

VOLUNTEER REVIEW In early 2025 The Friends of Botanic Gardens Forum (FBGF) carried out a review of their support processes for gardening volunteers prompted by changes in one of its member gardens, Sheffield Botanic Gardens. **Lloyd Snellgrove** outlines the review.

Volunteers in Botanic Gardens



Volunteers at Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh (© Lynsey Wilson RBGE).

Of the FBGF¹ gardens 14 participated in the survey plus two other highly regarded gardens.² The purpose of the survey was to compare, contrast and identify good or appropriate practice in this activity given the gardens differed greatly in resource. The survey focussed on gardening volunteers although most gardens had a range of additional volunteer roles such as garden guides, information/help desks and plant sales.

The 19 questions formulated by FBGF discussion were largely driven by operation and task such as ‘How do you apply?’ and ‘Is there an induction?’ ‘Can you use power tools?’ ‘Is there a paid volunteer co-ordinator?’ ‘What days and times can you volunteer?’ ‘What tools are provided?’ ‘Is protective clothing provided?’

These are the sorts of questions typically referred to as ‘hygiene or transactional factors’;³ low down the ranking when it comes to motivation, often reflecting the view that volunteers are there primarily plugging budget shortfalls in

essential but usually low-level skill tasks.

It is a similar narrative to one that often haunts gardening and horticulture, giving rise to the notion that much gardening is straightforward; what has been called the ‘reductionist’ school of gardening based on the view that little skill or knowledge is required. The focus is on simple tasks such as mowing, trimming, tidying, weeding, edging and other important but relatively undemanding repetitive maintenance jobs.

However, a few questions probed qualitatively different activities, seeking to explore if volunteers were encouraged to contribute ideas in design, planting and engagement in the development of their garden. Is there a trend towards volunteers playing a more skilful and integral role in garden care, creativity and development?

Case study

Using my own volunteer experience at Sheffield Botanic Gardens as a case study I know that

although there isn’t formally the opportunity to contribute in this way, the lived experience is that not only does this happen but it forms a key component of the botanic integrity of Sheffield Botanic Gardens. This hasn’t been strategically acknowledged or planned but over the years knowledgeable volunteers have ‘led’ in the botanic development of several plant collection garden areas.

This uses the botanic and horticultural expert knowledge of volunteers as opposed to simply applying it on maintenance tasks. This not only improves and develops the quality of the plant collections but significantly adds crucial scientific value, which would otherwise be missing.

This collaborative co-design partnership approach was reflected in many but not all gardens. When asked if there were regular discussion sessions to ‘further engage volunteers’, answers included: ‘There is a volunteer section of our weekly team meeting, as well as ad hoc discussions between the engagement team and garden



Top: Volunteers wear high vis bibs at all times to be both visible to the public and each other when working in denser parts of the garden (© Lloyd Snellgrove).
Above: The opening of the Volunteers Centre at Sheffield Botanical Gardens. The event saw quite a crowd gather on the balcony of the Dorothy Fox Education Centre adjacent to and overlooking the Volunteer Centre where talks, lectures, education and public engagement events take place (© Laura Mills/ Sheffield City Council).
Above right: Volunteers work in various parts of the gardens and here in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh they are working in the edible garden and also with the arboriculture team (© Lynsey Wilson RBGE)
Right: Carolyn Clark, then Chair of the Friends of Sheffield Botanical Gardens, Safiya Saeed, the Lord Mayor of Sheffield, and Miles Stevenson, Chair of the Sheffield Botanical Gardens Trust.

team. Volunteer engagement is part of the Development Plan and the responsibility of the development/engagement team, and 'The Friends Feedback Forum meets about six times a year. Over lunch time. Update from Curator, discussion about past and future activities. Sometimes followed by an afternoon talk from a member of the Friends or a visiting speaker.'

A further question asked more directly 'Are volunteers encouraged/allowed to contribute to new ideas/plantings/designs in the gardens?'

