

Issue No. 58

August 2021

# **Friends of Thwaite Gardens Newsletter**



## **Hello everyone**

Welcome to our newsletter in August 2021. What a roller-coaster ride we have all been on since March 2020. I do hope you have all kept healthy – I guess it is likely that some of you may have had Covid, I certainly know one of our photographer friends has had it.

Given that the gates were locked to members (and indeed to the Friday Volunteers for quite some time) we did not ask you to renew your membership in October 2020. Recently the university has agreed that members may visit while the volunteers are on site – currently 1.00-3.00pm on Tuesdays and 9.30am- 2.00 pm on Fridays – as long as everyone behaves responsibly in terms of Covid, notably not visiting if feeling ill or being required to isolate. We volunteers signed up to a Covid protocol in order to continue to work at the gardens.

Staff at the university are concerned about the security of the site if the gates are left open when no staff or volunteers are there. Some of you may not know that Vic Swetez retired at the end of 2020 – he used to visit the gardens twice a day and was responsible for opening and locking the gates. He has not been replaced.

The sale of the parkland, lake and the old Thwaite Hall remain in process. This means there will be no access to the greater part of the grounds, just to the two acres of the botanic garden.

Anyway, here I am asking you to renew your membership, please, if you have not already done so in response to an email from Vic Swetez. The membership year will run from 1.8.21 to 31.7.22 and will give you free entrance to our Open Day on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> September (and indeed to next summer's Open Day, so your membership fee is a real bargain).

Our bank account is diminishing so we welcome your continued support. Membership is still £8 per individual, £12 for a couple. Entrance to Open Day for non-members will be £5 per adult.

The gardens are looking lovely at the moment: do come and enjoy them on our Open Day , and remember to bring some carrier bags for all the plants you will be buying. There will be different plants this year: ones which will look good in the autumn. I look forward to seeing you again.

Annie Bourton Card      29.7.21

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### **A prickly new look!**



The greenhouses have seen a vast amount of change this year, largely due to the effect of the low temperatures on the more tender plants, as the boiler had broken down, but, in addition, it was decided that something had to be done with the cacti bed in the main corridor: Two of the cacti were attempting to emulate “Willy Wonka” and break through the glass roof! It is thought that they have probably been there since the 1930s and whilst sad to see them go, they were past their best. And so the task fell to Bob and Ann, our cacti experts to redesign the bed. Removing the giant beasts was no easy feat: Rohan had to be called in to assist with additional equipment and despite wearing protective gloves and clothing, the barbed spines are forever embedded in Bob’s skin! However, the results of their hard work, as you can see from the photos that Annie took, are amazing! Some of the original plants have been potted up or replanted and are presently flowering away quite happily. In addition, Ann Lowry has added other cacti. Well done to all concerned

Anne Connell, July 2021

## **PEAT FREE COMPOST**

In last April's newsletter I wrote about FoTG's decision to switch to peat-free compost, and the difficulties of sourcing it in local garden centres. Peat bogs are now recognised for their major role in removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and in the English lowlands over 90% of them have been lost or damaged in the last century due to peat extraction. 99% of the peat extracted is used in horticulture which, our government estimates, consumes just under 3 million cubic metres annually, so there is good reason for us all to go peat-free.

Since last year, availability of peat-free compost to buy in garden centres has increased, and some of the larger chains have committed to going peat-free in their container-grown plants. The Wildlife Trusts organisation recently carried out a detailed survey of garden centres, and you can read about their results by clicking [here](#). The Royal Horticultural Society, who have committed their gardens to being peat-free by 2025, has useful advice on peat-free gardening on their [website](#).

FoTG volunteers make their own compost on site, mainly from the weeds which we dig up. These have been particularly abundant this year, as the paths and flower beds were completely neglected last summer due to a Covid lockdown of the gardens by the university. However, home-made compost, being non-sterile, is not suitable for raising plants from seed. Also, our quantities are small as space for bins is limited, and we lack a shredder for the coarser material, which has to be discarded. This makes maintaining the necessary carbon:nitrogen balance in the bins difficult.

So in the end we are dependent, like everyone else, on buying in commercial bags of compost, and we have, like everyone else, to check the labelling on the bag carefully to ensure that it is peat-free.

