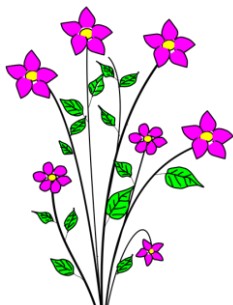


Issue No. 51

January 2019

# Friends of Thwaite Gardens Newsletter



## ***Diary DATES***

### **Evening Meeting**

7.45 pm, Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> March 2019 at Cottingham Methodist Hall

Speaker:- Graham Elliott

Marketing Officer - Mires Beck Nurseries, North Cave

A talk entitled “Origins, Development and Work of the Nursery”

Members – free, non- members - £2

Plant stall, Light refreshments available

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### **Gardens Opening Times Reminder**

**Monday to Thursday 10am to 3.30 pm**

**Fridays 10am to 3pm except on Bank Holidays and at other times when the University is closed**

## **OPEN DAY 2019**

**This will be held on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May.**

As usual, there will again be a plant stall with a wide variety of plants for sale. Donations of plants from Friends would be welcome. There will be the usual refreshments served from 11 am in the new classroom. We would very much welcome contributions of home baking to this stall, as it tends to be very popular!

Other ways in which you can help to make the day a success are:- Welcoming visitors, assisting with refreshments, handing out brochures, signing up new members, manning the plant stall or taking admission fees.

Admission to the Open Day is free to members on production of their membership cards and for non-members is, the very reasonable price of, £3.00 with accompanied under 16s free. So please tell all your family and friends about the event.

The Choir who entertained us so well last year have agreed to come back this year, so that's something to look forward to.

There is a form at the back of the newsletter (for those who receive this electronically to complete) if anyone wants to offer to help. For those without email who receive this as hard copy, there will be a loose copy of the form with their newsletter.

## PLANT OF THE MONTH – NEW ZEALAND FLAX (*Phormium tenax*)



My own very first and memorable encounter with *Phormium tenax* was on holiday in Falmouth in 1969. A huge clump grew in the garden of our holiday let. It was in flower at the time and so, as well as impressing me with its exotic appearance and sheer size, the towering flower stems exuded a heavy sweet resinous odour that seemed to embody some quality of the tropics and which I forever associate with that holiday. I almost expected a hummingbird to appear to sip its nectar! It was my first experience of the garden delights of the far south west, along with big Cordylines, Mimosa and huge Monterey Cypresses. I seemed almost to be in a foreign country and I never imagined that such a plant could be grown in East Yorkshire.

Indeed, in those days few, if any, local gardens would have had New Zealand Flax. Things changed radically from roughly the late 1970's onward. Suddenly, flax plants appeared on the mass market, in a range of quite jazzy striped variegation – remarkably in tune with other 1970's fashions of the day. Now they are common in private and public gardens and parks. They seem particularly popular in modern urban design where vegetation of a somewhat outré character is required to complement some outlandish architectural experiment in glass and aluminium, or whatever.

There are actually two widely grown species of this plant. *Phormium tenax* (known broadly as the main species and sometimes as “Lowland Flax”) and a

second but at least as common species, *P. cookianum* (the “Mountain Flax”). Both are native of New Zealand but to different habitats. In the wild *P. tenax* tends to be found in low lying wet places, whilst *P. cookianum* is an upland species. The differences are somewhat subtle but definable. *P. tenax* is much the larger of the two with stiff sword like leaves which may reach 3m. in length. The robust flower stems are even taller, studded with clusters of dull red tubular flowers, succeeded by black seed pods which slightly resemble hands of small black bananas pointing upward. *P. cookianum* is rather smaller and the leaves more curving. Its flowers are yellow and seed similar except that the pods hang downwards. The majority of the coloured ornamental forms are of the latter species.

*Phormium* is an immensely robust plant once established and remarkably hardy – only rarely killed by exceptional cold. It is extremely popular with “Exotic Gardeners” keen on sub-tropical effects. However, care must be taken not to change one’s mind after planting as it can be very hard to eliminate. It is also a ‘top drawer’ coastal plant, notably on windy exposed coasts.