- There is a Garden Management Committee, run by the Curator, on which several Friends sit because they have a particular area of expertise.
- The Volunteers are a small informal group who assist the paid Garden Team. Close liaison between ourselves and the Garden Manager and paid Gardeners is important and a strength.
- We welcome all ideas and implement them if we can. Donations of plants from them for new areas of planting are welcomed too.
- Volunteer ideas are warmly accepted.
- Yes, volunteers are asked about this as part of their evaluation process, as well as informally by the Garden team – members of the team who make design decisions also host volunteer sessions.
- Suggestions are made to the Garden Manager or through the Volunteer Coordinator to the Friends

Management Committee.

One garden made this point about specialist expertise:

- Specialist volunteers – we have a specialist volunteer who helps with our Herbarium (which would otherwise be almost entirely under-utilised), she's been a hugely helpful resource for interns/student projects in the Herbarium.

These references to volunteers as experts and specialists and others as experienced gardeners resonated strongly with the experience at Sheffield BG. Here the situation is acute as budget reductions have reduced the curatorial role to one of a fractional volunteer playing little active management in the gardens. This volunteer expertise is pivotal with relatively little curatorial staffing likely to be forthcoming in the near future.

Without the right botanical and horticultural leadership this begs the question of how the integrity of a botanic garden can be sustained. Without this integrity the core business of a botanic garden as a scientific institution is fundamentally compromised. This may or may not be a concern at other botanic or specialist gardens¹ but it might increasingly become so, as funding levels become increasingly constrained.

The Sheffield Botanic Gardens case study highlights the critical role volunteers play as

knowledge workers and leaders contributing to the botanical underpinning of the garden. At Sheffield Botanic Gardens the three National Plant Collections were initiated and developed by a volunteer, the Himalayan border raised by a volunteer using collected wild seed, and likewise the South African and Pacific North-West borders arose from seed and specialist sources.

Adding knowledge

These contributions significantly underwrite the scientific value of the collections. These are individuals whose knowledge is on a level with professional paid staff, who have their own contacts and networks to prestigious gardens and nurseries, fulfilling a part curatorial role in linking and networking with specialist collections. Importantly from a management perspective, the role of the volunteer moves from being transactional to transformational and collaborative, whereby individuals through their actions and ideas encourage, lead and inspire others. The volunteer becomes an asset of a different order.

Many gardens have been fortunate to harness these types of individuals and the opportunities they present. Although the weakness might be that they are serendipitous, the good news is that many volunteers are individuals with a long-term



commitment and dedication to their gardens, they wish to be, and are proud to be part of the institutional furniture.

In the same sphere of experience if not with quite the same breadth and depth of knowledge is the botanical gardener, experienced gardeners, artisans who are hugely influential at Sheffield Botanic Gardens, and indeed elsewhere; continuing the 'pushback' on the 'reductionist school' of thinking.

In the herbaceous and mixed border what is often not factored in, is the skill to deal with ever changing living things, planning and thinking ahead, empathy, plant knowledge, when to cut back, when to leave, how to facilitate increased biodiversity, letting the self seeder be. These are all part of the technical, artistic and creative skill set experienced gardeners have, working often in important historical landscapes, and in gardens of complex planting, botanical and horticultural interest.

The Friends Forum survey started out mainly with questions around transactional and task-oriented activities, but what emerged with supporting evidence further provided by the author's experience of Sheffield Botanic Gardens, was a picture demonstrating the many volunteers who have high levels of skills and knowledge, forming part of the critical conditions for a successful botanic garden. There is no reason to think this

situation is not replicated across the country in specialist gardens.

They are all knowledge workers who have become botanical guardians. Without this input it would be impossible for these gardens to continue as they are delivering the necessary range of botanic garden functions and services.

These changes in the role of volunteers draws attention to the question of how much thought is given in the strategic planning, management and engagement of volunteers. What once might have been regarded as a 'nice to have' is now a critical and permanent feature of the resource base of many gardens⁵ providing an essential physical and knowledge resource.⁶ This doesn't just add to excellent amenity and public horticulture but to the scientific underpinning of plant collections.

