

Issue No. 52

May 2019

Friends of Thwaite Gardens Newsletter



Diary DATES

OPEN DAY 2019

This will be held on Sunday 19th May.

However, as you all know, there are issues regarding vandalism of the site and the buildings and also access to Thwaite Hall grounds once the new owner has taken over. He has said that he will allow access on the open day, but we don't know the details as yet, so can't assume we will have access or what will be practical.

However, 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, and we would very much welcome contributions of home baking to this stall, as it usually goes down very well!

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.

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## PLANT OF THE MONTH - OAT GRASS (*Stipa gigantea*)



This is the first time we have discussed a grass in the POTM section, somewhat remiss because grasses have been and still are very popular ornamental plants. The highpoint of the grass fashion was perhaps the 1990's when they were widely promoted by garden designers. Although perhaps less novel now, the range of grasses for ornamental use continues to expand, still has a long way to go and has come very far since the days when Pampas Grass (*Cortaderia*) and Gardeners' Garters (*Phalaris arundinacea* 'Variegata') seemed virtually the only options.

Aficionados of grasses in general point to their general toughness, low maintenance, delicacy and subtlety of form and prolonged interest. Although rarely colourful they do have one quality in abundance that many other garden plants have much less of – movement and grace. *Stipa gigantea* has all the qualities above and arguably to a greater degree than even many other grasses which has justly made it one of the most popular.

*Stipa gigantea* comes originally from central Iberia from rather dry rocky habitats. This suggests it will be happiest in dry well drained garden soils in a sunny position. This is indeed the case, although it seems adaptable to most well drained conditions. People who find it difficult to grow, in my experience usually do so because conditions are too damp, or shady or simply not open enough. This is a superb species in the wind and any gardener who has to deal

with exposed conditions – so destructive to many other plants – should consider *Stipa*.

Yes, wind and *Stipa* – what a delectable combination! Never are they more magnificent than in bright sunlight swept over by a strong breeze. The crowning glory of this grass is the flower and seed heads – delicate yet strong, they easily bend but rarely break. They start to emerge from the evergreen tussocks in May. The first stage is a diaphanous burst of trailing threads (awns) that shimmer in the sun – diamonded yet further by any clinging raindrops. Then, as you fear they must, they inevitably lose this beauty, they morph after about a month into something quite different. Post seed drop they become plumes of golden papery husks that resemble clouds of tiny flying insects. This stage lingers long in the year, even into winter, where before finally ended by heavy snow or gales, it may yet re-ignite as a frozen fountain under hoar frost.

Management of *Stipa* is easy and minimal. All I do to mine is cut them back to trimmed tussocks in late January. Some people do no more than remove old seed heads. A more dramatic strategy is to burn them every few years in February. Obviously this needs care but eliminates dead material that might otherwise cause rotting. I never feed or water them, they seem happier hungry and dry. After nearly 20 years they show no sign of decline.

My *Stipa* also self-sow, though this might be unusual. More commonly they are propagated by splitting which is fairly straightforward so long as it is done in spring, not autumn.

*Stipa gigantea* has a range of uses in the garden. It is statuesque enough to be grown as a single specimen. Conversely mass planting in a 'Prairie Garden' is magnificent. It combines well with perennials like *Crocsmia*, *Rudbeckia*, *Echinacea*, *Verbena bonariensis*. It can also be utilised as a delicate but effective screen to improve privacy whilst hardly creating shadow.

John Killingbeck

April 20

## TREES OF THWAITE - FASTIGIATE HORNBEAM

*(Carpinus betulus 'Fastigiata')*



This is one of the most striking trees in Thwaite gardens and tends to be noticed by most people even though it is not colourful with no bright flowers and only moderate autumn colour. It is the shape which most draws the attention being a little like a large broad egg in form. Some people express surprise that it has not been clipped to this shape. This combines with a commanding position just north of the greenhouses making it hard to miss.

Hornbeam is a native tree to Britain, though only to south east England. Epping Forest is a classic site to find it, where many old pollarded trees are to be found. It is said also to favour heavy clay soil in nature, though is easily grown on others. The name “Hornbeam” means ‘hard wood’ – in Anglo Saxon and it is certainly one of the toughest densest timbers of European trees. Traditionally it had rather limited specific uses such as cogs, though it was for firewood or charcoal production that it was generally more prized. This probably explains the pollarding practice in Epping.

