

LOCKED DOWN BUT NOT OUT GARDENING AT KEW THROUGH THE PANDEMIC by Pin Dix

It is a beautiful, crisp Christmas Eve morning. I have finished work for this year and have time to reflect on what has been, to coin an oft-used phrase, 'a year like no other'. It seems impossible now to think that barely twelve months ago life was what we like to term 'normal' and, as gardeners, we were taking stock and planning for the season ahead. I am fortunate to work at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in a team responsible for looking after the Grass Garden, newly created Evolution Garden, Victoria Gate and Palm House Pond, Salvia and Peony Borders, and my own particular patch, the Woodland Garden. At full strength we are a team of seven (including the specialist kitchen gardener who offers help when time allows), with additional support from students, apprentices, trainees and volunteers. We began 2020 full of hopes of what we might achieve this season (a large bed renovation in the Woodland Garden, continuing to develop the Evolution Garden, a bumper year in the Kitchen Garden) never imagining a global pandemic was just around the corner and that this year would turn out to be nothing like we had imagined.

I have a vivid memory of the meeting with our senior manager on March 17th where we gathered together as a section and were told that those with underlying health issues or needing to use public transport to get to Kew could no longer come in to work. Whilst reassuring to know RBGK was taking the health and wellbeing of its staff so seriously in the face of the increasing concern nationally over the rise of COVID-19, it was surreal to think that more than half of the horticultural staff and affected students would have to remain at home the following day. Despite being in an obviously grave situation, none of us had any idea that day of how long it would be until we actually saw some of our colleagues again. The volunteer programme was put on hold, within a week the country had entered lockdown, and the gates to the Gardens were closed.

From March 25th RBGK would consider the few remaining members of horticultural staff as so-called 'Key Workers', responsible for the conservation of the valuable living collections held on site. Where possible, everyone unable to safely be at the Gardens were placed on furlough as the organisation took advantage of the Government's Job Retention Scheme. I think it is safe to say I was one of the lucky ones, being part of just twenty percent of horticultural staff not furloughed at all during the first lockdown period. Our team of seven plus helpers, was reduced to three and other teams within our section were fewer still. To keep numbers using the facilities as low as possible, to maintain strict social distancing measures and help prevent fatigue and undue stress levels, those of us remaining were rostered to work three days a week, with four or five of us working each day overlapping on a Wednesday, to enable a level of continuity, when we had a total of nine workers across the section. Whilst it would be testing to maintain the Gardens on those numbers at the best of times we were met with the not entirely unwelcome but nonetheless challenging demands of an extraordinarily beautiful but very warm and dry spring. With the nation



Socially distanced team meeting, complete with Tilly the dog (Credit: Tony Kirkham)

in lockdown it was vital for Kew's staff to only undertake essential work and this took a little bit of negotiating, one person's necessity being another's indulgence. Through thrice-weekly, socially distanced meetings with Tony Kirkham, Manager of the Arboretum and Gardens, we discussed what constituted 'essential tasks' agreeing on a plan of action to maintain the valuable collections by principally focusing on irrigation but to also undertake some basic tasks such as mowing and edging (both done without collecting clippings), and some necessary

pruning and weeding. Having the Gardens closed meant we could essentially lower our standards for a period but, with the knowledge that Kew would reopen as soon as possible, we could ill afford to cease certain tasks altogether. Leaving lawns uncut and weeds unchecked would require a Herculean mission later on to bring the Gardens up to an acceptable standard for welcoming back the paying public.

Generally we worked alone, so as to have as little close contact with each other as possible, and sanitised everything we handled after each use. We kept our own set of tools in individual barrows to avoid cross contamination and every shed and workspace was equipped with hand sanitiser, latex gloves and disinfectant. Irrigation maps were drawn up for each area so if any of us became unwell or had to self-isolate there would be something for those less familiar with an area to follow. The benefit of having the Gardens closed to the public was that we could leave irrigation out overnight saving us a huge amount of time each day.

Whilst some found working alone highly productive and enjoyable, others clearly suffered feelings of isolation. As well as keeping things going at work, we all had our own personal challenges: some having to find new places to live, or juggling childcare with a partner now permanently working from home; concerns over future finances or elderly and/or vulnerable relatives. As the weeks rolled on our new little 'team' became adept at knowing how and when to offer support to each other through the highs and lows of what has popularly been termed the 'Coronacoaster'. Those feeling most isolated of all were the colleagues who could not be with us; those stuck at home unable to work. Despite doing a great service for the organisation in terms of allowing it to maintain an income for each member of furloughed staff, many felt helpless and hopeless at times as the days of lockdown turned into weeks and months. There was an understandable concern that there might be a feeling of 'them and us' as and when those colleagues returned and it was not always easy to reassure people from my privileged position of being, as it were, 'on the inside'. It felt important to stay in touch as much as possible but the working days often felt like a blur of activity with little time to stop. A close friend told me of an idea she'd had to stay in touch with people without the necessity of calling or texting individuals every day. She sent a group of friends a 'photo of the day', showing she was thinking of them whilst allowing her the headspace to do other things. I was inspired and adopted the idea, sending a few close colleagues photos every morning of the Gardens I was so lucky to still be working in. With that most glorious spring and early summer, I was spoilt for choice as to subject matter, but taking and sending those messages meant, no matter how much work there was to do, I took a few minutes every day to stop and look at the beauty around me.

