

# Birkbeck Garden History Group Newsletter



Autumn 2025 No 70

## A New Style Newsletter

The BGHG newsletter has been restyled in this issue. It has been decided to omit the longer articles about BGHG activities and to include only news items and, occasionally, announcements of books of interest, plus the all-important Events page at the end. Contributions to the newsletter would be most welcome.

The BGHG website continues to be updated every month by Barbara Deason. It contains a calendar of lectures and talks and other garden history events, a section on new publications and an area for members which includes this year's newsletters. See the website at Birkbeck Garden History Group.

## The Walled Garden at Benton End

BGHG members will be familiar with the Garden Museum project to revitalise Benton End in Suffolk, former home of artist and plantsman Cedric Morris and his partner Arthur Lett-Haine, and the location of the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing. In early October, the Garden Museum announced the award of a £294,221 grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund for its 'Benton End Revived' project. This grant will enable the completion of the first stage of the project.

The restoration of the gardens is a separate project and work has been under way since 2021 to clear the ground and identify the plants that have survived. James Horner was appointed Head Gardener in early 2023. In June 2025, the Museum launched an appeal for funds to recover the walled garden section and rebuild Morris's collection of Benton irises. The BGHG committee decided to donate £500 to the appeal. We intend to plan a visit to Benton End, preferably when the irises are in flower but it is likely that the restoration will not be complete in time for 2026. We will try to schedule the trip in 2027 when the gardens will be more established.



*Benton End House from the garden*

*Photo: Rose Wallo, CC-BY-SA 4.0*

## An Autumnal Foray

One of the late joys of our season of mists and mellow fruitfulness that gets no mention in Keats's famous poem is the sudden appearance of mushrooms – the fruiting bodies of fungi – in our gardens, fields and woods in late October and November. Down House, home of biologist Charles Darwin from 1842 to 1882, is exceptionally fortunate in this regard. The lawns and the woodland around Darwin's famous thinking path, the sandwalk, have not been ploughed in many decades, which has allowed the networks of fungal mycelium to continue to grow undisturbed in the soil. While Darwin himself wrote little about the fungi growing locally, surveys in recent years have recorded nearly 500 different species on the 18 acres of the site, now managed by English Heritage.

At the end of October 2025, a group of Down House Volunteers, led by our mycologist, set out to examine the current crop. One part of the main lawn behind the house has been designated a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation owing to the richness of its collection. Here we found slippery jacks, puff balls, and parrot, scarlet, butter, pink ballerina and snowy waxcaps. Along the hedge dead holly leaves and pine cones were being colonised by tiny white and brown mushrooms. And in the woods, dead branches were providing homes for many more. In just two hours we found 42 different species, a most rewarding morning in the sunshine!



*From left to right: Slippery Jack; selection of grassland waxcaps plus a puffball (sectioned); pink ballerina waxcap; yellow curtaining crust mushroom*

*Photos: Sheila Poole*

**Sheila Poole**

## Film Library at the Garden Museum

The Garden Museum is building up a collection of films online on a range of topics including Art & Gardens, Garden Design, and Garden History. Many of the films are recordings of lectures held at the Garden Museum, durations ranging from three minutes to over an hour. There are several films about Derek Jarman and Prospect Cottage, one on the Brazilian designer Roberto Burle Marx and one on creating a gravel garden. Some of the films, such as the ones on Penelope Hobhouse and Beth Chatto, have been available for many years but there are several new releases, such as Tim Richardson speaking about the English landscape garden. One film shows Charlotte Molesworthy and her topiary garden at Balmoral Cottage in Kent which BGHG visited in 2023.



*Topiary at Balmoral Cottage*

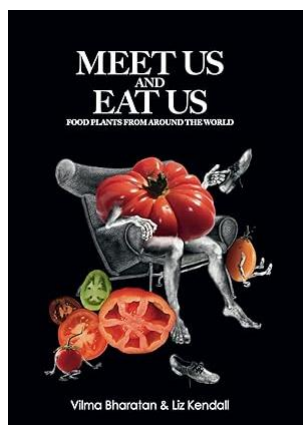
*Photo: Caroline Foley*

Three of the films feature Benton End; the Story of Benton End is the first followed by one on Elizabeth David at Benton End and the third about Benton End irises with Sarah Cook walking around the garden with Matt Collins.