Rohan Lewis

## **PLANT OF THE MONTH : YUCCA (*Yucca gloriosa* – and others)**



Thwaite is endowed with a number of different Yucca plants. Several of the more obscure ones as well as plants which look very similar can be seen on our small 'Desert Bed' near the little alpine greenhouse. They are the result of the interest of our Chairman, Steve Howe – who like a number of people nowadays has a bit of a passion for 'Exotic Gardening' as it is sometimes known. Some of you might recall that a few years ago we had a lecture on this subject by someone who has a nationally famous garden of this type in Essex with a large collection of desert plants, including many Yuccas.

Although they are increasingly available, I do not propose to say much about the uncommon species, partly because they are a specialist interest but also because most of them are unproven as hardy plants in the longer term, at least in this area of the UK. I've actually tried several of them myself. Although they did well at first, all but one (*Yucca glauca*) was wiped out by the terrible twin

winters of 2009/10 and although very uncommon, *Y. glauca* has long been known to be very hardy - I have seen it myself outdoors in Helsinki botanic garden.

There are three or four species widely established in British gardens and all of them have a striking (and highly foreign to the British landscape), spiky 'tropical' or 'desert' appearance. For those who hate this sort of thing, they are of course anathema. But for those who like it, Yuccas are perhaps the most reliable means of achieving this 'look' and even for those who hate gardening – one Yucca in a gravelled front garden can achieve aesthetic drama with almost no effort.

King of the hardy Yuccas is *Yucca gloriosa*. This plant at its best is a stunner. The spear shaped leaves radiate rigidly from the central crown and are slightly bluish- green. After a few years a magnificent densely flowered bloom about a metre high, will issue from the centre consisting of a multitude of ivory white, tinged red, bells. This usually occurs any time from late summer to late autumn. One of the slight tragedies of this species is that, particularly in cool years, the flower may appear so late as to be ruined by the advancing winter. And a small plant may not flower again for a few years. Once mature, though, it establishes a short multi headed trunk and in good seasons there may be a number of spikes together or in succession. At Thwaite, in the Mediterranean bed, we have the variegated form which has striking yellow leaf margins and is, if anything, more popular nowadays than the green.

We have a second species, a very old plant too – *Yucca recurvifolia* – growing at Thwaite in the border behind the carpark. *Y. recurvifolia* is very similar to *Y. gloriosa* except that the leaves are less rigid and bend downwards as they age. Hence it does not have quite the equal dramatic spikiness. It has an equal flower, though and generally will bloom earlier in summer before the autumn sets in, so is perhaps the more reliable species in colder districts. Sometimes one encounters plants that do not seem to fit easily into either of the above species.

The final (or perhaps two final) *Yucca* species widely grown is *Y. flacida*. Often named as *Y. filamentosa*, some authorities claim they are variations of the same. *Y. flacida* is the most modest of our common *Yuccas*. It is smaller and spreads horizontally, rather than forming a trunk. Somewhat less spiky, its leaves are narrower and floppier and the flower a smaller but still dramatic version of the aforementioned big species, again in mid-summer. There is more than one popular variegated form like 'Bright Edge' but which are weaker in growth and tend to become somewhat amorphous and grassy looking in time. Some say a true *Y. filamentosa* is distinguished by slightly more rigid growth and is adorned by curlier thread like fibres.

*Yuccas* are mostly native of the warmer and/or drier parts of North America and in many cases areas much warmer and drier than the UK. This limits the success of other species here except as seasonal pot plants. However many are being tried, permanently planted, outdoors. *Y. aloifolia* has grown for years in a few local gardens. Outgrown indoor *Yucca elephantipes* sometimes find themselves evicted into gardens where they may persist indeterminately in sheltered areas. Some of the tender species are ultimately much larger than the hardier ones – for example the well-known 'Joshua Tree' (*Y. brevifolia*) so if any of these do survive and flourish they will provide an entirely new dynamic to UK gardens. There are widespread claims of success with several stunning tender species, though often one finds their owners resort to sly protection of their plants during inclement winters – less and less practical as they grow bigger.

John Killingbeck, July 2021

### **TREES OF THWAITE – YELLOW WOOD (*Cladrastis kentukea*)**



The Yellow – wood is one of Thwaite’s more unusual trees and you are unlikely to encounter another outside a tree collection. Mind you – there is no obvious reason for this because it is a tree of graceful and fairly modest proportions, with rich autumn colour that would suit a moderate sized garden and public parks. Nor is it difficult to grow and seems perfectly hardy and tolerant of different soils. However, there is no accounting for public taste or the whimsy of the nursery industry – so rare it is.

