

FRIENDS OF BELFAST BOTANIC GARDENS

TRUSTEES' ANNUAL REPORT 2022/23

1. OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

The Friends of Belfast Botanic Gardens (FoBBG) charity works to advance the knowledge of botany, horticulture and the horticultural legacy of Belfast Botanic Gardens for the public benefit and to promote Belfast Botanic Gardens as a centre for horticultural excellence, botanical education and public amenity. It aims to promote the conservation, maintenance and development of the Gardens, buildings and monuments therein, enhance the scientific value of the plant collections and support the environmental worth of the gardens as a habitat for wildlife in Belfast city.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE

This year, 2022/23, is our second year of reporting to the Charity Commission NI on the achievement of our charitable objects for public benefit.

In 2022/23 we resumed our face to face meetings rather than meeting by Zoom. This was a very welcome development. We continued to engage with those who are interested in the welfare of Belfast Botanic Gardens via the www.fobbg.co.uk website, Facebook and Twitter. We now have 947 followers of the FoBBG Facebook page and 604 followers on Twitter.

The Global Medicine Garden (GMG) in the Botanic Gardens continues to be an important educational asset in helping us to attain our charitable objects.

The scientific value of this collection continues to be documented on the website with descriptions and photographs. Members continued to be enthusiastic in volunteering to help out with the maintenance and planting in the garden on Sunday mornings between April and November 2022.

The range of signage has been considerably expanded by two of our members and there are now approximately 70 signs within the garden. Each geographical area has a sign that identifies it, a sign with the names of the main plants in that area and signs for some of the individual plants that give the name of the plant and in some cases its medicinal uses. These signs help advance the knowledge of botany for public benefit.

We have also been working with Belfast City Council to develop a larger formal sign at the entrance to the GMG that will show a map of the garden, some background historical information on the development of herbal/physic

gardens and the uses of some of the key plants together with some information on the history of the site within the Botanic gardens.

In 2022/23 we opened the GMG to the public on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10.00 am to 4.00pm. This was so successful that the GMG is now open to the public every day. Members of the public continue to engage with members when we are working in the garden on Sundays. We have been able to talk to local residents and visitors from across Northern Ireland, other parts of the UK and international visitors about the GMG, its plants and history.

Seeds are harvested from the plants in the GMG and a member packages them in hand-made pocket envelopes made from pages of re-used brochures. When members are working in the GMG or at plant sales, these seeds are available for visitors to take and grow in their own garden which helps advance the knowledge of horticulture.

During 2022/23 we have hosted visits by some prestigious groups to the GMG, some in response to direct requests and some passed on from Belfast City Council. The GMG is now accepted as an attraction worth visiting. We have had visits from a group of horticulturalists from Vancouver, a group of American and UK scientists on a conference visit to Belfast, Groomsport Gardening Group, Ballynahinch Gardening Club and Castle Espie Wetland Centre. We have been helped by the 'Bot Crew', who are part of the gardening staff within the gardens, in facilitating these visits and we are very grateful for this support.

In August 2022 our member, Professor John Pilcher, gave a public talk entitled 'Bogs – a window into the past and hope for the future' in the Braid Centre in Ballymena. This was very well received and advanced the knowledge and understanding of botany in relation to the development of bogs over thousands of years and their importance as a natural asset.

In terms of promoting the gardens as a centre of horticultural excellence, FoBBG continues to be a member of the UK 'Friends of Botanic Gardens Forum'. Its purpose is to provide a forum for the exchange of information between Friends of Botanic Gardens groups in their support and engagement of the mission of their respective botanic gardens.

The Chairman of Friends of Belfast Botanic Gardens holds a key role as Secretary of this Forum which helps to further promote FoBBG and the Belfast Botanic Gardens to the wider UK and world audience through the Friends Forum website (www.fbgf.org). It also enables FoBBG to gain access to the educational work and activities that other UK Botanic Gardens are involved in and generate ideas to help FoBBG meet its charitable objects.

We continue our 'Gardens Focus Group' meetings with Belfast City Council managers for the gardens and representatives of the gardening staff. At the meetings in 2022/23 FoBBG discussed establishing a collection of woody plants in an area that once held a collection of bamboos and grasses but which is now grassed. Initial discussions centred around a collection that had associations with Irish gardeners or plant hunters. At the January 2023 meeting this idea formalised into the creation of a 'John Templeton Trail' within the garden. This will contain a selection of trees and shrubs that the naturalist John Templeton (1766 – 1825) had in his garden in Cranmore, Malone. One member has assembled a list of some of these trees and shrubs from records of the plant collection in Templeton's garden. In our 2023/24 report we will report on the commencement of the planting.

At the Gardens Focus Group meeting we continue to raise the need to preserve and maintain the architectural heritage of buildings and monuments within the gardens such as the Palm House and the Kelvin memorial statue.

During 2022/23 we have attended stakeholder meetings, hosted by Belfast City Council and Queens University Belfast, on the 'UPSURGE' project for the Lower Botanic Gardens. This is a nature based solution for public and environmental benefit which is funded from EU Horizon 2020 funds.

<https://www.upsurge-project.eu/demo-cases/belfast-northern-ireland/>

These meetings have resulted in a draft outline plan for the use of the area. Friends of Belfast Botanic Gardens has been allocated a plot within the site and we have been discussing with Belfast City Council the purpose for which we will use this plot to fulfil the brief of the project and to meet our charitable objects.

Fundraising

The Friends group continues to raise funds from membership subscriptions, plant sales and sales of ceramics that are hand-made by two members using ferns from the Botanic Gardens and Queen's Quarter. The ceramics are accompanied by an information card about Belfast Botanic Gardens.

During 2022/23 we continued to have small 'pop-up' sales in the area beside the GMG. This gives us additional opportunities to talk to the public about the Botanic Gardens and the plants they are buying, some of which have been raised in the gardens.

The Friends group continues to get an administrative grant of £300 from Belfast City Council. Our membership subscription is £12 for a single membership, £20 for joint membership and £5 for student membership.

Events

As well as monthly business meetings, the Friends group arranges social events for members. These events were re-established during 2022/23 after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Average attendances at meetings in 2022/23 compared to prior years is shown below.

Summary of attendees at meetings (averaged) *Zoom		
Year	Attendees	Apologies
2017/18	13	9
2018/19	17	9
2019/20	16	9
2020/21	16 *	6
2021/22	10 *	9
2022/23	12	11

3. PLANS FOR FUTURE PERIODS

We will continue to develop our website to advance the knowledge of botany, horticulture and the horticultural legacy of Belfast Botanic Gardens for the public benefit and to promote Belfast Botanic Gardens as a centre for horticultural excellence, botanical education and public amenity. During 2022/23 we have been working with a group of employees from a software company who are giving their time for free to help refresh the website. We hope to relaunch the new website in 2023/24.

We will continue to work with Belfast City Council in the 'Gardens Focus Group' and focus on key priority projects within the gardens that will benefit the public and promote the conservation, maintenance and development of the Gardens, buildings and monuments therein and enhance the scientific value of the plant collections. This work will include the start of planting for the 'John Templeton Trail' and also the inclusion of more labelling in the gardens.

We will continue to work with Belfast City Council and Queens University on the 'UPSURGE' project.

Trustees Adrian Walsh
 Frank Caddy
 Ann McBrien
 Brigid McElhill