

Our speaker was an absolute cracker. We were riveted by what she told us and how. We gained seven new members from our ten visitors so it will give you some idea about the talk and even more importantly, the friendly, welcoming flavour of the Garden Club members.



At your first opportunity get along to the beautiful Hillier Gardens and Arboretum, near Romsey where Fran Clifton is Head Gardener. We had asked her to talk about 'A Day in the Life of a Head Gardener'. Fran was brimming with energy and enthusiasm, had worked there for 25 years and been head gardener for 20 years. Hillier Gardens were obviously the best office in the world.

What did she deal with? Well, for a start, there are 16 staff in the horticultural team and two students.

This works out that each one cares for 10 acres of garden and they are assisted by 200 volunteers. Just think of the complications that might bring. Every plant is catalogued with a number that starts with the year of planting. (This is very useful to any keen gardener because you can see how big that lovely little tree, that you have just planted, is going get in 25 years, when it starts to undermine your house.)

When there is a special event, like opening the new restaurant, Fran has to ensure that the lawns have been mowed so that mower lines are straight, plant labels are horizontal and all edges to flower beds are pristine. On the other hand, when early storms in 2022 took down or damaged 84 trees she organised the tidy up that took six months. Being open to the public and removing huge trees takes considerable organisation as you can imagine.

Trees are a huge feature in the gardens and there are now 650 champion trees. What a legacy Harold Hillier has given us when you think that he bought the house and land and moved in the day after our late Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953. Tree planting started then as they were his passion - if only he could see it now.

Concerts take place in the gardens in the summer and Fran has to be involved with this as well as Royal Horticultural Society plant trials. At the moment 134 different Mahonia are being grown and studied for one of these trials.

A major feature in the gardens are the long borders. In 2009 these were emptied, lots of propagating was done as some of the plants are very rare, and the whole lot was extended

and replanted. Luckily, an automatic watering system was installed as since then our summers have become hotter and drier but it is used very sparingly, mindful of conservation. All waste plant material, apart from perennial weed plant roots, is composted, for use in the garden. The compost is stored and turned for two years before it is ready to use.

There is a charge to enter the gardens but annual membership is very worthwhile as you will find that frequent visits let you see, for example, the winter garden at its best, the long borders in summer, magnolias in spring and tree colours in autumn. Refreshment and dining facilities are good and members can take in some visitors for free.

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