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SHORT NOTE

ANECDOTES AND ACCURACY – A WALK  
WITH A GARDEN GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

It is important that the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) has a means of interpreting its activities to the people who meander through our gates. The RBGE mission statement is 'To explore and explain the world of plants for a better future' and indeed, who would wish otherwise for future generations? However, most visitors need help to discover exactly what that means and how the Garden can contribute.

Almost 20 years ago, staff at RBGE saw a need to better promote its activities to the public and one way of doing this was to introduce the Garden Guide service which came into being in 1991. The Garden Guides are now part of the Horticulture Division having initially been developed within the Public Services department.

Nowadays the Garden Guides are an active group of twenty-plus dedicated, motivated communicators who have an affinity with RBGE. Many are Edinburgh-based, but some do travel from further afield. Although they are a voluntary group, they receive a payment of £8.00 per tour to cover their travel expenses.

The Garden Guides conduct daily walks which last for about one hour and run from April to September at 11.00am and 2.00pm daily. Each guide will take a maximum of 15 persons although in practice most walks are with a handful of visitors. When the numbers are lower the walk can be more personal, and a conversation can be enjoyed with the guide rather than a rehearsed script.

In 2008 the RBGE website was upgraded and it is now possible to book tours on the internet. Bookings are made by tour groups and a wide range of interested parties for bespoke tours as well.

HISTORY

The Friends of RBGE (later RBGE Membership Programme), a support organisation of individuals interested in the work of the Garden, was the initial pool from which potential guides were selected to expand the Garden Guide service. This initiative was taken forward by Sally Heron, who has been the stalwart of the group from the germination of the idea by Alan Bennell, Head of Visitor Services, to the present day.

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Fig. 1 The Garden Guides following successful completion of the training course and the award of certificates, 22 April 2009. Alan Bennell, Head of Visitor Services, who conceived the idea of the Garden Guide service, stands in the centre of the group holding a celebratory bottle. Photo: David Knott.

Sally was joined by Malcolm Cox who was participating in an exchange visit to RBGE from Brisbane Botanic Gardens at Mt Coot-tha, Australia. He had prior experience with volunteer guides and was able to bring this to RBGE to help with recruiting more guides. During the winter of 1992–93 a group of seven guides was trained and ready to lead tours in the spring of 1993.

A second group of eleven more guides was recruited in 1996. In 2003 a full-time volunteer co-ordinator, Susan Greenhalgh, was appointed. This post was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and lasted for three years. Susan Greenhalgh took responsibility for the group for the duration of her three years in the post. In the spring of 2006 the Guides became part of the Horticulture Division.

In the autumn of 2008 a decision was made to strengthen the group. This set in motion a process of selecting a new group of potential guides. A letter was sent out with *the Botanics* magazine to those on the mailing list, living within a twenty mile radius of Edinburgh, requesting interested volunteers to contact RBGE. This elicited an exceptional response and nine applicants were selected for training throughout the winter of 2008–9.

Training was provided in-house using the experience and knowledge of staff from all divisions – Horticulture, Science and Corporate Services. However, the group of established guides who also attended many of the training days, were very important

in imparting information and inspiration to the new guides. Over lunch and coffee, the social aspect of guiding was promoted and it is thanks to these established members that the new guides integrated so well into the Garden community. Experienced guides continued to mentor the new guides during the first month of walks.

The Garden Guides receive continuing development and input in the form of monthly meetings, after which there is usually an update from a selection of staff from the Horticulture or Science Divisions on work going on in the Garden. They also receive email updates on topics such as seasonal plants of interest.

#### STABILITY

It may seem from the three recruitment initiatives that there is a constant loss of Garden Guides. Taken over an eighteen year period this can be rationalised with the demographics of the group. Composed mainly of females in the 50+ age group it is a volunteer role that demands mental ability and physical agility. In the volunteer community there are always some volunteers who are loyal and long-serving and some who will flit from opportunity to opportunity. This is the very nature of volunteering – if the work available does not appeal to an individual they are free to sample another interest elsewhere. In the current group of Guides there are still four with us from the original group of nine established in 1993, plus nine of the 1996 intake. This has provided stability to the service and knowledge and skills have been retained and shared. This stability and sharing of experiences are vital to the success of the group.

#### VISITORS

In common with many other visitor destinations across Scotland, 2008 saw a decline in the number of visitors to the Garden. A total of 505,325 people visited in 2008 with July being the most popular month. This was a 16.7% decline from the previous year. However, those taking a daily walk with a Garden Guide increased by 23% on 2007 figures. This is an exceptional increase and surely means that the Garden's mission 'To explore and explain the world of plants for a better future' is reaching a wider audience?

However, is the work of the Garden Guides providing a greater understanding of the work of RBGE? These figures show that we are only reaching 0.19% of our visitors.

We need people to know that we were founded in 1670 as a medicinal garden, and that if the open flowers of *Berberis darwinii* are gently touched, the anthers spring in towards the style. This highly successful mechanism leaves a dab of pollen on the nectar-seeking pollinating insect which takes this pollen to the next flower. This explains why there are so many seedlings around the base of the mother plant. With these and other similar messages, the Garden Guides successfully impart wisdom to visitors about the plant kingdom and the interlinking of the natural world.

The plants will often sell themselves on a tour and are the raw material of a

Garden Guide's tour, just as they are to generations of plant collectors. The Guides refer to the rich history of these plant collectors, and develop stories to explain our garden plant heritage. They use the plant labels and archive material in the Library and Herbarium, to put these stories into context.

Wildlife is abundant in the garden and most of the Guides have at least a passing interest in the subject and will happily divert from the route of the walk to examine tracks and snuffle holes left from the previous night's activity of nocturnal mammals.

Birds are a constant draw on a walk, indeed several of the Guides are active bird watchers and every summer one Guide organises an early morning bird walk. This leaves the gate at 6.30am at a time when many people have not yet stirred. A group of 15 people revel in the privilege of walking through a tranquil oasis that not many other Edinburgh residents will ever dream of experiencing.

We go into the 2009 season with an invigorated group, willing to teach and promote with anecdotes and accuracy.



Fig. 2 *Berberis darwinii*, the anthers spring in towards the style when touched. Photo: Tony Garn.