The full collection of films can be found at Films – The Garden Museum; scroll down the page to find ways of filtering the library by theme or by searching for words.

## Book Review

*Meet Us and Eat Us: Food plants from around the world* by Vilma Bharatan and Liz Kendall, The Edge of the Woods, 2024



The lipstick tree, *Bixa orellana* a traditional medicinal plant in South and Central America for centuries, today provides around 70% of the world's natural colourings. It is non-toxic and high in vitamin A. If E160b is listed on a food ingredient label, then you are eating the lipstick tree. Its red-orange colouring, variously known as annatto, achiote or roucou, comes from its red seeds and is used to add colour to a wide range of foods including cheese and margarine. This is just one fascinating description of a plant that is so integrated into our daily lives but is so little heard of.

This book presents a journey through the world of food plants, blending scientific detail with historical anecdotes, beautiful illustrations and, unusually for such a book, poetry. Ninety common food plants and their botanical families are explored, ranging from *Amaranthaceae*, which includes beetroot and Swiss chard, to known for the cardamoms, turmeric and ginger. The book begins with a brief introduction to food plant families stating that knowing the botanical name links us with the knowledge 'accumulated through generations'. It moves on to the necessity of food variety for food security and the dangers of narrowing the range of cultivation for any foodstuff. It is an appeal for us to get to know more about what we eat, and how it is grown and processed. It aims to engage, entertain and inform.

The descriptions of each of the ninety plants include their original geographical location and how they spread their range through trade and cultivation, plus a historical anecdote or two. For example, the Battle of Marathon (490 BCE) was won in a field of fennel or '*marathon*' to give it its Greek name. Broad beans have been feeding humans and animals from 5000 BCE; remains of cultivated broad beans were found in the city of Jericho. Tolerant of altitude and heat, rich in protein and phosphorous which is good for bones and teeth, broad beans spread from the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East to Europe, Africa and Asia. The quince has romantic associations, sometimes considered to be the golden apples of the Hesperides in Greek mythology. In Portugal they are known as '*marmelo*'; the British later borrowed this name attaching it to the breakfast preserve marmalade. Quince was also a traditional remedy for constipation.

Beautiful photographs capture the edible roots, fruits or seeds of each plant, drawing attention to their external appearance and the food within. The illustrations add a humorous touch, depicting various food items as small people engaged in culinary activities as do the poems which describe the properties of each fruit or vegetable in rhyme.

The book is good fun with a sound scientific base and will appeal to children and adults alike. It attempts the difficult task of delivering sound nutritional and horticultural information in a way that is accessible, interesting and perhaps sparking lively discussion. It may even encourage culinary experimentation with food plants that readers have not tried before.

**Patricia Maitland**

## Events

### BGHG Programme 2026

|           |                                                         |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| February  | AGM and Lecture                                         |
| March     | To be confirmed                                         |
| 22 April  | Bedgebury Pinetum and<br>Scotney Castle, Kent           |
| May       | Chenies Manor, Bucks and<br>Church Gardens, Uxbridge    |
| June      | Doddington Place and Godinton<br>Gardens, Kent          |
| July      | Upton Grey Manor and The<br>Vyne, Hampshire             |
| August    | Caisson Gardens, Somerset and<br>Iford Manor, Wiltshire |
| September | Nuneham Courtney and<br>Worcester College, Oxford       |
| October   | Hylands House, Essex                                    |
| November  | Winter Lecture                                          |

### Essex Gardens Trust Talk In-person

**Saturday 15 November 14.00** *Ellen Willmott and the Alpine Garden at Warley Place*, Sandra Lawrence. Room MAB 304, Lord Ashcroft Building, Anglia Ruskin University, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford CM1 1SQ,  
Email: [info@essexgardenstrust.org.uk](mailto:info@essexgardenstrust.org.uk),  
Web: EGT-Ellen-Willmott

