



ventnorensis

journal of the ventnor botanic garden friends' society

*"I suspect these children
will never forget things like
our giant waterlilies, curry
plants, or the vile smell of the
Aristolochia delavayi" (page 23)*

Irene Fletcher, Education Officer

Summer/Autumn opening times

10am till dusk daily

For opening times for Visitor Centre, Garden Cafés and Restaurants, Plant Sales and Greenhouse, please call the Garden on 855387 or check website, www.botanic.co.uk



exhibitions/events

- 6 July – 1st September** FLORA AND FAUNA SCULPTURE TRAIL
Discover the fantastical creations of artists Alan Williams, Frances Doherty and Ptolemy Elrington. Normal admission rates and opening times.
- 17 – 25 July** BLACK CAT ART GROUP ART EXHIBITION
10am – 4pm The Garden Gallery. Free entry.
- 20 – 21 July** THE UNDERCLIFF EXPERIENCE ECOLOGY FESTIVAL
10am – 4pm Learn about everything that lives in the Undercliff and around. Walks, talks, activities, stalls, food, beer and music. FREE entry to the Top Lawn.
- 23 July, 6.30pm** A TALK ON CLIMATE CHANGE BY JOHN CURTIS
24 July, 7pm ART, LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE IN THE IW UNDERCLIFF. By Robin McInnes and Sarah Benstead
- 26 – 29 July** ALISTAIR RILEY ART EXHIBITION
10am – 4pm The Garden Gallery. Free entry.
- 27 July – 31 August** WALKING WITH DINOSAUR PLANTS
Guided Walks with a member of the VBG team every Friday throughout August – (2nd, 9th, 16th, 23rd, 30th). Adults £8, Seniors £7.50, Children £6, Family Tickets £20 (2 adults and up to 3 children under 16). Booking essential. See website for more details.
- 1 – 6 August** DOWDEN'S ART EXHIBITION
10am – 4pm The Garden Gallery. Free entry.
- 10 – 27 August** INSPIRED BY WIGHT ART EXHIBITION
10am – 4pm The Garden Gallery. Free entry.
- 10 – 11 August** THE HEALING FESTIVAL
www.healingfestival.co.uk
- 30 August, 2.30pm** THE TALES OF PETER RABBIT AND BENJAMIN BUNNY by Quantum Theatre.
- 30 August, 7pm** TWELFTH NIGHT
Open air performances in The New Zealand Garden. Tickets from Gift Shop.
- 14 – 20 September** ST. LAWRENCE ART GROUP EXHIBITION
10am – 5pm The Garden Gallery. Free entry.
- 21 – 22 September** HOP FESTIVAL
- 28 September** CHARITY AUCTION IN AID OF DREAM HOLIDAYS

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Curator's Notes

Ventnor Botanic Garden recently received a number of plant fossils on loan from Dinosaur Isle. These date to the Cretaceous period, 125-110 million years ago. At this time the Earth was a significantly warmer place with atmospheric CO₂ concentrations higher than today's 400 parts per million. The fossilised plants probably become trapped in river silts on floodplains during a period of violent flooding. We specifically chose fossils which relate to plants growing at



Cycas revoluta



Wall Lizard



Cryptocarya alba

VBG today, such as cycads. In 2012 at VBG a *Cycas revoluta* flowered out of doors, a first in the UK. What is perhaps more significant is that south Wight had *Cycas* growing wild in the same general locus 120 Million years ago. Could this flowering at VBG be linked to a change in our climate?

Aloe polyphylla is about to burst into flower – [see 'Prickly Crowd-Pleasers' Page 20]. By collecting and distributing their seeds we are helping to decrease this pressure on the wild plants. We also use *Aloe polyphylla* to show the modifications that plants have evolved to live in arid conditions, and how these morphologies are shared with entirely different plants from similar ecological niches often continents apart; for example the aloe.

Dr Geoff While, the Marie Curie Fellow from Edward Grey Institute, Department of Zoology at Oxford University, visited VBG recently for his annual check on our Wall Lizards (*Podarcis muralis*). They are in fine fettle despite the appalling winter. Dr While informs us that the Ventnor Town lizards remain distinct from the ones at VBG: he studied the mitochondria of the UK Wall Lizards and found that the Ventnor animals are from an Italian clade [a group of organisms evolved from a common ancestor]. In contrast Ventnor's lizard populations are from a French clade.

A theory that the Ventnor lizards are representative of the Wall Lizards' northernmost range seems unlikely due to the lack of continuity of the Italian clade through Europe to the UK. A more probable hypothesis is that the VBG population developed from accidental or deliberate release from captive or wild lizards at an unknown time in the past.

VBG has been collaborating with climate change researchers at Texas State University and University of Nottingham. We have propagated and supplied live plant material of *Cryptocarya alba*, a Chilean tree for their study of Stomatal Index (SI), the percentage of epidermal cells in the leaves of plants that are stomata [gas exchange pores]. This tree is rarely seen outside South America: it needs warm conditions that very few UK gardens can guarantee. The unique microclimate of Ventnor is perfect – our *Cryptocarya* is nearly forty years old and the largest in the UK. National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow Jon D. Richey will study the effects of increased CO² on the plant's SI and compare his results with fossilised plant relatives. Jon explains: "SI varies inversely with CO² because at high atmospheric CO² levels, an individual plant can maintain a high level of photosynthesis while minimizing H₂O loss by having fewer stomata." This could produce indicators of future climate impacts and the ability of our current plant kingdom's capacity to survive in CO² levels that contributed to mass extinctions in previous geologic periods.

Chris Kidd
Curator

THE RETURN OF Friends' Autumn Plant & Produce Sale

Sunday, 15th September

10.30 - 4.00 pm

Free entry to the Top Lawn

Please put this date in your diaries and come along to support us.

