ventnorensis

Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society Journal

'Friends groups are best things since sliced bread. They give time. They do it for nothing. They put up with brickbats, yet still do an amazing job.'

Mike Fitt OBE, President, Pages 14 and 19

VOLUME 29 NO. 1 SPRING/SUMMER 2022

Spring/summer opening times

9am till 5pm daily. Plantation Room Café is open daily from 9am, serving breakfast, lunch and cake until 4.30pm. *edulis* Restaurant is open for special events. For opening times, and for information about special events for adults or children in the Visitor Centre, details of the café, and for Plant Sales and Greenhouse, please call the Garden on 855387 or check website, www.botanic.co.uk.

Exhibitions/Events

Almost daily the Garden hosts classes such as Yoga, Dance, Tai Chi and Qigong. See the website for details: www.botanic.co.uk/whats-on/

SPECIAL EVENTS

MAY

11th 2:00pm: Botany Club, Bluebells and Spring Flowers in America Woods, Shanklin. All welcome. See Page 20.

22nd 8.30am-10.00am: Rise Isle of Wight. New morning movement and dance party with an emphasis on having fun, improving health and starting the day in a positive way. 25 mins of Movement and Yoga, 55 mins dancing to live DJ with Our Girl G. Glitter station and water available. 10 mins chat and close. Bring mat, water bottle. From £16.76. www.thebodytalks.online/rise/

JUNE

3rd - 5th: Wellbeing Vibe 2022. A weekend of activities such as yoga, Tai chi, Qigong, dance, music breath work, singing and meditation classes. Also stalls selling produce from the garden and wellbeing products. Ticket includes parking and Garden access.

9th: Friends' Outing to RHS Garden Wisley: Contact Sally to check availability

22nd 2:00pm: Botany Club Beaver Walk. All welcome. See Page 20

JULY

3rd 8.30am-10.00am: Rise Isle of Wight. New morning movement and dance party with an emphasis on having fun, improving health and starting the day in a positive way. 25 mins of Movement and Yoga, 55 mins dancing to live DJ with Our Girl G. Glitter station and water available. 10 mins chat and close. Bring mat, water bottle. From £16.76. www.thebodytalks.online/rise/

THE DAILY WELLBEING PROGRAMME:

please check availability and booking details via botanic.co.uk/wellbeing

MONDAYS: 10.00am-11.00am: Tai Chi with Tony Bellis (Intermediate).

1.30am-3.00am: Creative Dance with Michelle Hainsworth: A lovely, joyful, expressive and inclusive class combining elements of modern dance with ballet. Booking essential.

TUESDAYS: 9.30am-11am Yoga, Trish Campbell: Echium Room.

10.00am-11:00: Release, with Dani Johnson of Firebird: Dance your own way. All welcome, including those with two left feet!

12.00 noon-1.00pm: Qigong with Gary. In New Zealand Garden. Gentle, for inner tranquility and relief of chronic health problems.

WEDNESDAYS: 9.30am-10.30am: Tai Chi with Tony Bellis (Beginners). Top Lawn. Loose clothing, soft shoes. antbellis@aol.com

10:30-11:30: Tai Chi with Tony Bellis (Intermediate). As above.

12:00-1:00: Sunshine Sessions with Firebird: As above.

THURSDAYS: 10:30am-11:30am: Re-flow Yoga with Helena Slow fusion of yoga styles for core strength and spinal mobility. £10, or 10 classes for £85. lennybiggs@hotmail.com.

10:30am-11:30am: Burlesque Chair Dancing with Coco Monroe. Sassy fun way to work out.

12:00pm-1:00pm: Qigong with Gary. In New Zealand Garden or inside if bad weather.

FRIDAYS: 9.30am-11.00am: British Yoga Wheel with Mark Holden: Friendly class for harmony and wellbeing, balancing relaxation with postures and breath in range of movements.

11.15am-12.15am: Tai Chi with Tony Bellis (Advanced). Top Lawn: Slow body movements.

6:00pm-7:00pm: Beginners' Salsa with Helena: Fun and uplifting for beginners to Cuban salsa rhythm. Some line dancing, and partner work.

SATURDAYS: 10:00am-11:00am: Re-flow Yoga with Helena. Fun and uplifting for beginners to Cuban salsa rhythm. Some line dancing, and partner work.

Front Cover: Japanese Garden with Japanese lanterns donated by the Friends. Photo by Colin Smith

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recycle

Wood Wide Web

Has a subterranean fungal network led to VBG's eventual success with Silver Trees? **Chris Kidd** ponders the Proteacea family

A tall ask: **Leucadendron argenteum**

Some plants are destined to break your heart, and those seem to be the ones we want to grow. Not for us the easy route of hardy shrubs, we hanker for the difficult plants. The Proteacea family is filled with such difficult genera: Lomatia, Telopea, Embothrium and worst of all, Leucadendron and its flighty, fluffy silver debutante *L. argenteum.* These Silver Trees represent a group of plants that more than one Curator has tried to introduce to Ventnor. Admittedly, such plants are a tall ask on anything but frost free acidic soil, but even when great efforts are made to create such conditions (and low nutrients to boot) it's frustrating to see them wither. On inspection, the roots are nearly always "shy", not leaving their protective pot to venture into the cultivated surround. In most cases the roots have not even moved beyond the propagule. We have planted dozens in different micro-locations and all died. However, in 2007 we planted five small Silver Trees from Cornwall, and one has defied the odds. Another, from 2011, found a foothold and then a flurry of accessions, from two different sources, all manage to grow prodigiously. So what happened?

Elsewhere in *Ventnorensis* we explore the possibility that a subterranean fungal network has enabled us to grow the elusive and difficult Silver Tree *Leucadendron argenteum* at VBG. The study of mychorrhizal associations has grown substantively since the revelation of the partnership between orchids and fungi was revealed to be crucial in orchid germination. This arcane knowledge, once viewed as magical mystery, is slowly revealing itself to be the tip of the mycorrhizal fungi-berg. Beneath our feet is a system more enormously complex and scientifically absorbing than we ever imagined. Our inherited botanical viewpoint of plants as specimens in isolation needs to be reviewed; the Ventnor Method is indeed growing more than plants in association with each other as they would in the wild.

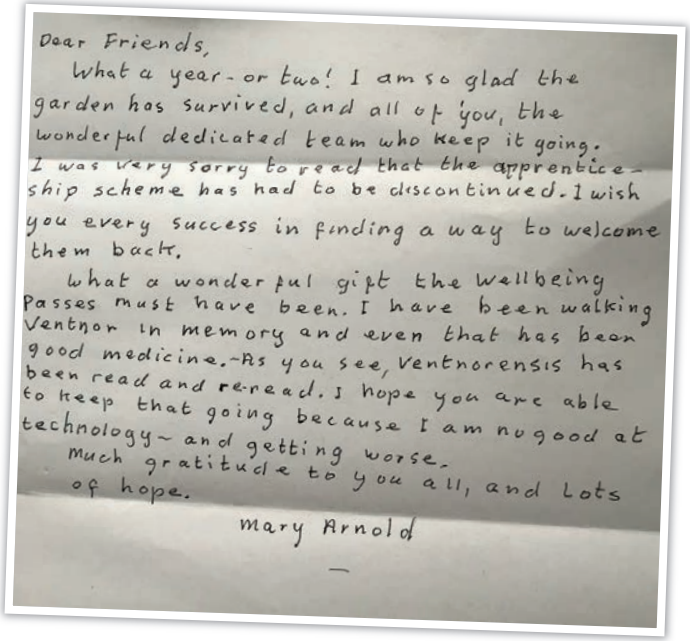
It is two years since Merlin Sheldrake wrote the bestseller *Entangled Life,* drawing together the known facts of the subterranean community and postulating the comparison with cerebral connectivity and complexity. As crossover books go, translating cold science into the mass market, Sheldrake has done a great job in endearing style. He didn't coin the phrase Wood Wide Web, but you get the point from those three well-chosen words. *Entangled Life* is a good read, go and buy a copy – or I've one you can borrow in my office.

And take a look at the Silver Tree. It might flower.

Memories of the Garden

A letter from our Friend Mary Arnold made us think afresh about the lovely memories that the Garden holds for so many of us. We invite you to send us your special memories of Ventnor Botanic Garden. Below, Dr Belinda Stuart-Moonlight loves VBG so much she modelled her own garden on it, using seeds bought from VBG.

Send memories to rosalind.whistance@gmail.com or post (we will safely return any printed photos) to Rosalind Whistance, Editor Ventnorensis, 10 Martine Close, Freshwater, PO40 9ND



Dear Friends,

What a year - or two! I am so glad the garden has survived, and all of you, the wonderful dedicated team who keep it going. I was very sorry to read that the apprentice-ship scheme has had to be discontinued. I wish you every success in finding a way to welcome them back.