Our tree is located in that now narrow peninsula of the ‘botanic garden’ area which stretches out to the railway along the new boundary with Thwaite Hall, hidden behind the dense shrubbery of old lilacs and so forth. It was originally planted in the early 1990’s as one of several trees to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the botanic garden. The planting took place under the time of VC David Dilks who showed great interest in the garden but whose tenure was too brief to undertake any of the plans he had for it.



There can be few trees at Thwaite that have suffered so much abuse and misfortune as this one. Many of its severe scars are still visible even after several quiet years. The most obvious is that of the main trunk which was completely severed some years ago. The blind stump still remains and sticks up from the present trunk which is necessarily somewhat crooked because it grew from what was originally a side branch. The other major scar can be seen in the bark which has been clearly stripped away from a large portion of the trunk in the past, more or less to the ground. This was caused mainly by deliberate vandalism with which, for no accountable reason at all, this particular tree was targeted repeatedly. Further repeat damage was occasioned by careless collisions with estate lawn mowers, which in combination with the vandalism came close to killing the tree, which was only young and small.

Nevertheless our Yellow-wood prevailed and once left alone for a while, gradually healed and has since grown remarkably strongly. Sometimes people ask why we haven't cleaned the tree up a bit by cutting the stump off or painting the wood, still exposed. The answer is basically because the tree is managing quite well without interference. The new bark is gradually enveloping the scars. Cutting the stump would only re-expose bare wood and painting bare wood with 'tree paint' has been proven scientifically to be a waste of time, even harmful. Incidentally, wound painting is still undertaken by some tree surgeons, occasionally out of ignorance but often because their clients erroneously think it is a sign of a job well done.

*Cladrastis kentukea* is a native of eastern North America. It is supposedly called 'yellow wood' because, yes, you guessed it – the wood is yellow when freshly cut - and even yields a yellow dye. Another possible reason is that the foliage turns a lovely clear yellow in the fall. This effect can be seen particularly well at Thorpe Perrow Arboretum, near Bedale, N. Yorks., where a number are grown in the autumn glades. Mature Yellow-woods may also flower but generally only sparsely. The blooms resemble thin white Laburnum flowers and are fragrant. I'm not aware of ours flowering yet although bees seemed to be swarming round it earlier this summer. It is hard to see why this might have

been except to visit flowers but if there were any, they were too high and obscured by foliage to see.

There is nothing to really compare with Yellow-wood in the European flora (Laburnum being closest) but there is another species in China – *Cladrastis sinensis* – which is even rarer here. In some ways even more attractive it has quite showy white flowers and more delicate looking leaves.

John Killingbeck , July 2021

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### **Diary Dates**

Open Day – 5th September

AGM - Scheduled for 12th October to include a slide show by Bob Hall of the East Riding branch of the BCSS

## Rebutia Group of cacti plants



The Rebutia group of cacti are amongst the easiest to grow of the vast number of cacti available and the flower production in spring is second to none in this plant kingdom. They are endemic to South America mostly in Bolivia and Argentina and are my particular favourites for their ease of cultivation early flowering and range of flower colours.

They will grow quite happily in my normal cactus mix, 2 parts J1 No3 with 1part grit and 1 part Perlite, water well in growth but allow them to dry out fully between waterings like other cacti plants.

Most of these plants will produce pups that often have their own roots and will separate readily to grow for spares and back-ups should you lose the mother plant. Also they are not difficult from seed although I usually buy seedling plants from established growers.

Keep an eye out for Red spider mite on the plant bodies in hot dry conditions and an occasional mist spray will help to deter this pest.

Bob Hall

Hull and East Riding branch of the BCSS.

## Grass Bed



A couple of pictures showing the extended and revamped grass bed carried out by the Friends of Thwaite Gardens volunteers.

## Glasshouse corridor Renovation



The cold winter and the broken boiler were devastating for the corridor plants in the large greenhouse. However, most clouds have silver linings and after a massive clear-out of old vines and other plants, we have transformed the space. When you come along at Open Day you will see what we have achieved: a real team effort.

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