*Grow on some plants for us ready for autumn planting!
Make some jams and chutneys!
Make some apple pies!*

Chairman's message

New Chairman Chris Kershaw is a retired doctor, and he has a prescription that will do us and the Garden good – Botanising

“Botanizing”, a term enjoyed by Charles Darwin and Sir Joseph Hooker to mean the amateur study of plants, seemed an appropriate description for the Horticulture Correspondence College RHS Level 2 study group sessions, which back in 2008-11 we at VBG undertook weekly. Thanks to the splendid example of a group mainly consisting of retired friends, many of whom had been teachers, we learned the true meaning of ‘the answer lying in the soil’, and aspired to become good “propagules” (an offshoot to create a new plant); and definitely not “podzolic gleys” (under ash and poorly drained soil)!

Botanising with friends, and taking part in Simon Goodenough's Grand Garden rounds, did much to take my endearment to VBG onto an entirely different plane. I have been delighted to see this practice continuing in John Curtis' Design Walks and Irene Fletcher's monthly volunteer walks, and as a recently retired specialist paediatrician in the military I found a striking parallel with medical students learning on hospital ward rounds. The tranquility of plants has always been a great antidote to toddler tantrums and challenging childhood behaviours. And why not? For we share some of our DNA with plants and, as the ENCODE project has shown us, alliums have more of the stuff than we do!

In terms of “botanising”, the many activities of the Friends, volunteering and attending walks and courses at VBG have, for me, filled the space vacated by the weekly RHS study group

I was honoured when Phil Le May asked if I might be interested to follow in his footsteps as your Chairman and have reason to be grateful to him on many counts. We should all be thankful that he continues as Vice Chairman on the Executive, and should frequently pinch ourselves and wonder at the incredible hard won legacy we still have at VBG – just.

Out of the adversity of the Garden funding dilemma and amidst the global financial crisis, considerable successes have been achieved. It is largely due to the US 5th Cavalry appearing to our rescue over the brow of the Undercliff in the shape of John Curtis and the CIC, combined with the stoicism and wisdom of Phil and Chris Kidd, that we are where we are – at something of a re-birth (time for a paediatrician?). It is really important for us now to see the glass as being (more than) half full and to recognize the successes of Chris and the gardeners against a range of odds, as well as the speed of the transformation which, in the first year, has been truly remarkable.

It is still, I'm afraid, a case of “no pain no gain” and we must augment our current level of overall support by inventing novel ways to energise and recruit new Friends and volunteers. As many of us as possible should assist the handful of stalwarts who make cakes and teas, sell plants and open their gardens, which are a vital source of our revenue.

One line which I shall be pursuing with the Executive is creating a set of endowment funds within the Friends' Society [see Page 27]. This should allow us to strengthen the Friends and enable us to fund programs in the Garden from income rather than capital. Today we raise a pound and spend a pound; tomorrow with some effort we can raise a pound, invest a pound, and spend the income every year into the future. We already have a fund earmarked for plants and their presentation. I intend to set up a new fund to assist apprentices with student bursaries and to encourage youth development through horticulture.

In terms of "botanising", the many activities of the Friends, volunteering and attending Irene's walks and courses, and the Design Walks at VBG have, for me, filled the space vacated by the weekly RHS study group. On a recent visit to Wakehurst Place, serendipitously I just caught "Jim's" free 11.30 tour. He had been a teacher with a botany degree and was one of 60 tour guide volunteers working there for the previous six years. Tour Guides, we are not alone! What a calling and a challenge it can be – to be a "propagule" as good as he and our Jonyth – the achievement of "botanising" excellence! We can be just as good if we put our minds to it and help VBG blossom in its role as the botanical diamond of the Isle of Wight and the finest sub-tropical garden in the UK.

I hope you will take delight in active "botanising" by joining the volunteers and walks at VBG and helping with Friends' events. This is my prescription and you could well find it lowers your blood pressure nicely.

Unsung Botanising Heroes

There are two unsung heroes of the Friends, Barbara Shaw and Doreen Bayton, who many members may not know. Between them, with their unstinted and dedicated enthusiasm and loyalty, they have helped to raise thousands of pounds for Ventnor Botanic Garden.

Barbara, an extremely knowledgeable plantswoman, was initially on the Committee of the Isle of Wight Botanic Garden Society, which was instrumental in getting a botanic garden on the Island. She subsequently served on the Executive Committee of the Friends for many years, and certainly since early 1990s has grown, donated and helped sell plants and impart advice at our numerous plant sales, coffee mornings and over the last three years at the Open Gardens of the National Garden Society – all profit coming to Ventnor.

Barbara is supported by Doreen, who has helped with Social Committee Events and provided delicious cakes and many plants over a number of years. This she continues to do. Both these stalwart members spend many hours loading and unloading Barbara's car, stand out in all weathers attracting customers, only rewarded with tea and cakes! Apart from this they are continually producing varied and unusual plants. We owe them a large debt of gratitude.



*Knowledgeable:
Barbara Shaw*



*Stalwart:
Doreen Bayton*

Jonyth Hill

Polygala virgata

The genus *Polygala* has over 500 species and sits within its own family, the Polygalaceae. Commonly they are known as the Milkworts; supposedly when the European members of the genus are browsed by cattle they increase their lactation and milk



Polygala virgata

production. This was appreciated by Dioscorides who used the name *Polygala* from the Greek *polys* meaning much and *gala* meaning milk. As so often happened, Linnaeus adopted this name from antiquity when he classified the genus into his binomial system.

This genus is often mistaken for a legume from a glance at its floral appearance. It has five sepals; the inner two sepals are fused and raised aloft as wings. The lower petals, where united, can also confusingly resemble the keel of a Legume; indeed they are known to botanists as a pseudo-keel (false-keel). The disguise, however, is given away by the crest of the pseudo-keel, a non-androecious frippery that merely resembles the true stamens seen in Papilionoide Legumes.

Distribution of *Polygala* is sub cosmopolitan, that is it is nearly everywhere with the exceptions of boreal areas and islands. There are two to be found on the Isle of Wight

Happy birthday to You!

We had a really lovely evening celebrating VBG's 41st birthday, attended by true lovers of the Garden. The food was deliciously fresh, and we had a



drink and birthday cake, accompanied by a jazz trio. Chris took us on a walk to look at the Puyas and told us about animal eating puyas in the High Andes. He poured nectar out of the flowers to show how much there is in there - astonishing!

