

Chairman's Report at the 2024 AGM

I would like to start with a topic dear to all our hearts – the weather. The LDGA year of 2023 began back in December 2022 with a severe week-long cold snap that put paid to many of our garden plants. Fast forward to summer and a prolonged warm spell gave rise to the hottest June on record for the UK as a whole, even eclipsing the much-fabled summer of '76. July and most of August were quite wet, so very little watering was needed. Then in September, came another heatwave which gave us our hottest day of the year – that was also our Autumn Show day!

The year also saw the passing of several of our members and past members. One of them was Ron Garrod. He was a true old school gent who loved to grow chrysanthemums, sweet peas, and a host of vegetables on his large plot in Bygrave. His family have given all the money donated in lieu of flowers, to us (LDGA) for the benefit of future members. I'm not sure what we will do with it yet, but we will let you know as soon as we have decided. We also lost Thelma Colman who served on the committee as Meetings & Outings Secretary for many years.

Talking of Meetings and Outings and the social side of the association you may recall at last year's AGM Myra told us that she planned to retire from committee after this AGM. More on that shortly, but first a look back at her last year in post.

Our most popular evening came in July when over 50 members attended our first ever garden party at the store garden. Russel Atwood's No Dig Gardening talk, including a sing-along, was our most popular speaker evening, closely followed by Annie Godfrey from Daisy Roots with her talk about autumn colour. Another notable evening involved home-made wine tasting with prolific wine maker and show judge Kevin Martin.

In May our very own Mike McConnell presented an Insight into Flora & Fauna & People of South America and the Galapagos Islands, this meant we were able to make a small donation in lieu of speaker's fee to Garden House Hospice Care.

Looking ahead, we are pleased to announce that Jane Thorn is standing for election this evening, she had previously been co-opted to committee and has been helping Myra with the 2024 calendar which is now pretty much finalised. The next meeting, 'Making a living from sticks' with countryside steward Guy Lambourne from Wassledine is on Thursday 21st March at 7:30pm.

Due to rising costs, we regret that from now on, the meeting entry fee will increase to £4 for members and £5 for non-members. This is the first rise in 5 years and allows us to maintain the quality of both speakers and venue that we have enjoyed in recent times.

The Golf Club, therefore, will continue to be the main venue for our evening meetings, as you can see it offers comfortable surroundings with bar, a large car park and the option to have some food beforehand.

The exception to this rule being when we host high profile speakers as we will in June when Bob Flowerdew will present 'No Work Gardening' at the Central Methodist Church.

Now we come to outings. During the year we took coach outings to Beth Chatto Gardens in May, Kathy Brown's Gardens and Willington Garden Centre in July and RHS Wisley in September. We finished with 50 members and guests taking a trip to see the Winter Lights at Wimpole Hall.

The visits planned for 2024 are: the first one in May is still to be confirmed, then, Gotha Gardens (near Ashwell) in July, RHS Hyde Hall in September and the potential for another winter lights trip in December.

I am sorry to say that Moira Rigby our committee helper for outings has had to stand down, so if any of you would like to take control of one, some or all of these outings please come and speak to us afterwards.

Finally on the social front, our coffee mornings at Tapps Tea Room continue to be well supported. If you haven't been before, the next one is on 6th March from 10am, please do make a point to come along. We also plan to have two summer socials again this year, these will be in the form of tea and cake afternoons at Dimples.

Now on to Trading. First, on behalf of Trading Secretary John Riley, I would like to thank everyone who has helped to keep the Trading Store running smoothly particularly when he was out of action towards the end of the year. Their help has been invaluable. Also, to you the members for supporting the store so well again. Despite a slow start, store sales had caught up with the previous year's by mid-May and went on to finish 5% higher.

We had some bad news around the middle of the year. The owner of one of our major wholesalers passed away and the family decided to close the business. We managed to fill the gap for most of the products and introduced a whole range from Durstons which includes organic peat free compost, manure, topsoil, soil improver and decorative bark. We also introduced seaweed meal and Heart of Eden peat free compost for the first time.

Despite standing down at the last AGM, former Trading Secretary John Brookbanks has not been as retired as he was hoping. As well as continuing to be around when the store is open, he has been working hard behind the scenes helping John Riley with ordering and stock control and covered for him when he was out of action. He has also taken over from Peter Hollingsworth as 'Till Man'. I.e. the person we turn to when the till needs some attention. So, thanks John for all your efforts.

Don't forget it's not our store or John's store or John's store, it's yours, the members, so please give us feedback about the products that we sell, particularly the peat-free composts, and if you have any ideas for new products have a word with John Riley at the store or drop him an email.

Next, we turn to our produce shows. A big thank you to Show Secretary Paul Heydon, Roz Jennings and all those that helped run the shows last year.

Despite some rain around mid-day, our Summer Show was a great success. The number of exhibitors (32) and the number of declared exhibits (266) were both up 30% on the previous year. Takings from refreshments, plants sales and raffle also indicated a strong attendance especially from the general public.

As I mentioned, our Autumn Show was held on the hottest day of the year. It was none-the-less for that, with exhibitors (37) and declared exhibits (365) both higher than the previous year.

Both shows however, encountered problems when judges weren't available at the last minute. Fortunately, other judges were able to step in, but this did put the timetable back a bit, particularly at the Autumn Show.

Because of this, we are making some changes to timings. Staging will finish at 11:15am, a quarter of an hour earlier than normal, and judging will start at 11:30am, that gives us an extra half hour. You've been warned, so get in early, it always takes longer than you think to set-up.

With other shows in the area struggling or cancelled due to lack of interest, please make it your resolution to visit at least one, better still both of our shows this year to find out what it's all about. After all they are your shows really. You don't need to stop there either, why not give exhibiting a go, there's sure to be something that appeals to you out of the almost a hundred and seventy classes on offer. What could be more fun?

Show Schedules are available this evening if you are interested or speak to Paul afterwards.

Finally, let's look at membership. At the end of 2023, membership stood at 369 households. Before this evening, we had taken on 16 new members and renewed 212 more, making a total of 250 including 14 posties and 8 honorary positions which are free. A good proportion of new members come via word of mouth, so please keep singing our praises to everyone you come across.

After careful consideration by committee, which took in to account the current economic climate and our healthy financial position, we have decided to maintain the membership fee at £6 per household for the coming year - 2025.

If you use email, we like to keep you up to date on association news on at least a monthly basis and hope you find what we send useful. On average over the year, just over two thirds of those emailed opened their updates, which is a little bit higher than it has been in previous years. For that reason, please be sure to let us know if you have a change of email address.

If you don't use email, we plan to deliver a copy of our Compost Heap newsletter to your door 3 times a year - in Spring, Late Summer, and Winter. These will of course be available via email as well.

Our secure website is still the place to go when you want current information about the association and up-coming events. Your contributions to both Compost Heap and website are most welcome.

Andrew Dear, Chair, LDGA. 15/02/24