What a wonderful gift the wellbeing passes must have been. I have been walking Ventnor in memory and even that has been good medicine. As you see, Ventnorensis has been read and re-read. I hope you are able to keep that going because I am no good at technology - and getting worse.

Much gratitude to you all, and Lots of hope.

Mary Arnold

Pic of letter: Mary's letter, after reading Ventnorensis cover to cover

Remnants of the winter after a balmy 70°F weekend in a VBG-inspired (and from VBG-seeds) garden in the South East of England - Dr Belinda Stuart-Moonlight

Chairman's Message

Farewell from **John Bagshawe**

This is my last contribution to *Ventnorensis* as Chairman of the Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society. I have decided that it is time to pass the mantle on. It has been a real privilege and honour to be Chairman of such a wonderful charity, and I have appreciated the support I have received.

When I became Chairman in February 2019 I had high hopes for the future of Ventnor Botanic Garden. Then came Covid-19 and all changed. The past two years have been very difficult for me as Chairman and I sincerely hope that the person taking over in this role will fare better. I will still be volunteering at the Garden and being part of the Friends' Society.

Ventnor Botanic Garden is such a wonderful place and I hope that it can thrive in the future with everyone working together in harmony.

Stalwart volunteer: John's favourite job is clearing Echium once they are past their prime

Dear members . . .

Sophora: New Zealand colour

This Issue of *Ventnorensis* finds us, in part, in triumphal mood. We are delighted to introduce you to VBG's new Head Gardener, Michelle Cain, on **Page 20:** it was a joy to chat to her about her role, her ideas and her plans as she settles in to Ventnor Botanic Garden. We are also cock-a-hoop that Mike Fitt has agreed to step into those very big shoes left by Brian Kidd to become our President. Interviewing him was a revelation. **Page 14.** Sometimes *Ventnorensis* isn't big enough.

And then there are our apprentices. We can't help giving ourselves a pat on the back when we read about the achievement of Ellis Gant, **Page 21,** who was the last of the apprentices in the Friends' Society's Apprenticeship Scheme. Ellis's path was inspired by one of our first apprentices, David Pearce, who as reported in the previous Issue is now Head Gardener, no less, at the prestigious Whatley Manor hotel. As you'll find when you read his learned piece on **Page 16,** he is not only a great gardener but a gifted communicator too.

Instrumental in setting up the scheme and supporting the apprentices was Sally Peake, and on Page 8 she tells us what has happened to the other young horticulturalists who started out at VBG. Ever supportive too, is John Bagshawe, our Chairman. Through all the recent difficulties he has gone above and beyond to buttress the Garden, and has chosen now to step back. He will remain a Friend, a volunteer and a committee member. Thank goodness for that. See Chairman's Message, **Opposite Page.** We welcome Val Pitts as she steps up from Membership Sec to Chairman. See AGM report, **Page 19.**

Far, far away, Deborah Coulson tells us about her hugely successful garden, the Nairobi Physic Garden, **Page 28.** Maybe Sally could organise a trip there some time! Luckily we have our own Botany Club, kindly organised by new Committee member, Anne Hornett, and Brigette Sibbick, where Friends and friends alike can turn up and join in, in exchange for a fiver in the hat. **Page 22.**

Of course we are privileged to have our own experts, our Curator Chris Kidd who on **Page 6** leads us through another edition of his longterm plans for the Garden, this time in South Africa. Thankfully, Chris Watts is, after all, going to carry on providing our weather reports (see previous issue): and Colin Pope introduces us to some plants which pique his interest, **Page 10.** He also gave a refresher tour of the Garden to our volunteer guides, **Page 24,** an example of how much our volunteers in all areas are cherished, and rewarded by friendship - and sometimes by lunch! See Pages **22-25.**

Finally, hot off the press, we congratulate Mike Fitt, recipient of this year's Harold Hillier Award, **Page 19.**

Roz Whistance

Please may I have contributions for the Autumn/Winter edition by 15th September. Email rosalind.whistance@gmail.com

PLANTING PROFILE

South Africa

By **Chris Kidd, Curator**

This is the next of a series of articles showing the Friends the guiding documentation for the future of this Garden's plant collection, area by area. The actual document behind this is fairly bleak and minimal, taking function over form, so I've tried to lubricate it rather - I'm sure you'll get the gist. As with all plans, these may be aspirational and subject to change. It's worth bearing in mind that I've not seen a single planning document from the Hillier era, or the council era for that matter. Both were concerned with the melody, intrigue and beauty of populating these remarkable acres with rare and exotic plants. In some areas we shoehorned some of Hillier's collection into the semblance of a modern botanic garden layout, and in doing so we lost integrity, but with South Africa, prior to our development there simply was nothing of note to remove. Next in the series is the South African Section.

South Africa

Setting

Created starting 2004 in an area to which Hillier referred imaginatively as Area P. This is an East/West valley with south and north facing slopes. No residual Victorian planting was made, the area was part of the wooded grounds of the Royal National Hospital and used by patients for walking exercise, bisected by a very narrow tortuous path. A few moribund trees and unpleasant shrubs were clustered in the more fertile spots; a very large and poorly purple beech once stood in the middle. This was removed in impressive style utilising a crane, the stump removed later. A triangular area is bordered to the west by a stone wall.

Development

This section was created as part of the Southern Hemisphere Garden, a Friend's Society matched funding project with Living Spaces from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The project ultimately brought into intense cultivation 25 per cent of the Garden previously underutilised, stretching from the entrance to the cricket club. A steep topography, the solution started with landscaping and pathway construction to allow the vehicle access previously unavailable. The difficult steep bank and shallow soil was tamed initially with terraces of local stone built by a work-experience group supervised by Pete Froud, but deep shadow from evergreen oak created a dingy, dry feel. The Southern Hemisphere project profoundly changed the nature of this area: the removal of over-mature trees and stumps was a huge and often hair-raising task. Widening and metaling paths allowed drainage of cold air into lower areas of the Garden, freeing banks from hoar frost.

The "triangle" sits in isolation from neighbouring soil, with a macadam and wall perimeter wall, so this was an opportunity to create an acidic island bed to favour exotic natural South African calcifuges. Hundreds of tons of soil were mechanically removed and replaced with more acidic compost.

Botanic Direction

The plants from South Africa that populate this area are predominantly non-woody, short-lived perennials. As such, these plants are more vulnerable to cold than any other geographical representation at VBG. We see a fairly regular destruction of the plant community in cold winters, where up to 80 per cent of the available planting area is lost. The temptation in replanting is to adopt a glorified summer bedding style using colourful cultivars, emboldened by the principal that so many retina burning bedding plants had origins as South African species. The correct approach is to replant with species which were forerunners to bedding, alongside more esoteric species to include annuals, woody perennials and bulbs, making a rich varied tapestry that natural selection will whittle as the Ventnor Method comes to bear.

The cold-draining path system has been compromised at its northernmost end in return for Garden security. During very cold nights these southerly banks showed clear cold drains as brown scorched streams from the higher car park. As the highest plantings on the banks are now woody, they prevent such damage, so replacement should take this into consideration. The south facing banks have never successfully supported Proteaceae shrubs or Restios, probably due to alkaline mortar inclusion. These plants should be restricted to the "triangle". The triangle itself was heavily planted with Proteaceae. These have proven to be spectacular though short lived. The dream of successful Silver Trees has been a hard fought battle: multiple attempts failed, but now one large specimen is at flowering size. [See Curator's Notes, Page 2]. Interestingly, subsequent plantings have been successful: perhaps there is undocumented mycorrhizal activity with the species and the successful tree brought its own inoculum that has now multiplied and spread throughout the available soil, allowing new plants to thrive.

Regular destruction: Cold winter in 'South Africa'

RHS Visits

Did you know that because VBGFS is affiliated to the Royal Horticultural Society, anyone wishing to visit one of their gardens is entitled to 30 per cent off the entrance price?

So if you're going to visit any RHS garden, just ask Jenny Parker, our Hon Sec, to borrow the Friends' Society discount card. jenniferparker126@hotmail.co.uk

Where are they now?

Sally Peake updates us on some of the young people who have benefitted from our support at VBG

Ellis Gant: Fast-tracked and beyond

A moment of sheer delight struck me early in March when I had a message from our last apprentice, Ellis Gant, to tell me that he had been accepted onto the Diploma course at RHS Wisley. Not only is this two-year, full-time course one of the most prestigious in the world but Ellis is the second of our apprentices in recent times to be accepted - a real tribute to the boys themselves, but also to the teaching of Trish Brenchley and the Isle of Wight College Horticultural team. I have kept loosely in touch with most of our trainees and I thought you might like to hear news of their progress.