Rosemary Stewart

as wildflowers too: *Polygala vulgaris* most commonly, but not exclusively, on our chalky downlands and the charming *P. serpyllifolia* often found on Bleak Down, the gravel pits of St Georges Down. This year I found some at Mount Joy Cemetery in Newport, though I doubt this is a first record for the location.

At VBG we have been growing the hybrid *P. x dalmaisiana* for many years. This plant is a hybrid between two South African species, *P. oppositifolia* and *P. myrtifolia* and it flowers almost continually throughout the year. The plant is usually for sale from our plant sales area, though being a hybrid and only available clonally from cuttings makes for a slightly wobbly looking plant in a pot. Seed raised species *Polygala* are much stronger. In the Garden this hybrid is capable of much abuse as long as it doesn't face the north or get blown by strong wind.

With the translocation and expansion of our South African Terrace following the successful Friends Grant in 2005 we had the opportunity to experiment with further species of this fascinating genus. We imported seeds of several species, with mixed results. Germination can be temperamental, but not so much as weaning: young seedlings don't like being messed around with. One notable success has been *P. virgate*. In its native lands of tropical south and east Africa it is often found on lower slopes, scrubby hillsides and streamside openings. In the Drakensburg range it is found from plain level up to c1800m. Known to Afrikaans as Persboom or Bloukappie it is known to the indigenous Sotho people as Hlokoa leleue and to the Zulu as Ithethe; at VBG we only know it as *P. virgate*. It makes a distinctly broom-like shrub (even more Leguminous confusion) with few leaves which tend to dehisce in winter. Similar also to a newly planted broom it can rock considerably in the wind. Once in bloom it is a remarkable shrub with magenta flowers, quite striking and often commented on by visitors, including in 2012 none other than Brian Schrire, Legume Systematist from RBG Kew. Brian, a South African by birth, commented how well the Persboom grew in our remarkable microclimate.

Chris Kidd

... and to you!

The June Design Walk ended with a surprise detour to New Zealand, where Pimms and birthday cake was brought out to celebrate Chris Kidd's birthday.

Photograph by Rosemary Stewart



Rescued but not saved

John Curtis describes how the Friends have helped make a wealth of progress – but there is still much to do

We are making steady progress at VBG. The subflora for the extended Olive Grove has now been planted out. Our resident parade of Echiooms - *E. gentianoides*, *E. pininana*, *E. wildpretii*, *E. boissieri*, *E. bethencourtianum*, *E. candicans*, *E. italicum* subsp. *italicum*, *E. Tuberculatum* – are happily in full flower after March's snow. The June Design Walk



PV Solar Panels: to reduce costs to VBG

amongst the echiums' majestic spires dug into the results of their promiscuity – a number of unnamed hybrids. Several *Puya* spp. spikes have burst forth, allowing the UK's leading *Puya* expert to help us pin down their true identities, a step toward National Collection Status. Hampshire's Plant Heritage Coordinator recommended approval for our *Puya* collection after her visit to VBG.

A visitor to our *café edulis* (latin for edible) e-mailed recently to say: "We visited the *café* and thought it one of the most restful places we had ever been in. Can you possibly tell me the soft green paint shade on the walls as it has so taken my fancy?" Opened at Easter with the flowering of the Spaghetti Tree, this new *café/restaurant* on our lower level is having this impact in large part due to the Friends' project which rebuilt the fountain area, removed the tarmac and paving blocks, and ushered in a range Mediterranean edibles from fig to loquat and grape. To see our gardeners delivering seed trays of live salads such as red orach from the lower nursery to *edulis* is to understand ultra fresh food with zero food miles.

I followed a Tunnel Walk last month and arrived into the bright sunshine glittering off the Channel to hear: "Our visit to the Garden and the tunnel has made our holiday. We visited the Island because we wanted to see the Garden."

But, we are not getting it right for all Garden visitors. Not yet.

We have problems with signage, with maintenance, with those who expect formal flowering borders, and with trespassers who refuse to pay admission. So we soldier on – launching a project for one of the first audio visual guides for a botanic garden, explaining what modern botany is all about, running guided tours, and passing out stickers to those who have paid admission. New doors have just gone into the Exhibition Room to create a more vibrant atmosphere in the courtyard and the Volunteer Information Point (aka The VIP Lounge) is now open by the fountain [see Inside Back Page]. And we are installing a range of low carbon equipment to cut our impact and our power bills.

Our work with Ecoland and the UK Government's Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) will introduce solar PV panels to generate electricity, solar thermal boxes to create hot water, air source heat pumps to heat the Exhibition Room, a grey water system to flush the toilets with waste water, and ultra efficient LED (Light Emitting Diode) lighting. We are delighted that Wightlink has agreed to contribute to the creation of an EcoCentre in the atrium of the Tropical House where we can showcase what we are doing on sustainability and explain it to all ages. We are also adding an electric vehicle charging point to the car park with Scottish and Southern Electricity in hopes that Mia, our favourite electric car, will come back.

Out on the Canna Bank a visitor asked me if the Garden was run solely by volunteers. "Almost," I replied. We love our Volunteers – their help in the Garden, in the VIP Lounge, on tours, greeting coaches, and sorting our Library saves us. Thanks must go to Elizabeth Summers for her willingness to take on some of the admin tasks for all the Volunteers, so the Garden staff can do more gardening.



Pointing the way: John seeks ideas for clearer signs

Yet to come this summer we have a Sculpture Trail, the blossoming of Curator Chris Kidd's giant water lily, Shakespeare, Walking with Dinosaur Plants, the Ecology Festival, and the Healing Festival.

On 11 July it is the first anniversary of the transfer of the Garden from the IW Council to the CIC, but the Garden is far from saved. Much accomplished, much to accomplish. The passes you purchase, the Olive Trees you sponsor, the meals you enjoy at *edulis*, the plants and gifts you buy, and the guests you bring to the Garden are all contributing to a better VBG. Please come and see us this summer:



Goodbyes, thanks, and hellos

We wish to thank Virginia Newbold for all her tireless work as Membership Secretary, and welcome Caroline Peel to that role. Virginia said: "I have enjoyed trying to update and simplify the membership system. I would like to say a special thank you to Jean who has always been there to discuss all sorts of membership payment issues and their resolution."