Part of the plant’s toughness is in its actual structure. The leaves consist of a strong and useful fibre, first employed by Maori people and later, commercially, by Europeans, who also introduced it to places like St. Helena in the hope of establishing wealth creating industry there, like in New Zealand. Most of these ventures failed in the end, but the introduced flax escaped from its plantations and rapidly spread in such places creating vast monocultures of almost impenetrable alien vegetation, ruining local ecology. In Britain, *Phormium* is more restrained and only in western Ireland has it naturalised to a significant degree.

We have a prominent bed of *Phormium* at Thwaite – in the centre of the lawn beyond the greenhouses. Instigated by Joe Garner and university staff, it has been incorporated by Friends into a general “Antipodean” border of other Australasian plants. Several of the coloured flax varieties are on display but only represent a small portion of those now available in pink, yellow, cream,

copper colours and variegations. All seem reasonably hardy but some less so than others. There is also a range of dwarf varieties: somewhat pointless – as they resemble very coarse grass. John Killingbeck Jan.2019

### **TREES OF THWAITE – THREE ASHES (*Fraxinus spp.*)**

By far the best known Ash species – and much the commonest at Thwaite – is the native *Fraxinus excelsior*. It is one of Britain's most widespread species and is found elsewhere over much of Northern Europe. On the Yorkshire Wolds it is the commonest tree by a fair margin partly because it grows particularly well on well drained calcareous soil in cool moist climates.

Ash is much loved and has been dubbed “the Venus of the woods” in folk culture and was regarded by the Vikings as “the tree of life”. Whether it warrants such poetic lauding is perhaps debatable. Although it can sometimes reach very impressive dimensions in excess of 30m (in East Yorks., such giants are mostly found near the bottom of chalk valleys) a typical Wolds Ash is a more sorry affair of not much more than half that height and often broken and misshapen by storm damage in middle age. Ash is also notably late into leaf making a pure Ash wood look particularly wintry as late as May. In cold upland areas it may barely be in leaf by the longest day. Once in leaf though, growth, particularly on young trees, is very vigorous and impressively luxuriant which combined with profuse seed (known as Ash “keys”) makes it a very competitive species well able to take care of itself.

Ash timber is valued, so most East Yorkshire Ash woods are in fact man made plantations. However, it is claimed by some authorities that Ash forest was the ‘natural’ vegetation cover of the Yorkshire Wolds before human clearances in pre- history. Others dispute this, pointing out that Ash seems by nature to be a coloniser of open ground and appears to have increased relative to other trees following human activity. Whatever the case, only a few remnants of the characteristically rich ground flora associated with wild Ash forest survive in the region today e.g. at Millington Wood.

We have so many native Ash trees at Thwaite, that thinning would arguably be desirable, competing severely as they do with many rarer trees. None are particularly good either, though one growing close to the 'Secret Garden' is quite fine and tall. We also have the spookily contorted Weeping Ash (*F. e. 'Pendula'*) growing near Thwaite Hall. In local parks and gardens you might also encounter Golden Ash (*F. e. 'Jaspidea'*), not a particularly noble tree except in the quality of its autumn colour – rich golden yellow and much superior to that of the common form. A small grove of them in a private garden in Camerton village, Holderness, is quite stunning in October.

What of the other species of Ash? Thwaite has one reasonable, if slightly crooked specimen of Narrow Leaved Ash (*F. angustifolia*) growing in the southern end of the wood. *F. angustifolia* replaces *F. excelsior* as native in Southern Europe. It is a less heavy looking tree and is planted in quantity (possibly by mistake for common Ash!) in a few places; locally near the Humber Bridge and further afield south of York on the A 19 and along parts of the A1. A subspecies known as *F. a. oxycarpa* 'Raywood' is fairly common in Hull streets. It is a gorgeously feathery textured tree, noted for its superb autumn colour – orange within, mellowing to the colour of vintage port on the exterior – giving it the common name "Claret Ash".