Ellis is now at Osborne on the Historic and Botanic Garden Training Programme, a one-year studentship studying under Toby Beasley; this is the perfect adjunct to Ellis' fast-tracked apprenticeship with us, which had to be completed in just one year, rather than the two-year programme planned, due to the withdrawal of our Gift Aid scheme by the VBG-CIC. This fully vindicates the Friends' additional support for Ellis - funding extra-curricular trips to Tresco and the Royal Parks amongst opportunities closer to home.

Adam Cooke and Indi Wyatt: Impressive and vital for VBG in lockdown

Indi Wyatt completed her apprenticeship at VBG in March 2021; her vitality and enthusiasm during the lockdown periods was truly inspirational and she was sorely missed by Trish. Indi made the most of contacts on the Island, and has settled into a role at Eddington House Nursery with enthusiasm. Her plant knowledge is impressive. She continues to show an interest in garden design and stands in for Gerry Price, the Coastal Gardener, at her nursery when Gerry is needed elsewhere.

Adam Cooke came to us in 2018 with a family background in horticulture; when he completed his apprenticeship with us, he became gardener to a large house in South Wight, fully responsible for the planning and maintenance of its garden - and close enough to pop to VBG on his days off for advice. Since the sale of the property in 2021, Adam has worked on a number of contracts alongside his elder brother and his father, fulfilling his ambitions to be self-employed on the Isle of Wight.

David Pearce was our first apprentice in recent times, sponsored by the newly set-up Gift Aid scheme. David was our 'guinea-pig' in so many ways and we were all thrilled when he was accepted onto the RHS Wisley Diploma course. The development of the teenager into a young professional was hugely gratifying to see, and he has shared many

David Pearce: Our first 'guinea-pig' success story

of his opportunities with us through the pages of *Ventnorensis*. On graduation David joined the horticultural team at Highgrove, and has recently left to become the Head Gardener at the prestigious Whatley Manor Hotel near Malmesbury, Wiltshire. Having been a finalist in last year's Young Horticulturalist of the Year, David has again been shortlisted for this year's competition.

Conrad Williams came to the Garden on a work placement from the Job Centre. Shy, with no formal qualifications, his reliability and responsible work attitude endeared him to all who worked with him at VBG over several years as he transitioned to a casual paid role. When he expressed an interest in arboriculture, Chris Kidd encouraged him to look at the Level 2 course at Sparsholt, and the Friends helped with applications for bursary support. Conrad kept in touch and when he completed his course and was back on the Island selling Christmas trees as well as other 'in-between' roles, we would put together applications and offer interview advice. So I was thrilled when he was offered the role of Junior Arborist at Hillier's Arboretum at Romsey. Conrad was very happy there and several Friends enjoyed his guided tour (and his hard-won confidence). However, he never mastered the art of swinging confidently through the higher branches of trees armed with a chainsaw (something most of us can understand) therefore future roles as an arborist were unobtainable. It was back to the Coffee House in Newport for more confidence-building and support!

Conrad Williams: happy and valued

Conrad has been at Lord Heseltine's estate at Thenford near Banbury for two years, and is a happy and valued member of their estate team. Armed with his chainsaw, but with feet on the ground, Conrad helps manage Thenford's renowned arboretum, hedges and parkland. I hope to be able to arrange a trip there, for another of Conrad's guided tours.

Long-standing Friends may remember a series of French students (17/18 year olds) who came to VBG via a link between Ryde Rotarians and Chateau du Loir Rotary Club. Over five years, my husband and I hosted the youngsters for a month whilst they volunteered in the Garden, fulfilled the requirements of their technical French land-based qualification, and practised their English. One, Mathilde Tellier, chose to major in horticultural design and, on graduation, joined the *Mayenne departement* responsible for designing the municipal planting schemes for which French towns are so well known. She also has her own garden design business (www.mathildegarden.wordpress.com) offering advice with gardens and funeral plots.

I have focussed on just six young people that I have had the privilege to meet at VBG whilst they were gaining valuable experience in practical horticulture. Maybe you have more updates from students or staff members that you know? Our Members would love to know where they are now. I certainly would!

See Whatley Manor, P16; Apprentice and Beyond, P23

Imposing plants

Colin Pope on our year-round Garden

Visitors to the Garden in December are always relatively few and yet there are some interesting and unusual plants flowering which you will not see at other times. Last December, mild weather allowed two of these to flower particularly well.

Kniphofia multiflora: Giant Poker's flowers point upwards

On the South African Terraces, one final *Kniphofia* puts on a late show but this one looks very different to a typical Red-hot Poker. The Giant Poker, ***Kniphofia multiflora,*** is the tallest species in the genus and it is unusual because the individual flowers point upwards, giving the exceptionally long inflorescence a fuzzy appearance with their exerted stamens and styles. The narrow flower spikes can reach up to 2m. It is a multi-stemmed robust plant and our plant produced a total of nine inflorescences, the best display by far to date. Like other *Kniphofia* species, this is a South African species. It is an upland plant confined to marshy areas. There are two colour forms which roughly correlate with distribution, with whitish to cream flowers in the south and yellow to orange flowers further north. It is generally considered to be rather tender in this country, only surviving outside in the west. In many places where it could be grown, the late flowering would be damaged by frosts.

At the start of the Long Border, in the shelter beneath a mature pine is another imposing plant. ***Dahlia imperialis*** is known as the Tree Dahlia because of its enormous growth with thick, bamboo-like stems and large elder-like leaves. It is a native of the Central America's highlands where it can reach a height of eight metres. The Aztec name for this plant was *acocotil,* meaning water-cane. The hollow stems of Tree Dahlia were used for transporting water and as a potable source of water for hunters and travellers.

The Tree Dahlia has become a popular plant to grow in a tropical border because of its lush foliage, but it is a late flowerer and is generally

Dahlia imperialis: enormous growth

cut to the ground by frosts long before it can develop its flowers. At Ventnor, flower production does not start until December and, even if frosts are absent, salt-laden winds can quickly burn off the foliage and flower-buds; most years it does not get to flower. This last December was an exception and it produced several flowering stems opening to produce single pink flowers. In this country, *Dahlia imperialis* can never reach its full potential. When grown in Mediterranean gardens, it produces a stunning show of multiple pendulous heads of some 20 pink flowers, 10-15cm across.

My final unusual plant is an evergreen shrub or small tree, indigenous to Southern Africa and flowering in the spring and summer. The Tree Fuschia, ***Halleria lucida,*** is not a fuschia but has been given this name because of its clusters of tubular, orange to brick-red flowers. There has been a plant in the Hydrangea Dell for many years, dating back to Hillier's days, but it has not grown well having been increasingly shaded out by competing trees, in particular a large bay tree. A couple of years ago, the Bay tree was felled to clear an entrance to the New Zealand Garden for wedding parties, and the Hydrangea Dell was opened up to the light again. The Hydrangeas responded by much improved flowering and the *Halleria* put on a lot of growth and started to resume some of its true character with lush, glossy bright-green foliage on arching, drooping branches. Finally, this spring, it has produced a flush of flowers, but they are easily missed, hidden beneath foliage. *Halleria* is unusual in producing its flowers and fruits, not from the tips of its branches like most flowering trees but from its trunk, exhibiting what is known in botany as cauliflory. In fact, producing flowers directly from the stems and woody trunks of trees is a common feature of many tropical and rainforest plants but is very rarely seen in plants from more temperate climates. The Mediterranean Judas Tree, *Cercis siliquastrum,* is the only tree commonly grown in gardens which exhibits cauliflory.

Halleria lucida: 'Tree Fuchsia' but not a fuchsia

Halleria lucida is becoming popular as an ornamental tree for African gardens as it is considered to be one of the best trees for attracting birds. Sunbirds are attracted to the flowers for nectar whilst a large range of birds feed on the small, fleshy fruits. *Halleria lucida* is generally grown as a conservatory plant in this country. There is an old, semi-collapsed tree which reached 6m in height at Tresco and there are a few specimens in mainland Cornwall gardens. Otherwise, it is rarely seen outdoors.

The story of our Ventnor plant should be a lesson to us. There are many choice plants in the Garden that have succumbed to competition from other more aggressive species or are just about surviving under sub-optimal conditions. Whilst it is with great pride that many plants grown at Ventnor survive and compete well, others need a bit of horticultural attention to perform well. This is essential if we are to keep a collection of plants that is nationally important and demonstrates the potential of tender and semi-hardy plants to survive in our changing climate.

Weather in the Garden

(September 2021 to March 2022) **by Chris Watts**

Following on from the prediction in the last issue of *Ventnorensis* that the weather station only had a limited future, a few things have taken place to ensure its survival in the short term and maybe into a longer term. Fingers crossed!