Just as many thanks go to Jean Kelley for her equally sterling work as Treasurer. We welcome Kay Grist who takes over from her in this role.

Keep calm and serve tea

As you know, the Friends are sometimes invited to do the teas and plant sales for a National Gardens Scheme Open Garden. Here is Sally Peake serving on a chilly day at the dramatic cliff garden at Ashcliff, Ventnor, by kind permission of Judi and Sid Lines. The Friends make the cakes and the profits go into our funds. Also helping was a lovely young French student, Mathilde, who stayed with Sally when she had a few weeks training at the Garden last year.



Amongst all the other things she does, Jonyth Hill takes her turn with teas and brings plenty of her home-made goodies, but she wishes to give this up. Is there anyone able to give an hour or two to help us on these occasions and to make some cakes? It's a friendly job and you see some lovely gardens. Please contact Sally on 731403 or sallye.peake@btinternet.com.



The wonderful display of Echium, captured on the June Design Walk by David Whistance

Dear members . . .

In this issue we welcome new Chairman of the Friends Society, Chris Kershaw, and in fitting style for a new broom he is celebrating the community of gardeners by airing the term 'botanising' (Page 4). It's a great word – though there has been a bit of a backroom discussion about whether to use the archaic 'z' or more English 's' in its spelling. Be that as it may, the net result of botanising has to be the good of the Garden, and on Page 27 you'll see the ambitious thinking of those at the helm. How appropriate that to raise funds for the Friends the annual Plant Sale has been reinstated – a true coming together of gardeners for the greater good. Also that Jonyth has reminded us of two stalwart Friends who do so much that is unsung. We sing! (Page 5).

It is always lovely to receive a letter of appreciation and Rosemary received this email recently:

Rosemary, I wanted to thank you very much for the effort you put into producing the frequent newsletters. My wife and I have loved the Garden for many years, but unfortunately living in London we can't visit as often as we would like. So your emails are extremely helpful to us in keeping up to date with all the exciting changes there.

Thanks again! - Richard Greenleaf

Read on to be reminded of why we all love to be Friends of the Garden.

Please send your articles and ideas to me.

Deadline for Autumn edition, September 20th

Huge thanks to Rosemary Stewart for her photographs, help and encouragement,
Roz Whistance, Editor



The flower of puya alpestris in the Arid Garden. Photograph by Rosemary Stewart

Puya hits the headlines

The Garden has been hitting the national headlines again this June with the flowering of the *Puya berteriana*. The Daily Mail came to photograph VBG's Kirsten Morris with the flowers, which have bloomed for the second year running after being chosen as the logo for the Garden.

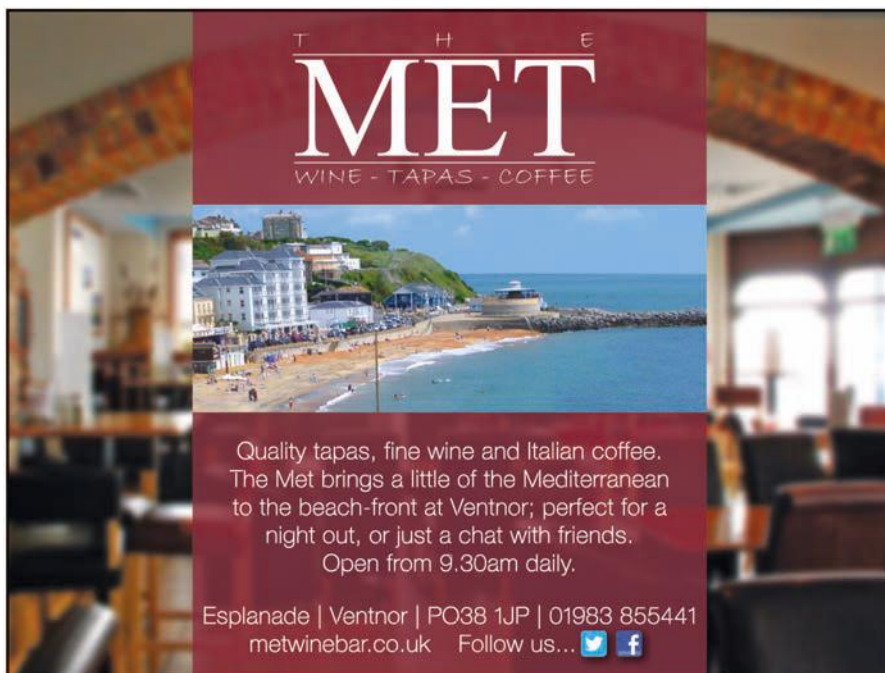
See link below – but note the difference in spelling between that on our website and in the Mail report. Evidently the reporter checked Chris's spelling with that ever-reliable site Wikipedia.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2344374/Puya-berteroniana-Exotic-plant-blooms-CENTURY-flowers-hottest-day-year.html>





Gardening volunteers

meet every Wednesday morning, at the far end of the car park. Bring hand tools and a drink to have at coffee break.



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WINE - TAPAS - COFFEE

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Open from 9.30am daily.

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DISCOUNTS for members

The following suppliers have kindly agreed to give discounts to Friends' Society members. Please be aware that discounts and other benefits of VBGFS membership are subject to change. **Remember to take your membership card with you – a discount will only be given if you show it.**

Eddington House Nursery Eddington Road, Nettlestone/Seaview:
10% discount

Deacons Nursery Moor View, Godshill: 10% discount.

Ryde House Nursery Binstead Road, Ryde: 10% discount.

Do not forget your Membership fee includes **10% off** for the Gift Shop, Cafe, Plants and Seeds. Just show your Membership Card.

Please do visit and show that we appreciate suppliers' support and goodwill.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION* / RENEWAL* FORM

*Delete as appropriate

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FAMILY TREES AT VBG

Celebrate a birth, remember a loved one or record an occasion by buying a growing Olive Tree.

The tree will be marked with your family name as a living celebration or memorial. It will be tended by our gardeners and will be yours for the life of the tree.

