



Karen Roper
President

Opening your garden.

Many people I talk to think their garden is not “worthy” of being opened to the public! However, the philosophy behind Open Gardens/Jardins Ouverts is to allow as many people as possible to be able to open their garden or to be able to visit one of our gardens. At Open Gardens/Jardins ouverts we have gardens of all types and sizes that open on our behalf. The one thing that links them is owners who are passionate about their plants and their gardens and who have a desire to share that passion with their visitors, in order to raise money for children’s charitable causes in France.

Some of our gardens are large and may be in a country setting, whilst others may be small in a village setting! Some of our garden openers practice permaculture or use raised beds, while others may be experimenting with gravel gardens, to allow plants to survive in our ever-changing climate. Some might be quite stately with manicured hedging and rare trees, whilst others specialise in rose gardens and mixed borders. Whichever style of garden you visit we hope that you will find something to interest you and many of our visitors go home saying they have “borrowed” an idea for their own garden.

We continually look for new gardens to open for Open Gardens/Jardins Ouverts, and this will be particularly important for our 2021 season. Despite 2020 being difficult in terms of opening gardens, we know that many of our current garden openers have been busy working away in the background, making changes to their gardens for visitors to see next year. Maybe you too have been busy?

Our main criteria when opening a garden is that it can offer at least 30 minutes of interest. If you think this may not be the case with your garden, you may like to consider about asking a friend or neighbour to open with you. In my hamlet we have three gardens that open on the same day and this works very well.

Serving of refreshments is not obligatory but can extend peoples' visit and can add to the ambiance of the day. Some people are good at raising cuttings and growing plants from seed, and many of our garden openers have a selection of plants for sale.

I normally try to get a couple of friends to help me on our open day. They kindly take money at the garden gate or help serve refreshments and sell plants. This leaves me free to wander in the garden chatting to my visitors. People love to ask the garden owner questions!

If you have ever considered opening your garden on our behalf, maybe now is the time to contact us? If we have a local coordinator near you, we will ask them to get in touch and if not, I will be the person that liaises with you in the future. If you have ever considered opening your garden, or having read this article feel able to do so, but there is something that you’re not sure about, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Our charities need your support more than ever and we hope even more of you will be there to help them next year!

Sue Lambert.
Garden Development
Manager



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The Bee Blog: Part II

Well, the bees have now been in their home for a few months. They have settled in very well and are very good neighbours. They are very busy most of the time and we see them flitting back and forth all day, arriving home laden with fresh pollen.



Although they have had a few unwanted visitors in the form of hornets, the bees all band together to protect their home. We have found this fascinating as the hornet hovers in front of the little hole and a group of bees comes out to guard the entrance. So far, the bees have won all of the confrontations. They seem very friendly with us and don't seem to mind our daily visits to let them know what has been going on in the world.

Jess Roper, Haute Vienne

Is the garden finished yet?

We bought le Domaine in a small village in the south of the Mayenne having previously been in the Deux Sevres for 11 years. The property had been a working farm until 25 years before we arrived and had fallen into a bad state of affairs



The main building had mediaeval foundations and was a chapel but evidence of this is long gone! There are several outbuildings and a second house in need of renovation which was watertight by November 2007.

We spend on average six months of the year here, usually April to the end of September or early October, and weather permitting, a week over the festive time and a week in February. The garden was a blank canvas, if you don't include needing to spend the first three years clearing the weeds, bramble, scrub, ridiculous amounts of agricultural rubbish and removing unwanted trees including a line of poplar trees that meant the view of the lake from the house was obscured!

David had always wanted to create a garden, only having 20m2 in London this was going to be a challenge and an eye-opening journey with 5 acres to play with!

Once the clearance had been completed creating a plan was put into place ... along with purchasing endless rolls of



permeable plastic to suppress weeds and any other wind-blown seeds! The garden evolved in an organic way.... often with a glass of wine in hand at the end of the day whilst ruminating as to what to do!

The most challenging area, which is behind the disused barn, has turned out to be the most successful part of the garden. Six lorry loads of crushed grey gravel "tous-venant" on top of the permeable plastic has created an amazing dry garden which is mostly self-managed. Plants which cope with the drought and heat have flourished and never cease to amaze!



As luck would have it our neighbours who owned the surrounding land, Michel and Regine Cottereau, the mayor and his wife, have become good friends and supporters of our little bit of British mayhem and amusement. It was their support of our enthusiasm that encouraged us to open the garden.

The first opening was in 2016, on May 8. The garden was looking good until a heavy frost arrived on May 1. Most of the irises which were just at the point of flowering were ruined, ... however this didn't put off over 60 visitors ... a mail-shot to all the commune residents arranged by the mayor and an introduction to a journalist who works on Ouest France meant that interest far exceeded my dreams. This inspired me to open the garden the following year with weekend openings at times when I know that the garden looks its best. Late May for irises, late June for roses mid-July for the full flush of the big herbaceous borders and mid-September for the asters, grasses and seed heads before the autumn tidy up!

With such a success the following year was planned with greater attention to detail! A map of the garden identifying the gravel garden, the grass labyrinth, the view of the neighbouring lake from the fake ruin, the faux tropic garden inside the disused barn, along with a walk around the lake taking in views of the house and garden. The map made for a suggested route for visitors along with photos showing progress in situ,



Calling in on my contact with Ouest France and approaching another local paper Les Nouvelles meant that in 2017 four openings rewarded us with more than 300 visitors! I even did a live interview from the garden on France Blue Mayenne which I agreed to do.