September was a fine dry and sunny month, prolonging summer up to the 26th; it reversed the autumn trend towards cooler, wetter weather. It turned out much drier and slightly warmer than August, although a disappointing August wasn't hard to beat. The warmest overnight temperature of 2021 was recorded on the 8th at 18.7°C. October was wet – easily the wettest month of the year, but this was redressed by a very dry November. For what is usually one of the wettest months in any year, it was the second driest after April, and the driest November in 35 years according to records from the Ventnor Park climatological station. Air frost is also very rare in November, but two light frosts were measured late in the month, 28th and 29th.

December was exceptionally dull over the final three weeks of the year. With a daily average of around two hours of sun at this time, the period 11th – 31st should see about 42 hours, but just 8.7 hours or roughly 20 per cent were recorded. And the wettest day of this month? Christmas Day!

The New Year began with a fairly benign January (flower count 203) if ever that month can attract that sort of description, but I apply it as there was little in the way of frost or wintry precipitation. February was far more boisterous, bringing three named storms over one week. Luckily only one, Eunice, proved a bit of a problem, as it passed by on the 18th. The gardeners had some clearing up to do, and I gather a paulownia tree was a casualty.

One particular day caught my attention in March, the 16th. It was the day which saw Saharan dust mixing with rain for several hours. Late in the afternoon the rain eased away to the east, and the sun appeared low in the western sky before setting. The most stunning rainbow I have ever seen was the result; a perfect arch, double, and with vivid colours, especially so where it touched the sea. The rain in the gauge, when measured, was cloudy due to the high content of sand. Lovely spring-like weather prevailed from the 17th to the 27th, but then came the sting in the tail – wintry showers on the 31st.

	Mean Temp °C	Rain mm	Wet Days (1+ mm)	Soil Temp °C 1ft depth	[1]	[2]	[3]
September	*17.4++*	*44.5----*	*6*	*n/a*	*8.2*	*0*	*16.1*
October	*14.2++*	*151.3++*	*13*	*14.7*	*6.0*	*0*	*26.6*
November	*9.0*	*10.9----*	*3*	*10.5*	*-0.5*	*2*	*3.7*
December	*8.5++*	*100.0+*	*15*	*8.5*	*1.0*	*0*	*18.7*
Year 2021	*11.7+*	*873.2++*	*114*	*n/a*	*-2.6*	*16*	*46.0*
January	*6.8+*	*53.0----*	*12*	*7.3*	*-0.5*	*1*	*10.9*
February	*8.3++*	*58.5*	*11*	*8.1*	*1.8*	*0*	*15.9*
March	*9.4++*	*44.0--*	*6*	*9.6*	*1.9*	*0*	*17.2*

[1] Lowest temperature °C [2] No of air frosts [3] Wettest day rain total in mm

Sakura Cherry Tree Project

By Caroline Peel

Last autumn I noticed a snippet in one of our MP's monthly newsletters about the Sakura Cherry Tree project, and thought of VBG.

This is a nationwide project which was originally meant to be a legacy from the Japan-UK season of culture 2019-2020, which aimed to showcase Japan's multifaceted attractions in the UK. Unfortunately the pandemic put the programme out by a year.

The plan was to distribute over 6,500 Japanese cherry trees – or Sakura in Japanese – to schools and sites all over the country. The project was formally launched with a planting ceremony in Regents Park, attended by HRH The Duke of Gloucester, the Japanese Ambassador Yasumasa Nagamine, and Keisaku Sandy Sano, the Joint Chairman of the Sakura Cherry Tree Project.

Six of the best: Site of VBG's Sakura Project Trees - with Japanese lanterns donated by the Friends. Photo by Colin Smith

All of the varieties are of Japanese Origin, having been supplied by the nursery of Frank P Mathews in Tenbury Wells. The majority are of three varieties – *'Beni-yutaka, 'Taihaku'* and *'Yedoensis'.*

Not wanting the grass to grow under my feet I quickly contacted the organisers and, together with Graham Middleton who was also after some trees for Ventnor, the Island was awarded 56.

Six of these are planted in the Garden above the Camellia Terrace: *'Beni-Yutaka',* which is a double pink variety and flowers in late April; *'Taihaku'* an icy white blossom from pink buds, also flowering in April; and *'Yedoensis'* light pink with an almond blossom fragrance. With the two Japanese Lanterns at the base of the terrace it should be a wonderful herald of spring in a few years.

The other trees are planted in various sites around the Island - the prisons, the hospital, Embankment Gardens in Sandown, Coronation Gardens, Ryde and a complete avenue of 17 at Northwood House. As for Ventnor, there are three trees (two white and one pink) opposite Trinity Church; two at St Catherine's Churchyard (a pink and a white); two at Ventnor Cemetery entrance in Upper Ventnor (both white); and two at the Community Garden area in Steephill Down Road, behind Ocean View fish & chip shop (one pink, one white).

All of these locations are accessible by the general public and I was surprised to see that even though they were only planted relatively recently, the trees opposite Trinity Church are coming into leaf and there is the odd bit of blossom visible too.

VBG will have a plaque to commemorate this gift by the renowned Japanese Artist, Kenya Hara. We look forward to receiving the donors or their representatives soon.

Force of nature

Roz Whistance meets our President and recipient of the Harold Hillier, Mike Fitt OBE

We've all heard that term 'force of nature'. Meet Mike Fitt and you half suspect it was coined for him.

"I was a rebellious teenager and now I'm a rebellious pensioner," he twinkles. Over the course of our chat he describes himself as a nuisance, as mad, as persistent - but anyone who has ever had contact with him will think of him as a man who gets things done.

Getting things done: Mike Fitt at Hampton Court Flower Show organising the Battlefields to Butterflies exhibit

His name was increasingly mentioned at Friends' committee meetings as our Apprentice programme developed. Our hope was to inspire our young people to see a world beyond the Garden and the Island - and here was a man who had created that blueprint. His Royal Parks Guild 'Discovery Days' invite young gardeners from all over the country to somewhere magnificent like Kew or the Olympic Park, to share experiences. "For instance, if you're working at an inner city park and much of your day is regular horticultural maintenance work, whilst learning your skills, often, you're not exposed to these amazing places. At an event with apprentices and trainees from a broad range of horticultural organisations, delegates can learn from and inspire each other."

Certainly when VBG's then-apprentice George was involved in Mike's *Battlefields to Butterflies* project in London, commemorating the centenary of the First World War, the Friends saw his confidence rise exponentially, and this will be true of so many of the young people who have benefitted from Mike's visions over the years. "Last year, because I like a challenge, I thought it would be good if we got some young enthusiastic 6th formers who've shown an interest in horticulture or botany to come along to our 'Discovery Day' at the Olympic Park and to meet the next cadre up of young people following a horticultural apprenticeship." So the next generation is inspired.

For all his affability you realise too there's a strain of anger running through Mike's veins. He wants to redress unfairness - even that belief that gardening isn't much of a job. "Like a lot of young people, I was advised not to go into horticulture as a career - or gardening as it was then called - it was only if you couldn't think of anything better. But luckily an aunt told my mother there were good training schemes. So at 16 I secured an apprenticeship with the Royal Parks."

Four years on and "of course I thought I knew everything. I tried to get into Kew but by then I'd married Barbara, and you had to be single." A false start in Exeter was followed by work and more qualifications at Capel Manor in Enfield, north of London, but Mike kept in touch with the Royal Parks and a job came up as Superintendent Grade 3. "The job was to look after Hyde Park, St James's Park and places like Downing Street, Buckingham Palace Garden and Ham House. There were other curious duties like liaising with the Met Police and responsibilities for traffic management. It was a strange job as it was so broad."

But Mike turned it down. "They said I had to live in Hyde Park, but we had our own house and didn't want to move. However, six months later Barbara said 'you're so miserable, see if that job's still going."

It was, and no, they weren't expected to live in the lodge in the middle of Marble Arch but by the Serpentine in the centre of the park. They lived there for the next 23 years. Meanwhile, with his Royal Parks pass he could wander at will, even through the front gates of Buckingham Palace.

Not that wandering, you suspect, was part of Mike's nature. Other jobs came up: "I moved to Richmond and Bushy Parks, as Superintendent - and suddenly had a thousand head of deer to look after."

He became Head of Outer Royal Parks, and ultimately became Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Parks for the Royal Parks. "As well as looking after these amazing spaces my duties expanded - I was on the team managing Princess Diana's funeral, for instance".

By now, part of his role was as Ceremonial Officer for Royal Parks, and he says: "If it was on Royal Parks' territory I dealt with the planning and delivery, overseeing TV companies, routes, crowds, stewarding, etc. I had to look after all that, which included the Queen Mother's funeral." In the 2003 New Year's Honours list Mike was awarded an OBE for services to the Royal Parks.