*Contact Phil Le May
01983 853824
or phil@thepitts.org.uk*



Proceeds to VBG Friends' Society

Meet the Chairman

VBG's second Chris K finds plants rather less demanding than his previous charges

"A friend invented a story about leaving a stethoscope at the hospital, and sat me opposite a day surgery Sister. I went weak at the knees ... for her and the Isle of Wight both at the same time." This is Dr Chris Kershaw, new Chairman of the Friends' Society but long-established Islander explaining how as a medical officer with the Royal Navy he came to settle on the Isle of Wight.



Happy: Dr Chris Kershaw

That was 32 years ago when he was sent to the Island to convalesce from a knee operation: on meeting this 'lovely blonde' he decided to stay. "Ann lived in Ventnor. We each had two children from previous marriages and they got on pretty well, with a lot of laughter and hijinks." Ann's father-in-law, Charles Davies, then Ventnor Town Clerk, worked with Mona Zink at the foundation of the Botanic garden.

A paediatrician, Chris was seconded to St Mary's Hospital, retaining an office at Admiralty House in Portsmouth when RNH Haslar closed. "I rather liked the idea of sailing 70 footers in Portsmouth Harbour when I first joined from the Reserves," he says.

You might wonder why the Navy needs a child doctor. But a glance at Chris's CV soon opens one's eyes to the implications about a Service which operates all over the world.

At RNH Haslar, while running an acute single consultant paediatric unit, he established and directed a child development centre, tackling Service separation as well as physical problems. His early collaboration work on this and SIDS (Cot Death) was recognised and followed in TV documentaries; he investigated the effects of passive smoking in Service families; he changed attitudes and procedures towards child safeguarding wherever he went.

"I was advisor to the Surgeon General in the specialty of Child Health and Paediatrics, and it got fairly interesting after 1997 when we went 'Triservice'. So then I was working not only with the Navy but with the Army in Germany and the Ghurkhas in Hong Kong and Nepal, and with the RAF mainly in Cyprus."

Chris was twice posted to Gulf war zones: the BBC's Kate Adie featured his Royal Marine unit in the Kurdish mountains. During the 2nd Gulf War he served at the same time as his son, Richard, now Principal Medical Officer on HMS Bulwark. His stepson Simon works for UKSA in Cowes: the link between children and the water clearly runs deep.

Chris retired from the Navy in 2007. "There was GREAT contrast between dealing with children who collapse in the night or those with ADHD having the screaming ab-dabs – and plants!" he smiles, explaining that his interest in gardens was triggered, aged five, by a rosebush. "I marvelled at the way my grandfather must have persuaded the passing horses to come in from the road to fertilise it! Then one day I saw him with a shovel . . .!"

He loves the Island, and has a lot to thank that matchmaking colleague for: "I love cricket and I love gardens and golf and beaches. It's a pretty good place to be."

Roz Whistance

Weather in the Garden

(January to May 2013) by Chris Watts

A little light snow and two air frosts were the highlights of a cold spell which spanned mid-January. But for the rest of January and for the first two weeks of February, the weather was essentially mild and wet; the rains of 2012 had continued relentlessly into the New Year, and January duly became the fifth successive month to record above average rainfall.

Valentines Day was something of a watershed. It was the mildest day of February, but Spring was then put on hold as eight weeks of cold and dreary weather followed with persistent east to northeast winds. Two droughts – now there's a word we haven't heard for some time – occurred, the first of 20 days from 14th February to the 5th March, and the second of 15 days from 24th March to the 7th April. February became the driest month for a year.

Having got away with a frost free February, March briefly turned wintry with some unwelcome snow. The main area of poor weather passed over northern France and the Channel Islands, but its northern edge caught the south coast of the Isle of Wight. Snow lay a few centimetres deep on the 11th and 12th; the 11th was an ice day (a day when the highest temperature does not rise above freezing). The morning of the 12th brought the lowest temperature of the winter, minus 2.9°C; the white magnolia seen from the east end of the car park suffered. Altogether March was a cold month, down by 2.5°C, contrasting greatly from March 2012 as the following figures show (last year's data in brackets): average maximum temp. 6.7°C (13.3°C); average minimum temp. 2.6°C (6.9°C); highest temp. 12.3°C (21.5°C); lowest temp. -2.9°C (2.0°C). Winter's stranglehold finally gave way on the 11th April as the winds, at long last, turned into the west; Spring resumed!

So from mid-April up to the beginning of June the weather was fairly typical – some bright sunshine, for example, which blessed both Bank Holidays in May, interspersed with odd days which were cool, wet and windy such as the 14th, 24th and 28th. However, May closed with a summery day, the temperature over 20°C for the first time this year, and a promise of a fine start to June, (the first six days of June brought nearly 80 hours of sun!).

	Mean Temp C	Air Frost Duration Hrs (No. of nights)	Sun Hrs	Rain mm	Wet Days (1+ mm)	Rain Duration Hrs
Jan	5.9	34.0(2)	n/a	133.5++	17	84.9
Feb	4.8—	0(0)	n/a	34.4—	4	29.5
Mar	4.7—	42.5(4)	n/a	85.0++	12	66.9
April	7.7—	0(0)	141.3—	48.1	6	31.2
May	11.2—	0(0)	194.4—	39.9	10	35.0

Note: Cols 2, 4, 5 No sign: about average

++/— : significantly above/below average

+/- : modestly above/below average

Your questions answered

What is the best way to preserve the look and feel of a mature *Corylus avellana* 'Contorta'? It does develop some straight branches or stems which I cut off. Is this the right thing to do?

Answer: *Corylus avellana* "Contorta" will, unhindered, turn into a very large shrub indeed. The best way to keep it small is to coppice the shrub, but not as if you are in a woodland hurdle-making business. Each year remove the very oldest, largest branches. Cut these off as low down as possible. This will encourage new vigorous and twisted growth from the base. Any straight (reverted) shoots should be removed as low as possible as soon as they are seen.

Have you any idea of what I might do with a small area of garden, about 1 metre square that is under a couple of bird feeders. This area is trampled by little bird feet and whilst on one hand it keeps the weeds down it also remains a patch of bare earth.

Answer: A colleague of mine from originally from The Komarov Botanical Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences had a similar problem and they found the only thing that would grow underneath is prostrate thyme. Why this should be I really don't know, although bird seed is quite often a source of unusual plants which are added to the feed and germinate elsewhere in the garden.

