

EGHN Laudation 2019/20: European Heritage of Gardens and Gardening

For the 1st Prize winner: Royal Horticultural Society HRS

By: Prof. E M Bennis, EGHN jury member

All of the EGHN awards pose a challenge for the jury members as all finalist are exceptional candidates, and this one is no exception. It is even more difficult as so many gardens across Europe have developed supportive activities for the public ranging from inter-active displays and exhibits, hands-on activities, training and education, while some have developed research areas such as heritage plants, ecological planting, and providing experiences for visitors with special needs. Our gardens have become much more than places of beauty or plant collections, they have achieved a prominent role in contributing to our quality of life. Gardens are about experiences, getting people involved through understanding and actions. There is a growing interest in gardens and gardening through television programmes, books and magazines, and the large number and very diverse garden shows across Europe. We know that gardening contributes to our health and well-being, but it also make a substantial contribution to the economic health of our countries. Recent research in the UK shows increased visitor numbers and income to gardens, and this is more than traditional visits to country houses, castles and museums.

Established 215 years ago, The Royal Horticultural Society is generally referred to as the RHS. Its activities are broad reaching from advice on what plant to use and where to find it, children activities, adult education and research, managing major gardens, and of course its garden shows. While mostly known for the Chelsea Flower Show, the RHS has a total of 11 shows across England from April to September, and London has shows for Botanical Art and Photography, and the Spring Launch and Orchid Show. The RHS also has five gardens in England with RHS Wisley as its flagship garden. Wisley and the other gardens provide inspiration through display gardens, exhibitions and advice. The RHS Bridgewater, due to open in 2020, is the newest garden and near Manchester. Covering 64 hectares, this is a €33 million investment and is expected to attract one million visitors a year. In addition to RHS Bridgewater, there are major renovations at Wisley and other gardens. But, the RHS is more than shows and gardens with extensive education programmes, research activities and campaigns supporting gardening in the broadest sense.

There are structured educational programmes that cut across all ages from children to adults. RHS staff and volunteers visit schools and provide teacher training, family gardening events, promote school gardening champions and annual awards. For adults there are formal RHS qualifications at three different levels, with the opportunity to study at home or at the 90 learning centres in the UK and Ireland. There are bursaries and students are supported with training in RHS gardens and associated gardens. I have known a number of people who have gained these qualifications at various levels and they found them both challenging and inspiring. And those of us that do not want a formal qualification, the RHS has on-line courses covering areas such as beginners guide to gardening, plant information and selection, health and disease, garden design, wildlife gardening, pruning, this month activities, propagation, etc. Then there is the ease of gaining basic information without a course. Simply input the name of a plant into a search engine and the RHS will probably be near the top of the list. There is comprehensive information about the growing conditions, origins, disease and even UK suppliers.

Less familiar to the public are the research activities of the RHS focusing on areas such as plant health, conservation and biodiversity, environmentally friendly gardening, plant trials, and the opportunity for the public to take part by recording and reporting their findings. Similarly, the Lindley Library in London is an extraordinary source of information of world class standing that is open to members and the public. There is also a library at RHS Wisley, and I personally hope that there will be one at the new RHS Bridgewater.

RHS Bridgewater demonstrates how the RHS connects with the public and the local communities. This garden will have dedicated classrooms for children and adults and a feature exclusive to RHS Bridgewater, a community garden for local people. This will provide not only a space, but encouragement and training in an area that is economically deprived.

On behalf of EGHN and members of the jury, I wish to congratulate both Merian Gärten in Basil and Gärten der Welt in Berlin for their valued contribution to our European heritage of gardens and gardening. We believe that the work of the Royal Horticultural Society inspires us as gardeners and garden owners, and demonstrates how gardens can contribute to our quality of life. Our sincere congratulations to the Royal Horticultural Society for this award. To accept the award is Tim Upson, Director of Horticulture.