The third Thwaite Ash is Manna Ash (*F. ornus*), also from Southern Europe. Although it can grow quite tall it is usually rather smaller than common Ash. Somewhat non -descript, it comes into its own when in flower. Unlike the dull barely noticeable blooming of *F. excelsior*, *F. ornus* is covered in white, fluffy sweetly scented flowers in late spring. It is claimed the name "manna" is due to its sweet sap, but might also be down to the flowers. We have two small *F. ornus* at Thwaite. One is near the hall and the other, rather suppressed and hidden in the copse near the Secret Garden. It is fairly widespread in Hull along streets and in parks and sometimes self regenerates.

The only two other Ashes likely to be encountered locally - in Hull not at Thwaite - are the American Red Ash (*F. pennsylvanica*) and the Single Leaved

Ash (*F. excelsior diversifolia*). The latter is a peculiar variation of common Ash with totally un- ash like undivided leaves. It sometimes confounds would be tree experts! Hull has a few examples. Hull has many Red Ashes – seemingly all the same age and size – perhaps planted as a municipal ‘job lot’ decades ago? Otherwise it is a rather scarce tree.

A final mention must be made of Ash Dieback disease. This is the latest of many pathological threats to Britain’s trees. Predicted to kill off upward of 80% of Britain’s Ashes, it is already very widespread, particularly among saplings and effectively out of control. It seems likely it will strip the Wolds of most of their already sparse tree stock. The question arises – what will replace Ash? Sycamore and Beech seem the most likely contenders at this stage, combined hopefully with a resurgence of resistant survivors from the Ash population. All eyes are on the lookout for resistant individuals.

John Killingbeck Jan 2019



### **January Newsletter: Enjoy the plants.**

As I write this, we are just beginning to see the first signs of Spring, even though wintry weather is forecast. Hopefully by the time you read this, Spring will be making itself much more apparent.

At Thwaite Gardens in January, the first daffodils can be seen, snowdrops and cyclamen, iris and hellebores. There are many different varieties of these, so whenever you visit there is something different to be seen.

Early in January the Friday volunteers started to prune the roses, a mammoth task which requires steady persistence, under the guidance of Jean Major and Pat Foreman. I am always amazed at just how much growth the roses put on in one summer. It takes a sizeable group of volunteers a few weeks to cut back the lengthy branches, cut out some of the old stems and to tie in newer, more



vigorous ones. Other volunteers chop up the cut-down branches and barrow them away, piling them into the skip for garden waste. It is real teamwork.

At 11.00 am I ring the hand bell and everyone stops for a well-earned cup of coffee or tea, warming themselves up while sharing information about the gardens and plans we have. Then it is back outside again and on with the work.

On warm dry days we always met in the outside classroom, but as most people will know, this was badly damaged by vandals. I hope this can be repaired as it was a useful resource, not only for ourselves on Fridays, but for visiting walkers, schoolchildren and students.

That is about us outdoors. For you and your lives indoors, there is information about the value of plants to keep the air clean. A NASA study showed that cactus and spider plants (*Chlorophytum comosum*) are particularly good at absorbing emissions from computer terminals and certain pollutants found in modern homes, eg formaldehyde and other toxins found in flat pack furniture, carpets, etc. Ivy (*Hedera helix*) is apparently particularly effective at absorbing airborne moulds. Mother-in-law's tongue (*Sansevieria trifasciata*) is also said to be good at absorbing certain pollutants. All plants take in carbon dioxide and release oxygen in daylight as part of photosynthesis. Orchids are able to do this at night with the moth orchid (phalaenopsis) being recommended for bedrooms.