When is the right time to move the *Nerine* bulbs in the garden?

Answer: The time of movement isn't as crucial as the necessity to move them as clumps and never bury the bulbs. The garden *Nerine* hardly acts like a bulb anymore and is more of a herbaceous perennial in many ways. Lifting and individualising bulbs isn't a good idea, it's better to split and divide clumps (ideally after flowering) and replant to the same level in a new position.

Send your questions to rosalind.whistance@btopenworld.com. Questions answered by Chris Kidd, Curator

CIC COURSES

West Wight Landscape Partnership in association with Ventnor Botanic Garden are providing

TWO FREE SUMMER FRUIT TREE PRUNING SESSIONS at Northcourt Manor, Shorwell.

This follows on from the success of their winter fruit tree pruning workshops and will cover summer pruning of apples and pears as well as stone fruit.

**Wednesday 7th August between 11am and 1pm
and Saturday 10th August between 11am and 1pm**

To book a place, contact Peter Fellows on Peter.Fellows@iow.gov.uk

Prickly crowd-pleasers

Chris Kidd celebrates the unexpected success of the Cacti and Succulents of the Arid Garden

Within the sensation caused by our spectacular plants are a lesser praised group which are nonetheless little sensations themselves. These are plants which we really shouldn't be able to grow and have surprised ourselves when they have been successful – the cacti and succulents within the Arid Garden. At this point I should note a debt of gratitude to Julian Winslow who persuaded us to give these a chance when we were all for throwing them out, when the Temperate House became the Tropical House.

In people's homes the enemy of the cacti is central heating, which ensures an even temperature 24 hours a day, which is the exact opposite of the temperature fluctuation many cacti need for flower initiation. Out of doors there is plenty of temperature change, diurnally and seasonally, so as a result flowering is more likely. The bigger enemy of course is wet cold: I think we are now educated enough to appreciate that deserts are cold places at night, but they are not wet at night and certainly not wet at night for six months. That said, as a famous grower once said, at the end of the day it is cold that is the main trouble. An unlikely problem most people wouldn't foresee is slugs, and particularly snails. These cause a great deal of damage early in the season as new growth is formed and before any spines have firmed up. They particularly graze *Opuntia* and leave the new pads deformed often for years to follow.

A significant difficulty is the poor identification of this group. Taxonomy, particularly of the *Cactaceae*, is considered something of a dark art that few will venture into; so many plants are sold purely as genera or with fictitious, ambitious or downright misleading names. Another little bonus is that when you do manage to get two knowledgeable *Cactaceae* growers together; they mainly argue.

Regardless, I've picked out three little crowd-pleasers from this year to share.

Aloe polyphylla is only found at high altitude in the Drakensburg Mountains of Lesotho, South Africa. It is listed as CITES Appendix I, the highest level of threat. It has become an endangered species primarily due to excessive collection from unscrupulous plant hunters taking plants and seed from the wild. The plants at Ventnor are from cultivated origin and are used as an example to visitors how some plants are pushed to the edge of extinction. *Aloe polyphylla* grows in a very distinctive spiral shape, which follows the mathematical principal of the Fibonacci sequence. In practical terms it ensures that within the highly compressed space of internodes each leaf is offered optimal position for light.

In the wild *Aloe polyphylla* remains a plant with a single spiral (monocephalic), but, for curious reasons we don't understand, the plants in cultivation at Ventnor have split into two or even three spirals, often growing back to back so the spiral is in some cases 90° to the horizontal. We have been hand pollinating in hope of setting seed.



Endangered: Aloe polyphylla



For one night only: Echinopsis candicans



Treats on a bad day: a mystery

Echinopsis candicans is a cactus from Northern Argentina. These South American cacti are often from altitude and so this is a rich area for prospective species that may cope with the milder parts of the British climate. This species is night flowering, a characteristic of many cacti, and so (as is often the case too) it is highly scented and white – all the better to attract nocturnal pollinators. The flowers only last for the one night and shrivel in the heat of the following day. Our specimen has been here since 2008 when it was imported from the vast wholesale nurseries of Spain. It has flowered regularly every year since 2009.

Finally, a mystery. This yellow flowered cactus is a great example of the plants I mentioned earlier. It came from a nursery in Devon we visited that has a great listing in Plantfinder. We arrived early one morning and were greeted by an Alsatian dog vigorously protecting a caravan from which a tired looking nurseryman emerged. He was persuaded by the offer of money to allow us to look at his plants, first the usual array of stuff we could pick up at B&Q which we scanned disappointedly. Just at that moment my phone rang to give me the news that Ventnor Brewery were going to close and that I need to find a new brewer for the hops we had just planted. However, things got better when we enquired about the cacti the tired nurseryman had, and we were led to a poorly constructed polytunnel of weeds, beneath which were a number of seed grown cacti left to him by his father. I doubt these had seen water for many a moon and from amongst the desiccated balls of needles we selected the un-named cacti, gauging their differences on shape.

Back at the Garden these little mysteries were planted out and have been a delight ever since. Some are of the subterranean morphology adopted to avoid very hot desert sun. Some have formed neat little balls and resolutely refused to grow any further. This one has produced two gorgeous yellow flowers as seen here, but we don't know what genus it is, let alone species. If you have any ideas, we'd love to know!

Annual General Meeting 2013

The Chairman, Philip Le May reported that the handover from the Isle of Wight Council to the new Community Interest Company took place in July 2012. John and Mylene Curtis have since been putting their efforts into making it profitable, not helped by the weather. The weeders, tour guides and 'Meet and Greeters' have done a sterling job again in bad conditions.

The Friends have funded the completion of the new olive grove and with money from the bequest of the late Henry Aldis they have provided a large grant towards the new Mediterranean landscaping and planting in the Café garden. They have given a grant to the Education Officer to get her started with her successful projects with Island schools, and offered a travel subsidy to set against their transport costs.

There were successful fund raising events through the year and Mr Le May especially thanked the team who provided tea and plant sales at Open Gardens in association with the National Gardens Scheme, resulting in a profit of £2,000. Other money was raised with sales and raffles at the CIC's Hopfest and Christmas Village – also with the RHS Lecture and in donation boxes.

