

FRIENDS OF BELFAST BOTANIC GARDENS

TRUSTEES' REPORT 2024/25

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 is the fourth year of reporting to The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland on the achievement of our charitable objects for public benefit.

2024/25 was another busy year for the Friends group. In April 2024, at the Tropical Ravine, members attended the unveiling of an Ulster Historical Circle 'blue plaque', championed by a long-standing member to commemorate John Templeton (1766-1825). John Templeton had advocated for a botanic garden for Belfast for many years but unfortunately died before the current site was acquired.

We were invited to give a short speech at the event. The speech highlighted Templeton's vision for a botanic garden in Belfast and the Friends' resolve to keep Templeton's vision at the forefront of our minds in continuing to help Belfast City Council (BCC) promote and further develop the Botanic Gardens in the future and in an uncertain age of climate change.

Also in April 2024 at the Spring Fair in Malone House, Barnett's Demesne, we had a stall promoting the Friends group and the history of the Gardens. In preparation for that we produced a membership leaflet highlighting and promoting our activities, to hand out to members of the public.

On 20th May 2024 we gave a presentation in the City Hall to the South Belfast Area Working Group of BCC. This working group comprises Councillors from the Botanic and Balmoral wards of Belfast. We explained 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.

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

At the meeting we sought and obtained approval from the working group to formalise discussions with BCC officers in the Neighbourhood Services Directorate to draft a specification for an independent report on the Gardens. A working group comprising Botanic Gardeners, Council staff and FoBBG members has now been established and is focusing on the specification for the independent report and the planning for the 200th anniversary of the Gardens. Included within this is preliminary work on a volunteering scheme for the Gardens.

We continue 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 1,083 followers of the FoBBG Facebook page and 682 followers on X. 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 GMG itself continues to be an important educational asset in helping us to attain our charitable objects. Members continued to volunteer and helped out with maintenance and planting in the GMG on Sunday mornings between April 2024 and March 2025.

Increasing the number of signs in the GMG and highlighting a 'Plant of the Month' in the GMG noticeboard continues to help us meet our object of advancing the knowledge of botany for public benefit.

We continue to harvest seeds from plants in the GMG and these are available for visitors to take and grow in their own garden which helps advance the knowledge of horticulture. We gave tours of the GMG to a number of gardening groups in 2024/25 including the Belfast Naturalist Field Club, the Paradise Gardening Club (Ballywalter) and Fermanagh Gardening Club.

Our tree labelling initiative, which started with the labelling of over 200 trees, continues. The initiative has been extended to include plants in the Tropical Ravine and Palm House and a range of shrubs in the Gardens.

In January 2025 we gave an illustrated Powerpoint presentation on the history of the Botanic Gardens to Comber Horticultural Society and in February gave a similar presentation to the Botanic Gardeners, 'Bot Crew', garden wardens and garden attendants.

During the year, thanks to an introduction from a member, the Friends group was invited by the editor of the Garden and Landscape Designers Association's Journal, 'Compass', to submit an article for their 81st volume themed "Embracing 2050 Sustainably: Global Resilience".

We submitted an article titled 'Belfast Botanic Gardens – Past, Present and Future'. This article highlighted the history of the Botanic Gardens and the influence of John Templeton, the history of the Palm House and Tropical Ravine, the creation of the new GMG, its design, layout and planting, and resilience for the future. This latter section highlighted the sustainable methods of maintaining the GMG, how it has increased the biodiversity of the Gardens and how cultivation techniques and careful growing medium manipulation can help mitigate the effects of climate change. These are techniques that we will use in the plot that the Friends group has been allocated within the 'UPSURGE' project site in the Lower Botanic Gardens. The article was published in December 2024.