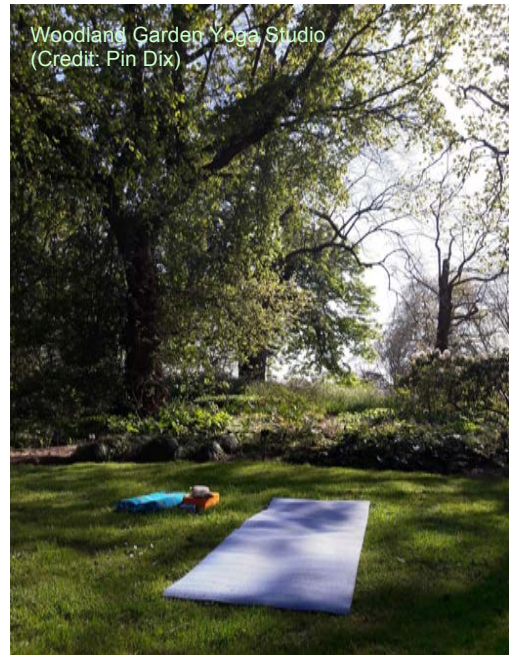


A selection of 'Photos of the Day' (Credits: Pin Dix)

As time went on, without air and traffic noise, without the thousands of visitors, without the opportunity to do all the work we would normally undertake, the Gardens became a quieter, softer, perhaps wilder place. The birdsong and humming of insects was crystal clear. A family of foxes had taken residence in an old badger sett and it was not uncommon to see four mischievous,

gingery pups playing out of the den in the middle of the day. Despite the ongoing doom-laden stories on the news, which in the end I stopped listening to altogether, there was a sense of serenity within the walls of Kew; moments of absolute bliss between the frenetic bouts of labour. I took to doing yoga after work in the middle of the Woodland, not something I would ever have the chance to do with the Gardens open! Not a day went by when I did not feel an immense gratitude for having the job I do, being able to continue to do that job, and doing it in such a special place.

There were low days of course, when it felt we would never get done all the things we hoped to; when we realised a whole season's work would be lost and what a cost we might pay for that in future years. In the Woodland Garden we having spent several years waging war on the dreaded weed *Allium paradoxum*, and making some progress through a process of both completely renovating the worst affected beds and hand digging through those less affected to stop the spread. There is a key time to do this before the bulbils, which form on the top of the flower stalks, drop onto the soil and make ready for a whole new generation. It is normally a task we do en masse over several days or weeks in late spring and we had started to see a reduction in numbers. This year, there was no chance to do that work. There was no time to catch the bulbils before they fell. And so we will have lost way and I must admit to feeling a certain dread at what we will be faced with come April. For those of us who care passionately about their work, as I, and many of my colleagues do, there were times when we felt totally overwhelmed. On those days I took to spending time under, or even hugging, the immense *Juglans nigra* that takes centre-stage in the Woodland Garden. Reportedly nearing 300 years of age it may be the oldest tree in Kew and has often been a touchstone for me when I've been struggling with one thing or another. Every season it shows its unique beauty and I never fail to be humbled by its majesty. Knowing all the years that tree has been standing in that spot, and imagining all the moments of history it has witnessed helped me put things into perspective and regain my faith that this too will pass.



It felt for a time that the lockdown would never end and the Gardens would remain closed for months and months but on June 1st the gates re-opened to a limited number of Members. This brought its challenges as we had inevitably become used to being able to work undisturbed. There were concerns among staff that we would now come into contact with people we didn't know, that the Gardens were not up to the high standards we strive for, and that our already limited productivity would go down. In order to keep us, and the visiting public, safe we were provided with barriers to block off certain areas, allowing us to carry out work without visitors getting too close or stopping to talk. Whilst we normally relish the opportunity to interact with the public there was now a reluctance due to both health and time reasons. For the most part the visitors were respectful and kept a safe distance, and comments made were largely positive. There was a sense of huge gratitude from most that they could return to what is often described by regulars as 'their garden' and only a few who commented on how 'sad' things

looked or wondered where all the vegetables were. Gradually the numbers allowed increased and the paying public returned. The weather was blissful and suddenly the place felt overcrowded, noisy and sometimes oppressive. For every lovely person who says how much they appreciate our

hard work and what a joy it is to return, there is one who doesn't understand why you'd rather their children didn't play with the irrigation, or run amok through the borders, or (worse still) use them as lavatories. Still, just as we had got used to and revelled in our haven of peace, so too we have adapted to the place being populated once again. If my own experience of lockdown, both in and out of work, has taught me anything it is the enormous value of nature to us as humans; how it helps us relax and unwind, how we need it to thrive and to be inspired. And, as the gradual re-wilding of Kew through the weeks of closure clearly demonstrated, we need nature far more than it needs us.



As I write this a large swathe of the south of England is under Tier 4 restrictions, Christmas is going to be solo experience for many (myself included) and, despite the knowledge that a vaccine is being rolled out, it seems clear that there is a way to go before we see life getting back to anything like 'normal'. Yet, as I have spent recent days cutting back and mulching beds for the winter and clearing a few (million) leaves, I have noticed the first bulbs beginning to nose through the soil and buds starting to fatten on branches. Soon I shall walk through the Woodland Garden to the melodic sound of the song thrush reminding me that, after the burdens carried by us all in this dramatic year, the winter will end; another spring will come. And where there's spring, there's hope.