What has to be said too is that volunteering is a deeply personal, cultural and social activity of mutual benefit to both the individual and the host organisation. Not all organisations have volunteer coordinators or volunteer strategies yet increasingly the trend and aim must be to have both to optimise both the organisational and the individual's well-being, helping engender wider community engagement, thereby furthering volunteer engagement through community and corporate⁷ engagement.⁸ Volunteer strategies also need to address potential issues of volunteer retention and motivation, fortunately most volunteers usually come highly motivated and enthusiastic.

As Annelies Andringa-Davis says, 'A volunteer coordinator who fosters that autonomy and is there to provide supervision, support, and development opportunities is invaluable to any garden. It's important to have regular discussions with volunteers about their role, providing feedback, and making sure that relevant and effective communication channels are in place.'⁹

Not only does this require strategic planning and an appreciation of the many roles volunteers can play beyond physical labour, but a cultural and perhaps attitudinal reassessment of the volunteer role, from transactional labour to an equitable one of partner and collaborator in the management and development of a garden. The volunteer and employed staff are true colleagues.

Budget reductions mean constantly searching for new cost savings and income generation but increasingly innovative ways of doing things, stemming the decline, even reversing it in some places. Does this include or require a paradigm and cultural reset in thinking about the place of volunteers, a way of endorsing and better facilitating a collaborative transactional and transformational approach, able to enthuse ideas from both employed and volunteer staff?

Different perspectives

This isn't just about knowledge, skills and experience, it's about bringing in different perspectives, backgrounds and ways of looking at things, a refresh that might spur new ideas, help meet the challenges brought on by the existential threats of climate change, the loss of biodiversity and as well as perhaps, organisational change.

Volunteer strategic development and coordination is beyond the scope of this article. As a 'workforce' now a necessary and permanent inclusion as part of many gardens operational, intel-

lectual and cultural *modus operandi*, it warrants strategic clarity and purposeful management.

As Annelies Andringa-Davis says; 'Volunteers are essential to the operation of all botanic gardens, no matter whether gardens are big or small. Employees alone cannot manage the numerous tasks required, and in smaller gardens, any activities beyond the regular programme often rely heavily on, or are entirely carried out by volunteers. They contribute to education, carry out horticultural tasks, are board members and perform many other tasks.'¹⁰

Footnotes

1. FBGF is an association of 20 UK botanic gardens Friends groups, 14 gardens participated along with RHS Wisley and Winterbourne BG.
2. RHS Wisley and Winterbourne BG.
3. Transactional here is loosely defined by a task, control and process approach.
4. Holehird Gardens in Cumbria is completely managed by volunteers, *The Garden*, August 2025.
5. Sheffield BG have around five or six full-time paid staff and four full-time volunteer staff.
6. Work by the Botanic Gardens Conservation International 'Celebrating our volunteers', *Roots Education Review*, 2016. Reporting on Kew and Cambridge and botanic gardens elsewhere in the world show volunteers engaged in education, research, interpretation, citizen science, as well as garden guides, plant collection care, management and development.
7. Companies increasingly recognise the role of volunteering. The legal sector – which has a longstanding tradition of taking on pro bono work – leads the way, with well over three-quarters of firms offering paid leave for volunteering, at an average of 1.5 days per employee. Telecoms and building and construction ranked second, with 62% of companies running schemes with a day allocated per employee. 'Which industries are leading the way on paid volunteer days for employees?', The Access Group (www.theaccessgroup.com/en-gb/blog/which-industries-are-leading-the-way-on-paid-volunteer-days-for-employees).
8. Sheffield BG frequently has enquiries about corporate volunteering from the private, public and higher education sectors which it finds difficult to respond to, yet here are individuals and organisations seeking to do 'their bit' for the common good. With a strategic prioritised approach it maybe possible to harness this energy and purpose.
9. Annelies Andringa-Davis in 'The heroes of botanic gardens – volunteers', *Roots: Botanic Gardens Conservation International Educational Review*, Vol 21 No.2, October 2024, p3.
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