

# Throw open the gates

Steve Bustin

At the end of a garden Open Day, there comes that delicious moment when the sound of the gate shutting behind the final visitor is accompanied by the sound of the first glass of wine being poured. Now's the chance to count the cash, exchange stories and relax after all the work.

Opening your garden to the public might seem like a really mad thing to do. Why on earth would you open up yourself and your little patch of horticultural heaven for comment, critique and potentially worse from the visiting hordes? Why should you let your lawn suffer simply so the public can scoff cake and bitch about your bedding?

The reality, you'll be pleased to hear, is very different. Yes, it's hard work and yes, it is most peculiar having lots of strangers poking round your garden. In my opinion, however, having opened my garden in both Brighton's Garden Gadabout and also in the National Garden Scheme (NGS), I think all self-respecting gardeners should do it at least once in their gardening lives.

It doesn't matter if your garden is the size of a postage stamp or if it doesn't rival Versailles in the beauty stakes – every reasonably well-cared-for garden is worth sharing and is of interest, so no excuses about your garden 'not being good enough' or being 'a bit boring'. Here's why you should seriously consider opening your garden:

**1. It's fun.** Yes, honestly. The first time you do it you can get a bit stressed out at the thought of it but the day itself is great fun and my partner and I now look forward to our open days. We have volunteers who come back time after time to help out because they have such a good time – although I suspect working in close proximity to cake helps.

**2. People are much nicer than you expect.** In the four or five years we've been opening our garden in Brighton, I don't think



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anyone's ever said an unkind word. Well, not to our faces anyway. The sort of people who are going to come out to visit gardens and pay money to do so aren't there to rip it to shreds. People will always comment on the things they like and wait until they're out of earshot before talking about the things they don't. If they really don't like your garden, they just leave.

**3. It's a deadline.** OK, maybe this one is just me as I need some deadlines in my life but knowing that you're going to be opening to the public on a certain date does tend to focus the mind somewhat. It's a great motivation to get those projects you've been talking about for months actually finished, and encourages you to think ahead and prioritise some of the garden jobs you might otherwise overlook. The other upside of this deadline is that once it's been and gone, you tend to find you're ahead of yourself for the rest of the year; we open in late June through to late July so the rest of the summer can be spent on enjoying the fruits of our labours, not getting on with all those unfinished projects – as they're all finished!

**4. It makes you a better gardener.** My gardening has been improved hugely since I first agreed to open our garden. Visitors ask lots of questions and it's a great spur to

learn the names of some of your plants or know more about the type of garden you've got. Visitors will also offer advice, as many are keen gardeners themselves. I've had visitors identify mystery plants for me, tell me what was shredding my Golden Hop and suggest plants and combinations that would work well – and in most cases, they were right. A recent 'Talking Plants' visit by HPS members has resulted in some new introductions, many donated

by fellow members who could see where I was struggling with certain parts of the garden.

**5. It's for charity.** Most garden openings are raising money for a good cause, and it's a superb way to help your favourite charity by doing something you love. The Garden Gadabout in Brighton raises money for The Sussex Beacon, the local HIV/AIDS care centre, and the NGS raises millions for charities including Macmillan and Marie-Curie.

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The more gardens open, the more money they make. Don't think you have to launch yourself straight into the NGS, but look out for local Open Garden events or organise one yourself.

I hope that's helped persuade you that opening your garden is a good thing to do, and having opened mine several times now, here are a few top tips I wish I'd known before we started:

**Get help.** Even if you've got a small garden, it's worth roping in a few friends to give you a hand, especially if you're planning to serve refreshments. Trying to man the gate (and believe me, you need to – people will quite happily wander in without paying if you don't), answer questions, serve cake and nip to the loo is much easier with people to share the load. It also makes it a much more sociable occasion.

**People don't expect a show garden.** The most interesting gardens to visit are those that are a bit like one's own, acting as a source of ideas and inspiration. People know you're not a full-time gardener and don't arrive expecting a perfect striped lawn and not an aphid in sight. Having said that, do some basic tidying up. Trim the edges of the lawn (and if you remember, feed it a couple of weeks beforehand to strengthen it and green it up), tidy your 'working area' a bit (people do love to poke around a good shed), get rid of the worst of the weeds and do some dead-heading, staking etc. A couple of hours spent doing this the night before opening will make a huge difference.

**Keep it simple.** You don't have to do refreshments, and don't feel that you need to provide a National-Trust-style guidebook, or signage to rival Blenheim.

**Be sociable.** Don't hide inside during your open day! People love to talk to the gardener and ask questions. They will almost all ask the same questions, so be prepared to repeat yourself quite a lot. Our top three questions by far are a) how do you deal with the snails (with a bucket of salty water and no mercy), b) do you get fruit on your banana tree (occasionally but the man from Del Monte has nothing to worry about) and c) will you come and do my garden for me (answer no, but I know a man who can). Open days are also a great way to meet your neighbours (who can resist the chance to have a look at what's normally concealed behind gates?) and we now have regular visitors who come back every year.

**Enjoy it!** Bask in the glory – it's lovely to be complimented on your garden and all your hard work – so let your ego be pampered and be reminded why we don't just garden for ourselves. 🌸

**Steve Bustin's** garden in Brighton opens for the Garden Gadabout and the NGS on various dates in June and July. For 2012 opening dates see [www.roundhillgardens.co.uk](http://www.roundhillgardens.co.uk).