Most interviews would end there. Thank you very much, Mr Fitt, all done. But for Mike, retirement didn't mean stopping. "I explained to the Royal Parks I'd carry on my passion for these iconic places, still being a nuisance and making a difference. So I set up the Royal Parks Guild, a membership body for anyone who is in any way associated with the Parks, including those on the apprenticeship scheme." I said 'I'm going to wind down my connection with the Royal Parks over the next three years, put a moat between me and London called the Solent so I'm not tempted to continue working full time in the City, albeit voluntarily.' A strategy that didn't work as I am still very busy in London."

He was Chair of Parks for London - he's now president. And: "I'm a director of London in Bloom and a judge for London in Bloom and South East in Bloom. I've been fortunate to be involved with many other aspects of horticulture, including becoming a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Gardeners."

And: "I promoted the idea of engaging those struggling with life and hard to reach, using horticultural training as the link, and that's grown into 'Future Gardeners' project which is now a charity that I'm a Trustee of."

That mis-assigned term Levelling Up keeps springing to mind as Mike talks. When, in the 1990s, the Government legislated that in-house park staff were to be replaced by contractors - "which made me angry" - Mike suddenly thought about the maintenance buildings left empty in Richmond Park. "I contacted a charity I am vice president of, PHAB, which has the aim of helping able-bodied and disabled people get together to enjoy life." The result - the Holly Lodge Centre for people, anyone, but especially those with special needs. "The empty buildings were converted into meeting rooms, a Victorian classroom and a vintage chemist shop, and stables, when I had the idea to reintroduce heavy horses to the Royal Parks . . ." [www.thehollylodgecentre.org.uk]

Continues on Page 32

Restoration of a historic garden

Today's gardeners are taking more than a leaf out of their cottager forebears' book, says Head Gardener at Whatley Manor, **David Pearce**

Traditions can quickly become extinct if left to the cultural evolution of modern times. In a culture becoming more and more distant and unaccepting of our heritage and traditions, one could easily wake up and find oneself without heritage styles of garden design, architecture, or genetic diversity of plants which have been cultivated for millennia. 'Heritage garden management', however, keeps alive the gardens and landscape of our ancestors, serving to help us learn from them, and to prevent parts of our heritage from becoming extinct or forgotten.

Whatley Manor can be dated back to the 18th century but was not used to impress until Lord T G Smith bought the estate in 1871. His descendants owned the property until the 1920s when it was bought by H C Cox, who commissioned the renowned architect Septimus Warwick to extend it to the current 24-bedroom manor house. Warwick also designed a garden in the Arts & Crafts style, popular in the Cotswolds at the time. The Arts & Crafts movement was as much a statement as it was an aesthetic philosophy; pioneered by the textile designer William Morris, architect Edwin Lutyens and the founder of the Arts & Crafts garden, William Robinson, it was a stand against the industrial revolution, and the increase of mass-produced low-quality products (a problem we know all too well today).

When it came to gardens, the Arts & Crafts movement opposed the Victorian monstrosities of geometric bedding displays, as well as displays of wealth in the form of exotic rarities. In contrast, the Arts & Crafts garden was as unpretentious as it was beautiful. Many of the techniques were inspired by cottage gardens, where 'cottagers' had little time or resources to craft elaborate bedding schemes or money to buy or cultivate the rare and exotic species being sold for more than the price of a house. Instead, a mixture of plants was produced largely to feed the occupants, and - to a lesser extent - for scent (to mask the smell of sewage), colour, and cut flowers.

Most of the original cottage garden plants were natives, and even cultivars such as *Achillea ptarmica* 'The Pearl' have been present in cottage gardens for centuries. William Robinson took these artistic and informal plant combinations and invented the mixed border, as philosophised in his bestselling book *The English Flower Garden*. His less famous, but just as compelling *The Wild-Garden* went on to inspire the philosophy of Ventnor Botanic Garden itself, as well as many gardens of the 21st century, including Keith Wiley's *Wildside*.

One large influence on the garden at Whatley Manor was nearby Hidcote; the crisp architectural lines and dark green backdrop of the yew-hedged rooms contrast strikingly with the Robinsonian chaotic beauty. Wide diversity of plants, contrasting in form and colour, bustle for space and spill gracefully over edges and straight lines, 'deformalising' the framework. This put Whatley among an elite list of gardens inspired by Johnston's masterpiece, which include Highgrove, Sissinghurst Castle and Great Dixter. Arts & Crafts gardens are as popular today as they were 100 years ago.

Whatley's 12-acre garden sits on a south-facing valley of the river Avon. Meandering down a series of terraced garden rooms, the garden gradually decreases in formality, through a rose garden, a fiercely exotic 'hot' garden and a calming 'cool' border lined by resplendent *Eremurus spp.* and *Cynara cardunculus*. Below lie grand lawns bordered by spring flowering shrub borders and a Robinsonian flower garden, planted to orientate around the summer solstice. Passing through the walled kitchen garden and orchard, one reaches a historic woodland garden which transitions into a naturalistically planted arboretum and perennial wildflower meadows which blend the garden seamlessly into the surrounding Cotswold landscape. Like many gardens of the period, the garden has several isolated vistas, allowing the wider landscape to be 'burrowed'; a technique more traditionally associated with the landscape movement.

The cool borders and manor. Photo by Clive Nicholls

A heavy emphasis is placed on traditional skills and materials, and like traditional cottage gardeners we aim to source all our materials locally (whilst cottagers did this out of economic necessity, we do it out of environmental necessity). The garden is entirely pesticide-free, and uses the latest integrated pest management techniques to manage pests, with a 'prevention is better than cure' approach to reduce initial introduction of pathogens.

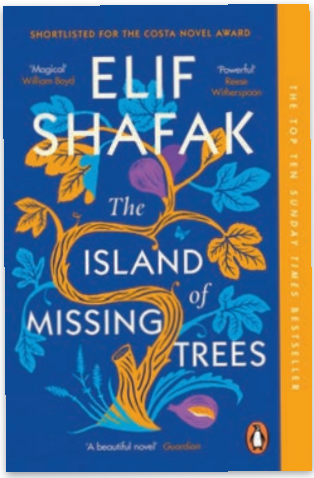
Our kitchen garden is on its way to being Soil Association accredited, and is managed following the 'no-dig' philosophy. No-dig veg gardening prioritises the beneficial fungi (mycorrhizae) and microorganisms found in healthy soil. Regular digging or rotavating breaks the subterranean hyphae which form symbiotic relationships with most plant groups; offering phosphorus (often very scarce in unimproved soil) and water, in return for sugars. Hyphae of a single species of fungi can spread for miles, and can even provide plants with a form of communication with other plants, allowing them to warn neighbours about pests and diseases. Working in harmony with this recent milestone of research allows us to cultivate vegetables whilst increasing yields, ecosystem biodiversity and resistance to pests and diseases, decreasing soil emissions and erosion. To feed the kitchen garden, we merely lay a 1-1.5-inch layer of homemade compost or very well-rotted organic cow manure on the surface of the soil when one would typically be double-digging.

Through a combination of traditional heritage gardening, in keeping with the original mindset of Cox and Warwick, partnered with the latest horticultural best practice, Whatley Manor is becoming a leading innovative garden. We produce a high yield of fruit and vegetables, providing our Michelin Star restaurant with a product completely unobtainable on supermarket shelves, and we are beginning a journey of discovery to prove just how important gardens of this type are for wellbeing and wildlife.

BOOK REVIEW

The Island of Missing Trees by Elif Shafak

Now and again a book seems to demand to be shared in *Ventnorensis,* and at the centre of this novel is a fig tree.



This is the story of a young Greek/Turkish Cypriot teenage girl, Ada, growing up in London in the present day. Her mother, who has recently died, was Turkish Muslim and her father is Greek Christian, and they came to England following the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Ada's bereaved father, an evolutionary ecologist and botanist, has brought a fig tree, *[Ficus carica]* from Cyprus to their garden in London, and he talks to it far more readily than he does to Ada. Then the Fig Tree becomes a narrator of the story because, as described in both Curator's Notes (P2) and Whatley Manor (P16), plants communicate through their own underground network. This power is a metaphor for the need for communication between people, and, although it sounds unlikely, it works very well to pull all strands of the story together.

Roz Whistance

Smile while you shop

How often do you shop online? More than you once did, I'm sure.

Our members and volunteers do so much to help that we are always grateful when we hear about a fundraising scheme that is free for us all to use and could make a big difference.

