

FRIENDS OF BELFAST BOTANIC GARDENS

TRUSTEES' REPORT 2023/24

1. ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE

This year, 2023/24, is our third year of reporting to the Charity Commission NI on the achievement of our charitable objects for public benefit.

It has been a busy year for us as we continue to promote the Botanic Gardens and fulfil our objects as a Charity in law.

Throughout 2023/24 we held face to face monthly meetings and continued to engage with those who are interested in the welfare of Belfast Botanic Gardens via the www.fobbg.co.uk website, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). We now have 998 followers of the FoBBG Facebook page and 662 followers on X. We find X to be especially important in quickly updating our followers with news about the gardens and this ensures that followers can retweet to share this information with a wider audience.

With help from our Friends at kainos, we launched our new website on 21st February 2024. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. The website holds a vast amount of information on the gardens and the plant collections therein including a Tree database, Cycads, Ferns and plants in the Global Medicine Garden (GMG). The new design helps visitors access this information more easily.

The GMG itself continues to be an important educational asset in helping us to attain our charitable objects.

Members continued to be enthusiastic in volunteering to help out with the maintenance and planting in the GMG on Sunday mornings between April 2023 and March 2024.

The signage within the GMG continues to help us meet our object of advancing the knowledge of botany for public benefit.

In November 2023 we finalised the design of a large formal sign for the entrance to the GMG. This was a collaborative project with Belfast City Council (BCC) and the sign has been recently installed. This sign informs the public about medicinal plants, including examples of plants by country within the GMG, and also displays a map of the GMG and the history of the site on which the GMG is located.

The GMG continues to be open to the public every day from 10.00 to 4.30pm. When we are working in it, members of the public who walk through it continue to comment on how much they like the garden and we are able to answer any questions they have about the plants. Visitors include local residents and others from across the UK and Ireland, and international visitors.

We continued to harvest seeds from plants in the GMG and members helped package these in hand made pocket envelopes between October and January. These seeds continue to be available for visitors to take and grow in their own garden which helps advance the knowledge of horticulture.

On 5th July 2023, author Shirley Lanigan visited the GMG to review it for inclusion in her recently launched book 'The Open Gardens of Ireland'.

Some quotes about the GMG and the work of the Friends in the article about the Botanic Gardens include:

".....for those who do love to study plants, there has been a fascinating new garden added to the Belfast Botanical offering".

"The labelling is wonderful, educational and informative."

"The friendly gardeners told me that they spend a great deal of time answering questions from visitors. I saw this for myself. There is something about a medicinal garden that fascinates people and this is a particularly welcoming as well as attractive and valuable example."

This will help in our efforts in promoting the Botanic Gardens and also educating the public about the specific plants within the GMG.

On Sunday May 28th the Irish Tree Society, including their Chairman, Thomas Pakenham (who has written many books on trees), visited the gardens to discuss its interesting collection of trees. The tour was conducted by Reg Maxwell (a retired Area Manager in BCC's Parks Department) who had responsibility for the Botanic Gardens for many years. The Friends group was represented on this informative tour, including our member Professor Jonathan Pilcher (who compiled the tree archive on our website) who led the group through the pinetum. The group also visited the GMG. We look forward to a continuing working relationship with the Irish Tree Society. At the end of the tour they presented a *Tetracentron sinense*, an Augustine Henry discovery, to the Friends group to add to the tree collection in the gardens.

We also hosted a visit to the GMG during the summer by a gardening group from Holywood.

In March 2024 the Chair gave an illustrated Powerpoint presentation on the history of the Botanic Gardens to the Alpine Garden Society Ulster Group.

In our efforts to fulfil our object of educating the public, we brought a proposal for Tree and Shrub labelling to one of our 'Gardens Focus Group' meetings with BCC managers of the gardens and representatives of the gardening staff. The proposal was to progress the installation of modern botanical labels to a significant number of the many rare and interesting trees in the Botanic Gardens collection. These new long-lasting labels would include the English name, together with the Latin name; this is particularly appreciated by botanists and naturalists as well as the many international visitors to the Botanic Gardens. The labels would also include the botanical family and the country of origin together with an accession number that links the tree to more detailed information in the Botanic Gardens database, such as the date it came into the gardens and from where it was sourced. The naming follows the accepted botanical protocol common to Kew and other botanical institutions.