In East Yorkshire the Hornbeam, though not really very common, is probably much more frequent than generally realised, in parks, large gardens, rural

woods and copses. Some particularly fine examples can be seen in Beverley on the Westwood and notably near the tennis club. Even so, it is almost always planted and rather infrequently self - set. It is not clear why this is the case because in many parts of the country also outside its native range it does so more freely – even as close to here as the North York Moors.

The natural habit of Hornbeam is a little like a Beech on a smaller scale – rarely becoming very large. The foliage is also very Beech- like, only more serrated. The smooth grey bark adds yet more to the Beech effect meaning it is often, understandably, mistaken for actual Beech. However there are subtle differences. Hornbeam bark is different from Beech in having a rather interesting dark grey vertical striping running through the paler ground – almost as if it had been marked by thick charcoal lines. Together with the rather fluted trunk, this gives the bole and branches a seemingly muscular appearance. More definitive still are the seeds. Each nut has a three pronged wing attached which makes their hanging clusters look a bit like shaggy hops, so distinctive that they cannot really be mistaken for anything else. In early spring the tree is also decked with curtains of small green catkins.

Our Thwaite tree however is the fastigiata form which gives it a much tighter more upright habit than the natural Hornbeam. Fastigiata Hornbeam is one of the most widely planted trees in urban areas where space is restricted. In youth it has a really strict vertical shape and is even used in formal planting for this reason. However, unless trimmed it gradually assumes a much broader habit as seen in our Thwaite tree. Ours is one of the largest recorded in Yorkshire and shows what will become of the many others that have been slotted into confined urban spaces everywhere. Planners take note! Many fastigiata Hornbeams also have a reasonable trunk but ours branches out close to the base.

One final similarity of Hornbeam and Beech is that they both make excellent hedges and retain their juvenile dead leaves through the winter. However I think it is fair to say, that although far less well known, Hornbeam actually makes the superior hedge. For one thing it is easier to transplant and establish. The ‘winter brown’ aesthetic effect is similar, except that Hornbeam has a

softer buff brown colour to the Beech's copper – arguably more subtle. Finally Hornbeam is not subject to the woolly aphid attack that sometimes mars Beech hedges in summer and will remain clean.

John Killingbeck

April 2019

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### **Notes from the Evening Meeting in Cottingham on 26.3.19 Mires Beck Nurseries: Our story**

At the March evening meeting our speaker was Graham Elliott, Marketing Officer at Mires Beck Nurseries, who talked to us about the origins, development and work of the nursery.

Following a trip to the US to see best horticultural practice and a meeting with the charity Thrive, which works in the area of social and therapeutic horticulture, Mires Beck founders Irene and Richard Tinklin bought a 10 acre plot of land near to North Cave in 1985. Their primary aim was to provide horticultural therapy but, as Richard had observed the decline in our native flora across the region, they also decided to become a wildflower centre.

In the beginning there was a broken glasshouse and an old barn, and an early key purchase was a second-hand prefab bought for £100 to use as a potting shed! Over time, with grants and donations, old buildings have been replaced and the site has expanded, a bore hole sunk and irrigation set up. In 1999 the then Humberside Aggregates donated a 4-acre site, which will be developed as a nature reserve, and in 2009 the new Oasis centre was built providing a social hub.

While the nursery produces plants for sale to the general public, garden centres and landscape gardeners this is a place which is really all about the people and the plants come second! Every week about 100 trainees come to the nursery for one to four days each, for horticultural training and work experience. All of the trainees have a learning difficulty or

disability and are supported by staff and volunteers according to their specific needs. The youngest trainee is 18 and the oldest 73 and Graham emphasised how much everyone loves working at the nursery. Staff, volunteers and trainees work in teams with specific areas of responsibility, such as the herbs, perennials, ornamental gardens, kitchens and estates teams. In addition the Anniversary Garden team specifically provides facilities for those trainees with more complex or profound disabilities.

The nursery now grows native trees as well as wildflowers with Yorkshire provenance. One of their stated aims is 'to protect and enhance the natural environment' and so they use only peat-free compost and the minimum of pesticides, and recycle as much as they can.

To find out more visit their website

(<http://www.miresbeck.co.uk/index.php/miresbeck/about>) or maybe pop along to their Family Day on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> May, 10-4pm. Opening times for plant sales and directions are on the website (but Graham did warn us not just to follow the satnav!)

Lindsey Atkinson  
Secretary

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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

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