Amazon runs a scheme called Amazon Smile that benefits your chosen charity. It will donate 0.5% of the value of the goods - any goods, be it books, household goods, clothes etc - to your chosen charity. So if you nominate VBGFS as your chosen charity, donations go directly to our bank account.

amazonsmile
You shop. Amazon gives.

VBGFS could benefit from your shopping at no cost to you (and no fees for us). All you need to do is:

1. ***Select VBGFS as your chosen charity at smile.amazon.co.uk***
2. ***Then, when you want to shop, simply return to smile.amazon.co.uk or activate Amazon Smile on your Amazon shopping app. You are usually offered the option to go to 'smile' whenever you purchase something through Amazon.***

Thank you! Since its launch in November 2017, UK charities have received more than £4.6 million in donations from Amazon Smile.

Sally Peake

New Chairman Val Pitts presents the Harold Hillier Award to Mike Fitt OBE

The 2022 Harold Hillier Award and AGM, April 28th

The Harold Hillier Award, given annually to somebody for significantly contributing to horticulture on the Isle of Wight, was presented to Mike Fitt OBE, patron and President.

Presenting the award, Chris Kidd said: "His involvement with projects, particularly involving young people, is breathtaking. The 'Discovery Days' that he runs have had over 600 participants, introducing horticulture to people career changing or tasting horticulture for the first time. He's brought in people across the industry to assist."

On Mike's powers of persuasion to get horticultural projects off the ground, Chris described creating the VBG garden on Platform 2 of Ryde Pier. "This is just one example of how [he] works, donating resources and time to advance horticulture on the Island." He added: "He's something of a star in our industry, he's received national awards, and it's a great honour to give him the Friends' Society Award."

Mike Fitt said he feels a bit of an imposter, despite many links to the Garden: "I was asked to be a patron, which made me feel I belonged. Then I was approached to be President. The wonderful Brian Kidd [previous President] was an amazing man, and I take too much on so I said no. But I was cornered! It's a real honour to be asked." He added: "I think there's a great future for the Friends. I'm so sad there are no apprentices - we did some great things with them. [See below]. I'm honoured and flattered to receive the award from an organisation I so revere."

The presentation followed the AGM, in which John Bagshawe stepped down as Chairman [see P4]. In his final report he described the recent difficulties arising from the pandemic and from a changed relationship with the CIC. He would remain as a committee member and a volunteer. Val Pitts was voted in as the new Chairman. Thanking the room for the vote she asked for ideas for activities: "It is your society, and it is time to have fun again," she said. Caroline Peel was thanked for her years of service.

After the presentation Head Gardener, Michelle Cain, was invited to speak. She thanked everyone who had made her feel welcome. She felt there was a lot of expectation on her - "and I'm just one woman. But John [Curtis] seems hopeful that we can recruit." She said there are many challenges: "Where does one begin with 22 acres here and seven acres across the road? It's difficult to know whether to put first the Garden or the people. Gardens are for people. Put the team first, the volunteers first, and the Garden will follow." See interview, Page 19.

The meeting was well attended and the atmosphere positive and upbeat.

See passed Ventnorenis issues, or website, for opportunities our apprentices have enjoyed: 'Horticulture and its opportunities – a Masterclass at Kew' Ventnorensis 27 no.1 Spring/Summer 2020 p33 – Sally's account of apprentices' trip to Kew with Trish. Our apprentices had participated 'for the last few years'

Battlefields to Butterflies project: Ventnorensis 26 no.1 Spring/Summer 2019 p.20 and 30: 'From Battlefields to Butterflies – from apprentice to committed horticulturalist' : George Tyler's involvement. 'Reclothing the Landscape' Mike Fitt's account of the whole project.

Heading in the right direction

Since Chris Kidd became Curator, VBG hasn't had a Head Gardener. It's a long-existing hole and Roz Whistance meets **Michelle Cain,** who has come to fill it

Fresh eyes: Michelle Cain

When you meet Michelle you can't help thinking how lucky we are to have her.

"I've been a Head Gardener now for 13 years, and because I've moved around a bit I've learned more than if I'd stayed in the same place," says Michelle. She comes here from Sissinghurst, via France and Greece– "partly for a holiday and partly to learn gardening in different climates". Before that she worked in a large garden in Highgate, London, and prior to that, "in a fabulous two-acre garden which had lots and lots of elements all packed in."

Unlike the proverbial rolling stone, however, this head gardener has certainly gathered some metaphorical moss: "Moving around is really a quest to find inner peace and happiness," she smiles. "The bonus is that you pick up different knowledge and different methods along the way."

One of the first benefits to VBG has been those fresh eyes she brings. She is very aware that much basic tidying needs to be done to catch up after gardeners were furloughed. Is she daunted? "When the sun comes out I'm a person who feels anything is possible! I'm an eternal optimist."

The staff situation is improving, and one of her tasks is to recruit. As well as she and Chris Kidd, Steve and Ben, there are now two gardeners who work largely for VBG@Home. Trish, who is employed by the Friends, organises the volunteers among her other duties: then there is a boy trainee and other part-time willing hands."It's not a traditional workforce, so some of my time is in planning to make best use of them - and making sure they know to come to me for direction." She adds:

"Ideally that means that Chris, the Curator, has the time he needs for curation."

Michelle has resisted the temptation to come in and stamp her mark on the Garden without a solid plan or project being in place. So, rather than spending her spring budget on plants, she opted to buy such things as capillary matting and ground fabric so projects such as revamping the top nursery can be done as soon as a plan is in place. She has also bought new tools and PPE - the vital gloves and boots that are requisite for the gardeners.

So, gloved and booted, what are Michelle and her team's plans? "Currently we're trying to work round the garden area by area, sort of like you'd deep clean a house,"

she says. She explains that the Ventnor Method - where disturbance is kept to a minimum within geographical areas [Australia, South Africa etc] to allow for self-maintaining ecosystems to develop - should not be used in the non-geographical parts of the Garden. "Areas such as the Palm Garden or the Trial Garden shouldn't be allowed to fill with ivy. After all, if everything is allowed to be naturalistic and wild that's no longer a garden, it's a wilderness. By creating a distinction between Ventnor Method areas and non-Ventnor Method areas we can maintain the garden to a more aesthetically pleasing standard whilst staying true to our principles."

Improving the presentation of the Garden to the paying public is her biggest remit, she says: "It's going to take time but it will be worth it for the visual benefits to visitors." An early project is to look at underplanting on the Japanese Terraces - "Which we ought to rename the Far Eastern Terraces. My aim is to buy in plants in the autumn to get it planted. The same goes for the Champion Trees - we must start to think about the Champion Trees of the future." She is keen to make something of the little pavilion with the wisteria, too.

Another of Michelle's 'fresh eye' thoughts is that more could be made of the Garden's history. "We have the Heritage Centre, but I'd love there to be more of a sense of Victorian legacy within the Garden itself." She adds: "There is so much here that ought to bring people coming from far and wide - but to be honest I'd never heard of Ventnor Botanic Garden before I applied for this job. Wouldn't it be great if visitors came to the Isle of Wight specifically to see Ventnor Botanic Garden."

In tandem with ramping up the experience for the visiting public is the long term purpose of the Garden itself. "What makes this Garden unique is the microclimate, so, as Colin Pope says, we've got to be at the forefront of pushing forth the boundaries of hardiness in this country. Things that were growing outdoors here 10 years ago were big news - now they're growing outdoors all year on the mainland. So we've got to start pushing forwards again, as not only is it our unique selling point to visitors, it also gives the Garden a deeper purpose beyond it being a visitor attraction - that of being at the vanguard of climate change gardening in the UK."

She is also excited to be part of a Botanic Garden. "We all know there need to be more accessions in the Collection. I'd really like to learn from Chris, and to help him broaden the collection."

Learning, she says, is important to every gardener, and VBG has opened up new experiences for Michelle. "There are always new plants. What's striking here is how things flower in December and January. *Kniphofia* in December, that's crazy!" She adds: "Tropical plants haven't featured heavily in my experience to date, so it's a new set of plants for me. As a gardener, there's always something new to learn, even if you've been a Head Gardener for years. That's what's great about horticulture - there's enough to keep you interested for life."
See AGM, Page 19

Gloved and booted: Michelle with volunteers

Botany Club

Two outings to put in your diary

Tuesday, May 11th – America Woods Walk
Colin Pope will lead us to see bluebells, wood anemones and a lot more. Parking is limited so car share advisable. Meet at 2pm at Upper Hyde Lane, Shanklin, and Bridgette will try and arrange parking. Walk of about 1/2 mile to the Woods and then as far as we want to walk before going back to No.19 for tea and cake (weather permitting).

Wednesday June 22nd – Beaver Walk
A guided walk of about 2 miles through Martin's Wood with the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust to see the area where they hope to reintroduce beavers. Free Parking in School Lane, Newchurch. Meet at 2pm. *As always stout shoes advised.*

Don't forget your fiver for the hat!