### Oxford Botanic Garden Lecture

#### In-person and Online

**Thursday 20 November 19.00** *Trees Through Time: Exploring the evolution of trees and forests*, Professor Jennifer McElwain. Oxford University Museum of Natural History, Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3PW. Tel: 01865 610300,  
Email: [admin@obg.ox.ac.uk](mailto:admin@obg.ox.ac.uk),  
Web: Oxford-BG-Trees-and-Forests

### RHS Library Talk and Walk In-person

**Friday 21 November 11.00–12.00** *Wisley Garden Jellicoe Canal – before and after*. Hilltop Library, RHS Wisley Garden, GU23 6QB. Tel: 01483 212428, Email: [library@rhs.org.uk](mailto:library@rhs.org.uk),  
Web: RHS-Wisley-Event

### London Parks and Gardens Lectures Online

**Tuesday 2 December 18.00** *The Blitz as a Catalyst for Greening London*, Katharine Hersee.

**Tuesday 13 January 2026 18.00** *The Influence of Migration on Community Food Growing, Gardens and their Gardeners*, Mary Kuhn.

**Tuesday 10 February 2026 18.00** *The Restoration of Abney Park: Breathing new Life into a Magnificent Garden Cemetery and Nature Reserve – A Community View from Abney Park Trust*, Tom Walker. Email: [office@londongardenstrust.org](mailto:office@londongardenstrust.org),  
Web: LPG-Winter-Lectures

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### Gardens Trust Lectures Online

**Wednesdays from 19 November 18.00** *Favourite Gardens*, a new four-part series among many other lectures at various times.

Email: [enquiries@thegardenstrust.org](mailto:enquiries@thegardenstrust.org),

Web: GT-Lectures

### The London Archives Talk In-person

**Tuesday 16 December 12.30 pm** *Modern Maps of London*, Vincent Westbrook. 40 Northampton Road, London EC1R 0HB.

Web: Lon-Archives-Modern-Maps

### Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust Lecture

#### Saturday 10 January 2026 14.30–16.30 In-person

*Small but perfectly formed: a history of entrance lodges*, Dr Victoria Thomson. Aylesbury Methodist Church and Centre, Buckingham Street, Aylesbury HP20 2NQ. Web: BGT-Entrance-Lodges,  
Email: [enquiries@bucksgardenstrust.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@bucksgardenstrust.org.uk)

### Cardiff University Course Online

**Wednesdays 21 January–25 March 2026 10.00–12.00** *Undocumented Pioneers: A History of Women and Gardens*, Stephen Parker.

Email: [learn@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:learn@cardiff.ac.uk), Tel: 0292 087 0000,

Web: Cardiff-Women-and-Gardens

### Suffolk Gardens Trust Lecture Online

**Thursday 22 January 2026 18.00** *Derek Jarman's Garden – Prospect Cottage*, Jill Francis.

Email: [suffolkgt.secretary@gmail.com](mailto:suffolkgt.secretary@gmail.com),

Web: SuffolkGT-Derek-Jarman

### Garden Masterclass Lecture Online

**Wednesday 11 February 18.00–19.00** *'Sweet Disorder' – Managing the Garden at Charleston*, Harry Hoblyn. Email: [info@gardenmasterclass.org](mailto:info@gardenmasterclass.org),  
Web: GMC-Charleston

### Kew Mutual Improvement Society Lecture Online and In-person

**Monday 16 March 18.00–19.00** *What is the future of horticulture in public parks? The pressures facing parkland horticulture, from green refuge to economic self-sufficiency*, Matthew Pottage. Lady Lisa Sainsbury Lecture Theatre, Jodrell Gate, Kew Gardens, Richmond TW9 3DS. Email: [kmis@kew.org](mailto:kmis@kew.org), Web: KMIS-Public-Parks

### Oxford Lifelong Learning Oxford University Study Weekend In-Person

**29–31 May 2026** *Visiting Historic Gardens: Past, Present and Future*. Rewley House, 1 Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JA. Tel: 01865 270368,  
Email: [ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk),  
Web: OxfordLL-Visiting-Historic-Gardens

**See BGHG website link Lectures & Talks for more events**