Celebrations included the 40th Birthday of the Garden in June when the Lord Lieutenant cut the cake! We had a Chairman's tea party for him to say thanks to all the staff and helpers who gave him such support during his term of office. Our President, Brian Kidd, also presented the Sir Harold Hillier Award to founding member of the Garden staff, Keith Brewer.

Committee Members stepping down include Jane Cheverton who set up the new website, Jo Haigh who found advertisers and Nicky Hayward on publicity. Evelyn Knowles helped with the schools' visits. Mr Le May thanked them all for their important help.

Mr Le May appealed for more members to come forward to help at events when they could "raise some funds and have some fun".

The Financial Report and Accounts were accepted.

Officers elected: Chairman, Surg. Capt. Chris Kershaw: Vice Chairman, Philip Le May: Secretary, Rosemary Stewart: Treasurer, Jean Kelley. Committee: Vic Hickin, Evelyn Knowles, Virginia Newbold, Ken Payne, Sally Peake, Colin Smith, Ros Whistance, Jan Wyers.

Mr Brian Kidd, President, thanked everyone for their hard work and said how much he looked forward to reading *Ventnorenensis*. Mr Chris Kidd, Curator, thanked Mr Le May for the many hours of work and sound advice during his time as Chairman and there was an enthusiastic round of applause.

Irene Fletcher, Education Officer, then gave a lively talk about Education in the Garden from the Forest School for under fives, the thought-provoking lessons for schools, through to the adult workshops.



Children were horrified by Aristolochia delavayi (the 'poo plant')

Pebbles to 'Poo Plant'

Everything continues to grow on the education front. School visits are in full flow, and the last part of the grant work which the Friends also contributed to, for children from our local school, St Francis, has been used for some fantastic outdoor learning experiences.

As well as garden visits, the grant has funded a huge range of outdoor learning in Ventnor and its environs.

Early in June I carried out rock pooling with the children. Amazingly, many have never been rock pooling! We looked at the differences between male and female crabs and someone found what I think was a pipefish, which are closely related to seahorses, which I've never seen before. As with all the best fisherman's tales, it escaped at the last moment!

Later we looked at the sea defences and simple geology around us – again, most of the children had no idea that the large granite rocks had been imported. We did beach art and I encouraged the children to think about why there were more grey pebbles than any other colour ... I'll leave you to think about that one.

On the way back to the coach we had a quick talk from Jeff Blake of Ventnor Haven Fishery who told the children about the different fish on display and a bit about the fishing industry. Incidentally, which would win in a fight – a crab or a lobster?

Within the Garden itself, we are almost running out of pinecones and red and yellow leaves for the children to make giant collages – and space in the New Zealand garden to make them! Nine Acres Primary sent 59 children to learn about plants, rainforests and habitats – many thanks to Beryl and Joan for helping to facilitate this. Carisbrooke, Newchurch, Godshell, Greenmount, Shalfleet, and Brighstone Primaries have also recently visited, many of them on coaches subsidised by The Friends.

I cannot stress enough what a marvellous opportunity you have given the schools through this. So many children learn better through practical activities and by seeing, smelling and touching, rather than straight classroom teaching. Memory and learning are triggered by a variety of stimuli and we all learn and remember in different ways. I suspect that some of these children will never forget things like our giant waterlilies, curry plants, the vile smell of the *Aristolochia delavayi* (the 'poo plant') and I will remember the look of wonder on their faces as flies trapped inside this stinky flower flew out when I broke it open. Actually, members of Niton and Whitwell Horticulture Society were pretty impressed by this too!

Weekly Forest School continues with pre-school groups who are getting more and more confident in the outdoors and will always remember their special place in the woods.

Many of you have been on our cutting and hanging basket workshops and I hope will continue to support education through attending others.

Irene Fletcher; Education Programme Manager

VBG's Seismic effect on Japanese Ambassador

At the beginning of the year the Lord Lieutenant requested that we host the Japanese Ambassador, His Excellency Keiishi Hayashi, who had expressed a wish to visit VBG as part of his John Milne Centenary itinerary on the Island, writes **Chris Kershaw**

Only a week or so before this request I had reluctantly decided that I could not attend the wedding in Tokyo of my nephew, Matthew, so I thanked him for sending his Ambassador instead and asked his assistance with a few choice words of welcome for our Japanese visitors. He and I were both fascinated to learn of the amazing connections there were between John Milne, the University where Matthew lectures, the origins of the Japanese and International Seismological Societies and the first seismographs built on the Isle of Wight. Details of these can be found at:

<https://www.e-education.psu.edu/earth520/node/1784>

<http://www.isleofwightsociety.org.uk/content/S634959377846229078/JMI30226.pdf>

Ambassador Hayashi brought with him his scientific and economics officers and, being careful to adopt proper Japanese protocols so not to provoke a diplomatic incident, Susan Scoccia, Luke Gunner (CIC volunteer co-ordinator), Kirsten Morris (marketing director) and I set about welcoming our guests and guiding them around the Garden. Matthew's choice words appeared to do the trick as His Excellency quietly observed that 'we were very well prepared' which helped the visit get off on a very good footing. Soon the party were enjoying viewing the Westgate arid plantings and the newly created olive grove – and the sun came out.



Delighted: The Japanese party

The original tour route rather skirted around the small Japanese section but, on learning of 'the tunnel', His Excellency requested we retrace our steps and we ended back at the sign* commemorating the originator of the Japanese Garden, Charles E Wheeler; at which many photographs were taken. This appeared to energise our visitors who proceeded to the coastal path and beyond into the scrub, perching precariously on the cliff edge to admire the view. I thought it wise at this point that at least one of us join them lest they disappear over the edge.

A friendly photograph session was arranged in the heart of the Palm Garden, and Kirsten and chef Martyn came up trumps with a traditional English tea in the newly opened *edulis* restaurant, where we served homemade scones with jam to each other in true Japanese style. Our guests also sampled Tropic Ale brewed from the Garden's own hops and remarked on its smooth taste. They were given traditional gifts kindly supplied by the CIC. The Ambassador has written a charming thank you and sent his good wishes and we have suggested ways in which our friendship might be extended in the future.