Following consultation, the proposal was accepted by BCC Managers with the funding being shared between FoBBG and BCC.

Over 200 labels have now been attached to trees in the Botanic Gardens and work is ongoing for extension of this labelling project to the shrubs in the gardens and plants in the Tropical Ravine and Palm House.

The Botanic Gardens Tree Labelling Project was officially launched by Councillor Micky Murray, Chair of the BCC South Belfast Area Working Group, at an event on 19th December 2023 in the Botanic Gardens. Our member Professor Jonathan Pilcher was invited to speak about tree labelling at the event and its importance and necessity within a botanic garden.

The Chair and Professor Jonathan Pilcher were also invited to attend the launch of the BCC wide Tree Strategy on 5th October 2023 in the Tropical Ravine.

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

In November 2023 we made a presentation to BCC managers on how the Friends Group can help BCC to do this.

In February 2024 we also wrote to the ten Councillors on the BCC South Belfast Area Working Group, (copied to the five MLAs and one MP), asking if we could give a presentation on how FoBBG may be of further support to BCC in conserving and developing the Botanic Gardens for the future and promoting the gardens as a valuable asset.

The 200th anniversary of the Botanic Gardens occurs in 2028 and it is important that its status as the only botanic garden in Northern Ireland is recognised and celebrated.

We received permission to address the South Belfast Area Working Group at their meeting on 20th May 2024 and we will give an update on this in our next report.

In our last report we mentioned 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 Road. One member has assembled a list of some of these trees and shrubs from records of the plant collection in Templeton's garden. We are pleased to report that during 2023/24 four trees have been planted as the start of the trail (three of them to mark the retirement of senior gardening staff). Additional trees will be added in the coming years.

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' whose purpose is to provide a forum for the exchange of information and ideas to promote the use, value and role of Friends of Botanic Gardens groups in their support and engagement of the mission of their respective botanic gardens.

Our Chair was the Secretary of the Forum throughout 2023/24 and this 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 with which helps FoBBG to get ideas for meeting its charitable objects and enhancing public benefit.

During 2023/24 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/>

We have submitted a plan to BCC for the plot that the Friends group has been allocated within the site and we continue to discuss with BCC 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 hand-made by two members using ferns from the Botanic Gardens and Queen's Quarter. The ceramics are accompanied by a card with information about Belfast Botanic Gardens.

During 2023/24, we had plant sales at the Lord Mayor's Fun Day in Botanic Gardens in May 2023, at the Mela Festival in August 2023 and at the Autumn Fair in September 2023. We also held a small 'pop up' sale at the GMG in July 2023. These plant sales help us promote the Botanic Gardens and give information and advice about plants to visitors to our stalls.

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

We have not increased our membership subscriptions for a number of years to ensure that they still remain affordable.

Events

As well as business meetings, a number of social events (including garden visits and talks about subjects related to gardening) continued during 2023/4. Average attendance at meetings in 2023/24 compared to prior years is shown in the table 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
2023/24	11	11

3. PLANS FOR FUTURE PERIODS

We will continue to develop our website and social media pages 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.

We will continue to work with the BCC South Belfast Area Working Group and the Gardens Focus Group and focus on the promotion of the gardens as a valuable attraction for visitors, as well as 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.

We will continue to work with BCC and Queens University on the development of the FoBBG plot within the lower Botanic Gardens as part of the 'UPSURGE' project.

The Chair continues to hold the post of Secretary for the Friends of Botanic Gardens Forum in 2024/25 and we will use this opportunity to continue to liaise with fellow Friends groups and promote the Belfast Botanic Gardens.

Trustees	Adrian Walsh
	Frank Caddy
	Ann McBrien
	Brigid McElhill