Bridgette Sibbick

BOTANY CLUB

Dragonflies Open Garden

Spontaneity is the mother of joy: so found Sally Peake and 30 others when at very short notice they took up Sylvia Clare's invitation to visit her beautiful garden, which she described as 'developing, with only four years' intensive creation.'

It was February, and the snowdrops and hellebores set in a recently-cleared woodland garden lit up the dark woodland floor, and streams ran down the gentle slope. Sylvia also has a collection of over 20 pulmonarias, which were mostly in bloom.

Donations from the trip made £138.30 for the Friends.
Many thanks to Sylvia Clare.

Dragonflies: Some of the 31 visitors

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) means that we cannot pass your details to the Garden marketing staff so, to hear ALL the Garden news and events taking place at VBG please go to the website and scroll down to the bottom of any page to find the SIGN ME UP box. You can also read their Privacy Policy. www.botanic.co.uk

Apprentice and Beyond

Our final (for now) apprentice, Ellis Gant, is currently training at Osborne, Queen Victoria's Island home now run by English Heritage. In March he secured a place on the prestigious two-year Diploma Course at RHS Wisley, Surrey. Thanks in large part to VBG and The Friends, he tells **Roz Whistance**

Growing confidence: Ellis at Osborne

How does Osborne differ from working at VBG?
There's a bigger team to start with (laughs) so I get to work with a few different people who have their own areas to look after - the terraces, or walled garden, or the Swiss cottage. And obviously stuff like bedding isn't done at VBG so that's building on everything else I've learnt so far. Everything I do is more practice and getting my confidence up.

Have you had formal training there?
Most of it is learning on the job like at VBG. You're shown, you try, you do it again. I did a day ATV training - little buggy things that go round the estate - as well as tractors which I've used before, and I'm going to do the spraying certificates with a specialist training company at one of the other English Heritage sites.

How did you get interested in gardening?
I helped my dad in the garden and did gardening club at primary school. I did a bit of volunteering, and looking at different plants I was thinking 'I want to learn more about this'. I did A levels and wasn't sure about University. I was lucky enough to get an apprenticeship at Ventnor and whilst everyone else was locked down I started learning. It's flown by ever since.

So tell me how the Wisley Diploma came about.
As I progressed through the VBG apprenticeship Sally [Peake] talked about this course, and I looked into it. She put me in touch with David [Pearce, who went from VBG to the Wisley Diploma Course] and I got some advice from him. At Osborne I chatted with the Head Gardener there, and with Sally - so then I applied online to Wisley, and had an interview at the start of March.

How did that go?
There was a formal interview with the Garden Manager and the Course Exam Officer from the school of Horticulture at Wisley, and then a current student took me to do propagation and then plant identification with another lady from the propagation team.

Were you nervous?
Not really. The presentations I've done at VBG about my time at Tresco, just speaking with all the Friends, and garden visitors who ask you about stuff - it all helps with your ability to speak to people and not just freeze.

Where will you live while at Wisley?
There's accommodation onsite for every student. I'll be living on the doorstep of the garden, with opportunities to go to other local gardens. And get the train to London, which will be exciting.

Is there anything you want to specialise in?
I do like vegetable growing and want to learn about care and pruning of growing fruit. In the first year you get to look after one of the student allotment plots. But I want to take everything the course has to offer and move around different departments.

At my interview I was asking the Garden Manager about the idea of 'no dig gardening' - something she really advocates. Wisley has a new world food garden, and they've all sorts of crops on display, so I'll hopefully get involved with that. I'm very lucky.

But you had to work hard - doing the VBG apprenticeship in one year!
Yes Trish was just amazing, the way she got me through the college work.

Tour Guides' Tour with Colin Pope

It is 2½ years since regular tours were undertaken at Ventnor Botanic Garden, but now with some degree of normality, a small group of Volunteer Tour Guides agreed to undertake them for this season.

Imparting knowledge: Colin leads the group. Photo by Steve Newbes

However, as the little grey cells have been unchallenged for so long as regards the history and flora, a request was made for Colin Pope, our revered ecologist, to take us around to renew fond memories and add new facts. We were delighted to be joined by two potential new tour leaders, and also a number of VBG Staff.

Colin with his remarkable knowledge pointed out the unusual, as well as the March star plants which were flowering. There were a remarkable number flowering in the South African borders including *Euryops, Osteospernums, Pelargoniums, Kniphofias* and *Sparmannias,* the latter having to be grown undercover in most parts of the country.

In the Australian Garden, the very attractive Acacia *verticillata* is breaking into flower with its mass of small, yellow bottle brush-like flowers. It is sometimes called 'Prickly Moses' because of its leaves - probably a derivation from 'Prickly Mimosa'. Also Colin pointed out the Cyathea - Rough Tree Fern - with its new uncurling crozier-shaped leaves.

In the Americas, *Drimys winteri* was covered in blossom. Hailing from South America and Tasmania, it has Vitamin C in its bark and was used by Captain John Winter in 1577-88 when travelling with Sir Francis Drake. His sailors were sick and he was hunting for medicinal plants, and this cured scurvy. It was also used by Captain Cook on his later travels. The vitamin was isolated centuries later!

Colin not only conducted us through various areas with flowering plants, which of course are the ones the visitors always ask about, but also showed us hidden treasures such as a Tree Fuschia – *Halleria lucida* from South Africa with its unusual orange flowers – in the Hydrangea Dell.

We are extremely grateful for Colin's time and expertise and he is shortly going to resume his monthly *Plants in the Garden* on the Ventnor Botanic Garden website. There is always something new to discover in our lovely garden.

Jonyth Hill

Wednesday Volunteers

Come, help, and enjoy, says **Bridgette Sibbick**

It has been lovely to see so many faces at our regular Wednesday morning group - new people and others who have returned. We have been lucky with the weather on the whole, and have been tackling many tasks in the Garden and greenhouses.

In January we attacked the Long Border, which is now looking very good. February was warm enough to sit outside and enjoy a drink after working in the Palm Garden.

Add to your garden: Friendly Friends' Plant Sale

The magnolias have been looking wonderful as usual and in March we had our Friends' lunch with lots of lovely food and drink to share. Jenny organised a very good raffle. We have been holding regular soup and Bring and Buy sales during the winter, and plan to have some outdoor picnics on the first Wednesday in the month to make sure that we still meet up regularly.

We hope to hold our first Plant Sale of the season shortly, and continue this regularly throughout the summer. In June we will be present at two Open Gardens and in August have a plant stall at Ventnor Day.

So there's lots going on and volunteers are always welcome to help out in any way they can - gardening, raising plants for our sales, and donations for Bring and Buy.

Gardening Volunteers

Help is always required in the Garden and we warmly welcome new recruits to work with the Garden staff and existing volunteers, either in our friendly group on a Wednesday morning or at other times to be arranged. No qualifications or previous experience is required – just bring your own hand tools if you have them, a flask of refreshment and wear sensible clothing.

For further information on Garden volunteering, please phone Bridgette Sibbick - 867739

VOLUNTEERING

Tour Guides

At Ventnor Botanic Garden, the staff and management are always delighted to have volunteers in a number of roles to support the Garden, particularly this year when we are celebrating 50 years since opening. For this reason we would welcome anyone who would like to act as a Tour Guide and help to make the Visitor Experience more attractive. No previous experience is necessary and training will be given, as well as support at all times. All we need is enthusiasm, a smile and a warm welcome for our visitors.

For further information please ring Jonyth tel: 01983 730532.

Volunteering: work, rest and play

Learning the ropes: Colin Pope leads the Tour Guides

Volunteer Get-together on 2 March

Chris and Trish had plotted to give all the volunteers a bergenia as a thank you for their work. Everyone was delighted. Unfortunately we did not take a pic of all the food piled high on the table! Volunteers brought a plate of food each and there was plenty for everybody - including the hunky gardeners. Chris made his thank you speech and we all felt appreciated.

Photographs by Rosemary Stewart and Steve Newberry

The Nairobi Physic Garden

Deborah Coulson's Physic Garden in Kenya started as a passion project and side hobby. Little did she know the effect it would have and how it would grow into something magical.

What started as a single bed, to now over 300 different species, 40 of which are on the Red List [of endangered plants], the Nairobi Physic Garden has become a place for people all over the country to enjoy, learn, relax and explore. YouTube videos about it have had over 160,000 views; chefs come to use the flowers in decorating their plates; artists come and paint; and it has become the Kenya Horticulture Society's Annual Meeting place.