In September 2024 we participated in an UPSURGE Climate Change Event hosted by BCC and QUB for the five UPSURGE city partners (Belfast, Breda, Budapest, Katowice and Maribor) which included a visit to the UPSURGE site in Lower Botanic Gardens. For the event, we created a large poster to present the work of FoBBG, our charitable objects and our plans for a 'climate change' garden on our plot in the Lower Botanic Gardens. We were able to explain our plans to Lord Mayor Micky Murray who visited the site.

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

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' and holds the Secretary's post. Their newsletter lets FoBBG gain an insight into the educational work and activities that other UK Botanic Gardens are involved in which helps FoBBG to get ideas for meeting its charitable objects and enhancing public benefit.

In August, the BBC recorded three episodes of the Antiques Roadshow in the Botanic Gardens. The Friends group helped in writing and proof-reading the script that was used by the presenter in the recording of the programme and as voiceovers in the editing stages. The focus was on the history of the Gardens, the Palm House and Tropical Ravine, plant hunters and ferns, with a particular focus on the Killarney fern. We also provided a range of props that were used in the filming: a modern replica of a Wardian case, a lead label printer, an old soil testing kit and a vasculum for carrying plant samples and keeping them moist.

The opening sequence of the first programme was filmed in the Global Medicine Garden and our plant stall at the event was featured in the third programme. The programmes, with our input, helped promote the Botanic Gardens to a wide TV and on-line audience, with a focus on its historical development, unique historical buildings, botanical collections and its value for the city of Belfast and Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately 2024/25 was a busy year for the Trustees in terms of submitting letters to BCC to oppose proposals for the Gardens brought forward by various committees of the Council. Along with other community groupings in the locality who also submitted letters of opposition, we successfully halted an ice skating rink that was proposed for December 2024 and two events in June and July 2025 that would have limited access to the Great Lawn for almost six weeks in summer. The most worrying proposal included the Botanic Gardens in a consultation process on an extension to existing opening hours for parks within Belfast, including the possibility of 24/7 opening. We submitted a strong and reasoned rebuttal to the proposal and encouraged members and others to do the same. We await the outcome of the consultation and maintain our perspective that any extension to the current opening hours is totally inappropriate for the Botanic Gardens, with its historically important and iconic buildings (the Palm House and Tropical Ravine), its plant collections and monuments, even though extended opening may be of convenience to others in the locale.

Fundraising

The Friends group continues to raise funds from membership subscriptions, plant sales and sales of ceramics.

During 2024/25, we had plant and ceramics sales in May, in August at the Antiques Roadshow and at the Mela Festival and at the Autumn Fair in September. Thanks to the work of a member who established links with Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, we were able to hold dedicated ceramics sales there in December and February. An application has also been submitted to BCC for permission to hold a number of pop-up ceramics stalls in the Tropical Ravine between July and September 2025.

The Friends group continues to get an administrative grant of £300 from BCC. At our last AGM we held our membership subscription rates at £12 for a single membership, £20 for joint membership and £5 for student membership. In March a sub-group was set up to look at ideas for increasing membership.

Events

As well as business meetings, a number of social events (including garden visits and talks about subjects related to gardening) continued during 2024/25

Average attendance at meetings in 2024/25 compared to prior years is shown in the table below.

Summary of attendees at meetings (average) *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	12	12
2024/25	13	13

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 working group established for a specification for an independent report on the Gardens and planning for the 200th anniversary in 2028, to maintain focus on the promotion of the Gardens as a valuable attraction for visitors. In addition we will work collaboratively with BCC and its officers on key priority projects within the Gardens that will benefit the public and promote the conservation, maintenance and development of the Gardens, the buildings and monuments therein and enhance the scientific value of the plant collections. This includes promoting the restoration of the Palm House, one of the most iconic buildings in Belfast.

We will continue to work with BCC and Queens University on the development of the FoBBG 'climate change' garden as part of the UPSURGE project within the lower Botanic Gardens. Work on building our plot is estimated to be completed in August 2025 and details of its further development will be provided in next year's report.

We continue to hold the post of Secretary for the Friends of Botanic Gardens Forum for 2025/26 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