Photo opportunity: The Sign

This turned out to be a unique opportunity for international diplomacy and another example of the many new successes in joint CIC co-operation with the Friends. We wait with interest to hear whether we may be included in the 400th Anniversary celebrations of British-Japanese cultural exchange (J400).

Acknowledgements to Lord Lieutenant, CIC, John Milne and Matthew Kershaw.

***Any members with information on the history of this sign, please write to the Editor**



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against the scenic backdrop of Ventnor Botanic Garden

Normal admission fees apply - Refreshments available
Contact: 855397 info@botanic.co.uk

All welcome

Friends Fund Raising Intentions

The role of the Friends in raising funds to save and develop the Garden is as vital as ever, and outgoing Chairman Phil Le May, new Chairman Chris Kershaw and Director of the CIC John Curtis recently set out a new and exciting direction and a larger role for the Friends. *Ventnorenensis* Editor Roz Whistance puts her questions to them.

Annual Subscriptions

Roz: How can the Garden get the best value from Friends' subscriptions?

Chris: For the coming subscription year we are working with the CIC to bundle our Annual Subscription and an Annual Pass to the Garden so we can benefit from Gift Aid on the whole. Notionally Friends will have the ability to continue with Annual Subscription alone or to take up an Annual Subscription & Pass.

Roz: Shouldn't people who volunteer get some sort of added benefit?

Phil: We are exploring how to create an additional benefit for those who are both committed Volunteers and members of the Friends.

Funds

Roz: In your Chairman's Welcome (see Page 5) you talk about endowments as a means to help the development of the Garden. What form will this take?

Chris: We are considering three endowments to begin with:

Plants and Their Presentation

Education, Apprenticeships, Student Bursaries, and Youth Development in Horticulture

Directed Giving: The ability for larger donors to specify exactly how their funds should be applied.

We will run a series of fundraising events across the year at the Garden to launch and support the Development Funds.

John: Fundraising need not be only about the Garden. We would like to engage other Island organisations like the UKSA, Island Youth Trust, or the Rotary who can benefit alongside us in joint fundraising at the Garden. From plant auctions, to jazz evenings, intimate classical or choir concerts in the New Zealand Garden, or even black tie marquee dances on the Top Lawn, we will need to explore many approaches.

VBG Patrons

Roz: What lessons or ideas have you picked up from other botanic gardens?

Phil: Following the successful models from Kew, Edinburgh and many other botanic gardens around the world we propose introducing a Patron Scheme for those who wish to support the Garden on an annual basis beyond their standard Friends subscription. We will name several donation levels.

Editor's Note: Ideas for naming these levels should be forwarded to the editor, please.

New members

A very WARM WELCOME to these friends who have recently joined the Society.

Mr D and Mrs J Browning	Chichester
Mrs L Burborough	Totland
Mrs C Churchill.....	Brighstone
Mrs S Curd.....	Winford
Mr P and Mrs R Dixon.....	Seaview
Mrs C and Mr R Farrell	St Helens
Ms R Gimson	Shanklin
Mr J Humphrys.....	Godalming
Mrs PA Kyle.....	Yarmouth
Mr J and Mrs S Malyon.....	Freshwater
Mr R Pritchard and Mrs B Ayres	Chale Green
Mr D Rawlins.....	Bembridge
Mrs A Rhind	St Lawrence
Mr N and Mrs C Sears.....	Bembridge
Ms L Thain.....	Yafford
Mr J Wheeler.....	Ventnor

Honorary members

Alan Titchmarsh
 Simon Goodenough
 Brian Kidd
 Bill Kidson

Corporate members

We would like to thank our corporate members for their continued support.



All aboard the VIP Lounge

Jonyth Hill in the information point, on queries and plaudits



***Where is? What is? How old?:
Jonyth answers visitors' questions***

When John Curtis took over running Ventnor Botanic Garden as a community Interest Company last July, he was very keen to involve more volunteers in roles other than gardening. One of these was to man an information chalet now called the V.I.P. Lounge (Volunteer Information Point.) Now there is a chalet below the Canna Room, which first opened at Easter:

Of course we experienced probably the coldest Easter we have ever had, with a bitter wind. Consequently visitors were few, and the emergence of plants probably a month late. However, as the weather improved the footfall has increased and the need for information more apparent.

Visitors like to stop and talk, are very interested in the history of the Garden and ask a variety of questions. Some are mundane, including 'Where is the exit?', 'How do I get to Steephill Cove?', and 'Where is the toilet?', although you can usually pre-empt this question because they slow down as they approach a likely door! Others include 'Do you know what the plant is halfway down the path, next to the orange one?' This is solved either by asking them to take a photo of it, or by tearing off yourself to find it and then, unable to name it, to find the Curator or taking their telephone number to ring the enquirer later. One satisfied customer, and another plant to put on your 'list to remember'.

I have suggested to John C. that we need to have workshops for map reading. I've come to the conclusion that we are not a map reading nation, as I watch visitors struggling to place their surroundings, usually requiring intervention to solve their puzzlement.

Most people appreciate the Garden even more when they comprehend the construct of a botanic garden. They always want to know the name of any plant in flower and whether they could grow it – oft times in the north of England!

Visitors are varied. There was a delightful German couple who had come hotfoot from a cruise which had docked in Portsmouth for a few hours; then an enthusiastic Spanish gentleman who hurried up to me saying: "Oh you have a badge, I just have to tell someone official how wonderful this garden is and to thank everyone who works in it". Then there was the small boy who completely fazed me with "What type of fish are they in the Greenhouse?" followed by "How old are you? You look very old". Today as I write this, I came across a gentleman slumped across a picnic table outside the café. I gently touched his shoulder, only to find he was trying to read his mobile phone under the table. I apologised and said I was glad he was all right to which he replied: "No it is a disaster; my budgerigar has escaped on the mainland. He is on top of the wardrobe and the lady looking after him is only 5ft 4" tall and cannot reach him."

I would encourage more of you to join us, as dealing with the public is very rewarding.

NB The fish is a grass carp - but I am not divulging my age.

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