**Annual Conference**

26th and 27th Aril 2017, The Botanic Cottage, Royal botanic Gardens Edinburgh.

The 21st annual conference was held over two days, upstairs in Professor John Hope’s lecture room in the stunningly restored Botanic cottage at the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh. The botanic cottage was once the main entrance to the botanic garden at its former site in Leith walk, saved from demolition it was taken brick by brick to the Inverleith Garden and rebuilt, where it now forms the hub of the garden’s community outreach programmes.

**Conference day 1**

Simon Toomer, PlantNetwork chair welcomed delegates and introduced the new branding for PlantNetwork and outlined the theme of the conference, how collectively we can connect skills and engage people.

Richard Baines, Curator of Logan Botanical Garden kicked off the day with a talk about his experiences of plant hunting partnerships. His talk about expeditions to Vietnam and Chile outlined the importance of finding the right partners, ensuring that the trip is mutually beneficial to all to ensure success; ensuring permissions are secured, finding good local contacts as well as the importance of thinking differently when it comes to putting together a team. Closer to home Richard talked about how Logan engages with a diverse range partners to raise the garden’s profile.

<http://www.rbge.org.uk/the-gardens/logan>

Martin Gardener of the RBGE gave a passionate talk about the successes and challenges of the International Conifer Conservation Programme’s ex-situ and in-situ programmes. 25 years has been spent building wild origin collections, which have been distributed to a network of sites, over 146 in the UK alone. Finding appropriate, sustainable host sites for over 20,000 plants is challenging and requires careful assessment. Martin also raised the need to establish propagation protocols that ensure genetic diversity in ex-situ collections.

<http://threatenedconifers.rbge.org.uk>

Chris Bisson of the Eden Project outlined ‘Eden on Prescription’, a pioneering social prescribing partnership programme that uses the power of their iconic setting to improve health, social ties and wellbeing. Users are referred by GP’s and secondary care services to take part in a range of projects such as Lunch clubs, Walking groups and a dedicated Horticultural therapy space. 4000 service users are supported and already GP’s are reporting a significant reduction in hospital admissions.

<http://www.edenproject.com/eden-story/our-ethos/eden-on-prescription#VGwOc43wudZEe2US.97>

After a delicious lunch, Simon Toomer conducted the 21st AGM, updating on finances and membership stats, outlining the challenges, the need to define a clear purpose, communicating in the modern world and the goal of finding financial security. Nominations to the executive board were proposed and seconded. Simon then opened the floor to ideas for future conferences.

Jenny Foulkes, RBGE’s Community Engagement Manager conducted a garden tour of the demonstration garden and outlined the many community projects that form the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh’s outreach programme. This was followed by the chance for delegates to explore the garden themselves.

<http://www.rbge.org.uk/whats-on/ediblegardening>

Alisdair Hood, Curator University of Dundee Botanic Garden gave a hugely entertaining and engaging talk about the art of ‘brass necking it’, how if you don’t ask you don’t get and with a bit of a brass neck you may be surprised what you can secure. Alisdair also outlined the importance of finding creative collaborations with Academic departments at the University of Dundee as well as the wider community to embed the garden into the wider community.

<https://www.dundee.ac.uk/botanic/>

Philip Turvil, Royal Botanical Gardens Kew, reported on Kew’s national outreach initiative ‘Grow Wild’. A mass engagement programme designed to get people interested in plants and fungi it uses seed kits of native flowers to facilitate community led projects. Grow wild connects with over 200 partner organisations and the findings of the programme report after being involved with the project people are changing their behaviours with 30% of people going onto to be further involved in doing something for nature.

<https://www.growwilduk.com>

**Conference day 2**

Simon Milne, RBGE, Regius Keeper welcomed delegates to the gardens and spoke of his commitment to the garden’s mission to inspire and include people. He spoke of his delight at how the many community projects had helped to transform the garden culture at Edinburgh. Simon also spoke of the importance of developing partnerships be they engaging with the natural capital agenda, plant diplomacy or initiatives to foster local and global communities.

Julian Ives of DragonFli td, showcased the work of his company and the developments in biological integrated pest management. In this age of diminishing chemical controls DragonFli want to bring the many recent advances made in IPM in the production horticulture sector to the amenity sector and to increase awareness of the potential benefits of biological controls.

<http://dragonfli.co.uk/natural-pest-control>

Emma McNamara, National trust Gardens and Parks Consultant gave a talk about the many and varies collaborations the Trust engages in both domestic and international. Emma also talked about her PhD work on spatial analysis of visitors for conservation management of cultural heritage sites, showing us some results of what her GPS visitor tracking has revealed about how visitors impact and flow around sites, fascinating data which peaked a lot of interest and discussion.

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/ktp>

Natalie Chivers, Curator of Treborth Botanical Garden then restored my faith in humanity with a talk about the amazing Friends of Treborth volunteers whose efforts along with Natalie helped to save Treborth from closure after the university withdrew support for the garden in 2006. As well as the volunteers’, students protested by chaining themselves to trees, sitting in their pants and demonstrated to stop the university removing the funding for heating the glasshouses which would have led to certain death for the collection. This story should be made into a film!

<http://www.treborthbotanicgarden.org>

Rosie Walker, Senior project Officer for The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) gave a talk on how through Citizen Science TCV engages with communities across the country to create projects to record data about the natural world which is used by a wide range of bodies to support conservation science whilst bringing community health and wellbeing benefits.

<https://www.tcv.org.uk/news/communities-having-fun-stirling>

Susan Priestley, Freelance arts project and development manager gave a talk about her work with engagement projects that bring together artists and scientists. Observing that Art and horticultural engagement projects seem to have shared aims of fostering health and wellbeing. Showing us some stunning printmaking images produced by the leaping Salmon projects at Hexham, Northumberland that uses the Japanese printmaking art of Gyotaku. This literally means using objects (Salmon and riverbank flora) to produce prints. Susan is passionate about creating cross sector collaborations and is keen to connect with anyone in PlantNetwork to explore collaborations.

<http://www.northernprint.org.uk/news/ten-plants-ten-printmakers.html>

Questions and discussion followed with discussion about the induction process for volunteers and about the availability of visitor tracking technology.

Anne Steele, Head of Heritage Gardening for the National Trust for Scotland gave a presentation about the many collaborative partnerships the National Trust for Scotland are involved in, including partnerships with RBGE with a pan-Scotland focus on data sharing, conservation, safe sites and bio-security. Partnerships with Scotland’s Gardens, National Tree Collections of Scotland, National trusts around the world. Anne also outlined the many community, Artistic and Research partnerships the trust engages with.

<http://www.nts.org.uk/Home/>

Liliana Derewnicka’s, Education Co-ordinator of Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI), presentation gave an overview of the Communities in Nature project, how the best practice was collected and disseminated and the findings of the 2015 Calouste Gulbenkion Foundation’s project review. Leading to the recommendations that outline the need to: Establish a community of practice, develop skills and capacities and the incorporation of the ‘social role’ into Botanic Gardens.

<http://www.bgci.org/public-engagement/communities_in_nature/?sec=education&id=communities_in_nature>

I attended the conference as a student of RBGE’s Planstmanship BSc/HnD Horticulture course and found the fascinating presentations and discussions stimulating and helpful in giving me a big picture view of all the things going on at the top of Horticulture.

Although the level of experience and knowledge in the room was potentially intimidating it was such a pleasure to be surrounded by passionate engaging people and really refreshing in a time of divisions all around, to be in a space where people were just interested in progressive engagement and partnerships.

*Stephen Willis*

 *Plantsmanship Student*

*RBGE*