The colour of healing: science is catching up

The Garden

Every plant in the garden has medicinal uses, and are grouped according to their uses. The garden is designed and grown in a series of concentric circles, known as a Mandala Garden. The inspiration for all my designs comes from Sacred Geometry, (symbols and their meanings) drawn from Plato in Ancient Greece, the Egyptians, as well as religions including Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, all of which recognised that certain geometric shapes are repeated throughout nature. The Spiral, for example, represents the way of all things, expanding outwardly from the core; from the movement of the planets to the patterns of the seeds on a sunflower. Another example is the square, which is considered masculine, and the circle, considered feminine; a squared circle represents balance. In a garden, the square might be the boundary of the garden and the circle the path around it. The spiral can be the footpaths or flowerbeds in a garden design.

I found out recently that sacred geometry is a tradition in India called Mandala Vaatika. A whole new world has opened up for me, where sound, shape, colour, plants and the gods are all interconnected and woven into a beautiful creation!

Structure of the Garden

The centre bed is called the Calm Bed. The plants, including angelica, chamomile, lavender, rose, lemon balm, sage and passion relieve stress, depression and other mental 'dis-ease'. The next concentric circle has a wide range of healing plants that treat everything from skin cancer, digestion problems and malaria to arthritis, measles and respiratory problems. There are also a number of plants that are antifungal, antiviral and antibacterial. The sections are according to disease: Head/Brain; Skin; Respiratory System; Immune system; Digestion; Stress/Anxiety; Cancer; and Heart.

I have about 150 species of African indigenous plants. I take care to only take one cutting when collecting for the garden, so not to disturb the local ecosystem. About 150 are exotic species from places such as South, Central and North America, Europe, and China. Kenya is on the equator, and ranges from an altitude of zero by the sea, up to 20,000 feet above sea level (Mt. Kilimanjaro). We collect plants growing up to 14,000 feet. This results in a vast variety of plant species!

I find it fascinating that modern science has finally researched and confirmed the healing powers of plants which have been known for millennia among the Mayans, Incas, Indians, Chinese, Egyptians, Aboriginals and Celts. Marigold has been considered sacred for centuries in all these civilisations, and used against eye inflammation, skin problems and as a bug repellant. *Artemisia Annua* or mugwort, is another plant being extensively researched by scientists looking into its healing properties for diseases such as cancer, diabetes, headache and malaria. Sage, too, has been known for millennia to be good for the brain, something being confirmed today by scientists. We have just had guest speaker Dr Nicolette Perry from the Dilston Physic Garden in Northumberland, who has a Phd on the beneficial effects of European sage on Alzheimer's Disease.

Making Ointments, tinctures and essences

30 years ago I did a Diploma in landscape design at the Inchbald School of Garden Design in London and became a qualified landscape designer. My interest in useful plants took me to India, and Ayurveda training. I also studied herbalism at the Scottish School of Herbal Medicine, and did a course at the Dilston Physic Garden in Northumberland, UK. I went on to become an Advanced Flower Essence Practitioner, where I made and sold flower essences, made from flowers in the garden.

Concentric circles: 300 species

Wangari Mathai, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and environmental activist from Kenya said: "We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds". I often show visitors how to make everything from tea to tinctures. The kitchen is also where I make ointments, oils, balms, pestos, vinegar and even smudge sticks for cleansing rooms of germs. St John's Wort, widely used for depression, anxiety and insomnia, grows here as an indigenous plant. I picked mine on the slopes of Mt. Kenya. It can be used in salads, teas, bath salts, balms, essences and essential oils, as can most herbs.

In 2021 tribal elders from all over the country came to see the garden, and they knew all of the indigenous plants and their uses. Unfortunately this knowledge is dying out with each generation, which is one reason why I feel so passionately about sharing what I have learned through individuals and groups coming to see the garden. My mission is "showing people the importance of nature through plants", and sharing this knowledge for future generations is of vital importance.

For more information you can visit www.nairobiphysicgarden.com, or email nairobiphysicgarden@gmail.com.

Mike Fitt Force of Nature, continued from Page 15

Needless to say, Mike gives energy to everything he's involved with. "At one time I had a crazy idea to twin the Isle of Wight with the Royal Parks - and we almost got there, but because of cuts the Council, sadly, got rid of its parks department. But since moving to the Island I've organised some guerrilla gardening in Ryde - planting up grotty flowerbeds in front of the Co op - and planting a mini-VBG on Platform 2 at Ryde Esplanade Station. Then there was the Big Project."

"I thought about Island Line railway stations. Why not look back as they would have been 100 years ago when the station was a community hub. Everything happened around the station, passengers arrived for their holidays, Islanders left for faraway places, children travelled to school, station gardens were tended, goods delivered, etc. …". His plan would be to individually theme the station's immediate surroundings, with for instance, a VBG-style garden in front of Ryde Esplanade Station, for which children could grow plants." Sadly, plans for the big Interchange at Ryde have put that idea on hold. "But I'm still working with the IOW Council to see what could be done. We might see something happen yet."

He was delighted when asked to be a patron of VBGFS but at first resisted attempts to make him President after the death of Brian Kidd. "I like to give things my all and am so often in London."

All of this is why Mike Fitt is this year's recipient of the Harold Hillier Award, given by VBGFS for services to horticulture on the Island. "I'm really proud to be given this," he says, "because my involvement with 'Ventnor Botanics' goes back a long way. I'm friends with Simon Goodenough – I nearly went for the curator job when it was first advertised - and I know Robert Hillier. It's a real honour. I think Friends groups are the best things since sliced bread. Friends give time. They do it for nothing. They put up with brickbats, yet still do an amazing job - particularly with things like the apprentice support that Sally gave."

He adds: "My apprenticeship was a gateway to an amazing career."

Great Friends' Recipe Swap

As the name suggests, this is more a dessert than a cake, and perfect once British raspberries are in season. It's not a traditional trifle - no jelly (so it's good for vegetarians), and making your own cake (rather than buying sponge fingers) is integral - but so worth it. It's a Nigella recipe, so you can't go wrong.

Lemon-Raspberry Plate Trifle

The Cake:
125g (5oz) butter
175g (7oz) caster sugar
2 large eggs
3 lemons
175g (7oz) self-raising flour
pinch salt
4 tbls milk
100g icing sugar

The Trifle
2 tbls flaked almonds
8 tbls dry sherry (I prefer a mix of Croft Original and dry)
4 tbls caster sugar
1 lemon, juice and zest
300ml double cream
2 punnets raspberries

METHOD

Preheat oven to 180°C/gas mark 4. Butter and line 450g loaf tin.

Cream butter and sugar, gradually beat in eggs and zest of one lemon. Add flour and salt, then milk. Spoon into tin. Cook for 45 mins or until skewer is clean.

Meanwhile gently heat lemon juice with icing sugar until sugar dissolves.

Remove cake after 45 mins or until skewer is clean, then stab all over with skewer. Pour syrup over cake, leave to be absorbed until cake is cool. Remove from tin (you might get sticky) and slice onto a large oval plate.

Toast flaked almonds in a dry pan until slightly brown.

Mix sherry, lemon juice and zest in a bowl large enough to take the cream. When sugar is dissolved, dribble the cream in, whisking gently, then beat until 'airy and floppily bulky'.

Empty raspberries over cake, flop over the syllabub and scatter toasted almonds on top.

Membership News

Thank you to all of our wonderful Friends who continue to support our work for the Botanic Garden and a very warm welcome to the following Members who have joined us since the last edition of *Ventnorensis:*

Sheila Hessey of Ventnor
Ruth Hilton of Godshill
Peter and Caroline Matthews of Niton
Anita Pearce of Milford-on-Sea
Debbie Rook of Shanklin
Fiona Stack of Ryde

Patrons

Gilly Drummond OBE
Penelope Hobhouse MBE
Mike Fitt OBE
Simon Goodenough
Alan Titchmarsh MBE
Phil Le May

OBITUARY

Cherie Kelly

We were sad to hear that one of our much-loved Friends and volunteers, Cherie Kelly, has died. She loved being part of the volunteering team for many years, here seen having fun collecting wildflower seeds in what was to become the hop field, and enjoying a Friends/volunteer celebration. Cherie was fiercely independent with a great sense of humour. Latterly she lived in St Vincents care home where she was much loved.

DISCOUNTS for members

Friends should always carry their **Friends' Membership Card** with them, to benefit from discounts and benefits that may be on offer. Friends can buy their annual VBG Membership Pass with a 25 per cent discount, if they buy it in person from the Garden. The Coastal Gardener, Seaview, will give Friends 10 per cent off purchases on display of their Friends' Membership Card.

Design by Simone Dickens, Coco Design Co. Kingston Smallholding Goat Farm, Shorwell. IW. PO30 3LP. Tel: 07530 867318 / 01983 551527 simone.dickens@gmail.com

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