The interview started at 6 am and continued to 9am!!! Admittedly I wasn't on the radio the full three hours but intermittently during the broadcast it did no end of good for my French!

Whilst a lot of work went into each opening the rewards have not ended! A new network of friends has arisen, introductions to other garden owners in the locality both private and commercial. Not knowing what the equivalent of the mafia is for garden owners, I think we may have got an invite into the French version and all thanks to Open Gardens and of course our friends the Cottereau!

The garden goes from strength to strength, well at least my stamina does, and each year throws up new challenges! The ongoing dry summers have meant we have had to reconsider some plants and that has inspired me to invest in plants needing more attention in the winter like agaves and cactus. Having been in London when lockdown was introduced, I didn't get out here until the end of June. Luckily, we have some amazing neighbours who offered to come over and cut the grass! With 2 hectares this is a major commitment! It did mean however that the garden was easier to manage.

The garden is a mix of French formality and English eccentricity! Long formal avenues create the rooms, and these are then given freedom to evolve. A gravel garden, grass labyrinth, three large herbaceous borders, a vulgar garden packed to the gunnels with dahlias.



There is a faux tropical section within a barn with no roof but trees that grow out of the roof and there is a new garden inspired by the desert. All these give any visitor a multitude of styles to enjoy.

As autumn arrives a review of the garden is called for and plans made for changes for the following year.

When I bump into friends and neighbours, always social distanced of course, the subject is always garden related.... "is the garden finished?" and as any gardener will say, it's a garden, it is NEVER finished!

2020 another interesting year, let's see what 2021 throws at us!

Edward Moss, Mayenne

Potting the drops

After a blistering hot and for us a summer of drought, a little rain has fallen, the temperature has dropped and some of the plants have revived. Autumn is in the air. For many gardeners it is a time of rest, some talk of putting the garden to bed for the winter but for us it is the busiest time of year as we have to repot our collection of snowdrops.



This is an anxious time as hygiene and complete separation of varieties is vital. The bulbs are each checked over for health. They are then replanted. Excess bulbs are potted up ready to sell. Bulbs can be sold in their dormant state and are known as 'resting bulbs' or flowering when they are called 'in the green'.

However, as most people like to see the flower 'in the flesh' we do sell a small selection in pots when we open in February.

Some interesting packages have been arriving at our home, after which there is a flurry of activity to plant, label and log. We have increased our stock by buying 'in the green' and 'resting' bulbs. We also have to thank Sheila's sister, Margot, for her generous donations of snowdrops from her collection at 'Dragons' in Chelmsford, Essex (See National Garden Scheme website). The drop count has increased by over thirty varieties so far in readiness for our opening in February 2021, particularly the yellow ones and there is even an orange one. Perhaps we may even buy Pink Panther and we'll let you guess what colour that one is! Snowdrops are so different to the more 'normal' garden plants giving us so much joy and hope for the winter season. They have lots of perhaps not considered advantages: they provide precious nectar for our neighbour's bees at a time when there is truly little else in bloom; they pierce through frost, the snow and even fallen leaves in sheer determination to be seen. The first of this genus is due to flower in October and we bid a fond farewell to the last in April, giving us six months of pleasure. When the sun is out, they open their skirts so as to be seen in full glory. We shall be opening our garden early 2021 and look forward to seeing you in January/ February.

Sheila and Ian Cole, Haute Vienne

A mountain to climb

My house is situated on a hill with a magnificent 180-degree view of the Pyrenees. Much of the garden is on a steep slope. Originally there was no garden here just a few trees.



For many years it was a holiday home and only visited for roughly half a dozen weeks per year. During that time some major structural work was done on the garden.

I designed some terracing, not in the classical sense, but using the contours of the land as well as experimenting with some trial plantings, but invariably returned to the game of hunt the plants among the weeds!

Subsequently as time went on, I began a long and interesting journey of discovery (in practical terms a journey of trial and error) to find plants that would survive in full sun with no watering. The soil here is heavy clay so often unworkable – too wet or too dry. One issue that I had was that I had no literature to help as it is not a true Mediterranean climate due to some heavy frosts during the winter months.



in the gravel garden. Only the pots and raised vegetable beds are watered though the latter are heavily mulched with straw. The garden is ecological, and I am a firm believer that this needs to be the future – gardening in tandem with nature and not against it.

Most of the planting is herbaceous. The plants that have adapted really well and self-seed profusely include *Gaura lindheimeri*, *Verbena bonariensis*, *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire', *Penstemon* 'Huskers Red' as well as various *Euphorbias*. The three annuals that self-seed prolifically are *Nigella*, *Ammi majus* and *Cosmos*



Once a plant is established, I find that many just self-seed, often in tiny cracks along the walls. I always plant small plants, and only between November and February as the plants then have time to establish their root systems before flowering.

The way we water, if we water at all, is an occasional heavy soaking as I believe this is the best way to train the roots to go downwards looking for water. In other words, sprinklers are the

worst way to water not only for the plants but also for the environment.

The summer of 2020 has been exceptionally hot and dry and there have been days when I felt almost cruel looking at some very tired and bedraggled plants, but after about twenty years of cultivating a dry garden I have not given in to temptation, and eventually, in early September 31mm of rain fell over two days. Not much, but just enough to make a small difference!

I hope that my experiences will encourage other gardeners to work with nature. Climate and soil vary considerably across France so for those who wish to lessen their burden of long hours of watering it is perhaps the moment to carefully choose the right plants for the right situation.

June Williamson, Ariège

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