I am not sure how many plants one needs to achieve these things, but for many years I have kept a spider plant near my computer and have potted up many of its babies for friends. Recent research has demonstrated that office workers, hospital patients and children at school all do better if there are lots of plants in their world. Gardens designed for Chelsea and other shows have been reconstructed in hospitals and hospices, with very positive feedback. There seems to be no doubt that plants are good for us, both in gardens and in pots within our homes.

## WATERING CACTI AND SUCCULENTS

Spring is “a-coming” and cacti and succulent plants will be into full growth in late March-early April. The exceptions to this include the South African species Lithops & Conophytum to name but two, which will be in their resting phase until much later in the year. It is best to check which of our plant species are in this group to determine whether to water or not. My greenhouse at home is frost free all winter and the plants are bone dry but some South African species need careful watering during this time. If you’re growing on a sunny windowsill you can water all year but cut down in winter or the short hours of daylight could cause etiolation (plants become pale and small). The ideal with all plants in Summer is to give a good drink and let them dry out thoroughly before watering again. Always start the water regime slowly at first, possibly an early spray only, as they can swell and burst if pushed too early. We in the British Cactus and Succulent Society have cultivation sheets to advise on these issues and I would be happy to send one to any interested parties. Good growing folks and hope you see their wonderful flowers.

Lithops



Conophytum



*Plants photographed in the cactus and succulent greenhouse at Thwaite Gardens*

**Bob Hall, Secretary of Hull and East Riding Branch of the British Cactus and Succulent Society (Hull & East Riding branch) and Friday volunteer at Thwaite.**

(Bob and his colleagues have a stall at our Open Day in May, selling cacti and succulents. If you want a cultivation sheet you can leave a message for Bob at the Gardens or via email: [pathbob@talktalk.net](mailto:pathbob@talktalk.net))

## ‘Friends of Thwaite Gardens’ on social media



As well as our established website, we now have a social media presence, and you can follow ‘Friends of Thwaite Gardens’ on Twitter, Instagram and/ or Facebook. You can find out about upcoming events and also keep up to date with garden news. We are posting regular photos of plants, so that you can see what is currently at its best in the gardens and glasshouses,

The website address is, as always, [www.thwaite-gardens.hull.ac.uk](http://www.thwaite-gardens.hull.ac.uk)  
If you search for ‘Friends of Thwaite Gardens’ on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, you will be able to find, and follow, us. We would love to hear your comments and suggestions too.

Jane Scorer

## **Vandalism/Break-in update**

As most of you will be aware, we have been subjected to further break-ins and vandalism, particularly in the last 2 weeks.

To ensure that people are not there out of hours, for their own safety, all the external locks, including the front gates, will be changed to a new key suite.

Only authorized University staff will be given keys for the new locks.

It is intended that University security staff will open the gates in a morning and check for signs of intruders before leaving.

Normal opening times for Friends (as mentioned earlier in this newsletter) will still apply. I hasten to add that this will not affect the work of the Friday volunteers and also Open Days and other events authorized by the University.

On a personal note, in all my 52 years of working at the gardens, I have never experienced this sort of stress. We have had break-ins and vandalism previously, but never on this scale.

Recently the police have informed me that they have obtained a DNA match which will hopefully identify one of the intruders.

Best wishes,

Vic Swetez

## **Contact Details**

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# THWAITE GARDENS OPEN DAY – OFFERS OF HELP

**SUNDAY 19TH MAY 2019**

I/we will help on Open Day.

*Please circle what you would prefer to do:-*

Gate/Programmes

Plant stall

Refreshments

Please circle your preferred time(s). “No preference” helps us greatly to balance the workload and accommodate those who are tied to a specific time slot.

10.45 – 12.30

12.30 – 2.15

2.15 – 4.00

No preference

*If you choose “no preference” we will tell you your allocated time and get your agreement.*

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Contact details. Tel/email \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for offering to help. Please complete and return this form to Vic Swetez at [v.swetez@hull.ac.uk](mailto:v.swetez@hull.ac.uk) or 141 Mill Rise, Skidby , HU16 5UA, or leave at the glasshouses.



