



Somerset Federation of Gardening Clubs Magazine

Issue LXXII

Spring 2026



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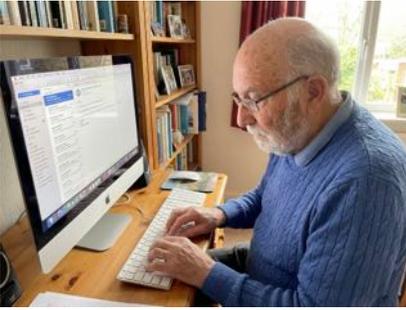
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Speakers & Judges List

To access the updated Speakers & Judges list your Club registered contact will need to request/or already have access details to a Private area. There have been a large number of amendments over the last few months. Please use the updated list to book speakers and judges. To help us keep this up to date we would appreciate nominations of speakers and judges that could be useful for other clubs. Please ensure the speaker and/or judge is aware of their nomination.

Welcome to the Spring Edition



There is a specific kind of magic that happens in Somerset this time of year. It's in the way the morning mist clings to the Levels, the sudden, defiant yellow of a stray daffodil, and that familiar, frantic itch we all get to finally—*finally*—get back into the soil. Welcome to your Spring magazine, a 32-page celebration of everything that

makes the Somerset Federation of Gardening Clubs such a vibrant, bustling community.

With around 180 clubs under our collective umbrella, the sheer breadth of knowledge available is staggering. This issue is a true reflection of that diversity. We have curated a "potting shed" mix of content for you: from items that you can digest over a quick tea break, to longer, more informative pieces designed for a rainy afternoon in the armchair. While our roots remain firmly planted in the rich Somerset earth, this edition sees our branches reaching surprisingly far afield. We are delighted to welcome back our regular contributor Bill Upton from **Australia**, whose updates provide a fascinating glimpse into the other side of the world. Furthermore, we are thrilled to introduce Karen Cauthen Elsworth, a **new voice from the USA**, proving that whether you're tending a plot in Taunton or a garden in Virginia, the language of plants is truly universal.

As you leaf through these pages, I hope you find inspiration for your borders, a solution for that one troublesome corner of the garden, or at the very least, a story that makes you smile. Gardening is often a solitary pursuit, but being part of this Federation reminds us that we are part of something much larger—a network of 180 clubs sharing the same joys, frustrations, and seasonal rhythms.

So, put the kettle on, find a sunny spot by the window, and enjoy. Here's to a productive, weed-free (we can dream, can't we?), and glorious Somerset spring.

Happy Gardening!

David - Magazine compiler

Chairman's Corner



It's the first week of January 2026, it's freezing outside with minus 3–5 degrees, and I wonder how our little feathered friends, who have been by the dozens hanging on our bird feeders, keep warm of a night. I'm sitting in front of our log burner in my armchair, comfortable and warm, thinking about what to write for this issue of our magazine. My mind goes back to the year 2009 when we joined the Federation's committee and now, at the high risk (!) of repeating myself, I'd like to talk again about our Federation — past, present, and future.

2011, and I became Chairman, so many years ago, and at that time our committee was managed by the four 'P's — paper, printing, 'phones and postage! I really don't know how our committee managed it all. For example, our newsletter (now renamed magazine) was compiled twice a year by Pip, then our Secretary, now our President, and all carried out manually, with articles being typed and completed in book form, sent off to the printers (200 plus copies), then returned, enclosed in written or typed stamped addressed envelopes, and posted out to all our member clubs. The Speakers and Judges Register was compiled in the same way; all changes had to be carried out manually, printed every two years and again addressed and posted.

The database, compared to now, was quite primitive; however, it did give us the basis to improve for the future. But again, any amendments were by post or telephone and therefore any changes were delayed. No emails in those days! These are just a couple of examples of 'the way we were'!

During the next fifteen years, things have changed. The four 'P's dramatically reduced and, in fact, in some cases ceased altogether. We saw some radical changes with the arrival of new committee members: Sally (Speakers and Judges), David (Website) and Catherine (Systems), all fitting in seamlessly with old stalwarts like myself, Pip, John and Mo!

Now then, for the future — and to put the next section into perspective — if in 2011 I had sat down with the then committee and talked about how I saw the future, everyone would have looked at me as if I had come from Mars! ... but here we are...

The Committee are always looking for ways the Federation can innovate and improve. So, with that in mind, Catherine and Andrew (her husband) have been working on a new website for the last year or so. This will be very different from our present one and will still take more time to complete. It will then be tested with dummy runs alongside the current site, removing any 'bugs'. When complete, our present site will be 'mothballed' and the new one will go online.

The advantages are enormous with this new site - we will provide each club with their own webpage where they can adapt the content to show their talks throughout the year, events, shows, and so on.

Going forward, Speakers and Judges would be able to access their details, and provide updates for their own talks and presentations, and Clubs will provide updates for their content – all to be reviewed/checked and published by the committee soon afterwards.

We would also be looking to provide more interactivity, so that clubs can provide feedback on Speakers and Talks, after a meeting, and Speakers can provide feedback on Clubs/event locations and facilities etc. – again published in a timely fashion after review. We will work to increase the number of registered Speakers - we are conscious that finding good speakers and talks is quite time consuming and difficult for clubs, but is key to offering a lively and informative program for the year, so understanding who Clubs have had to speak, that are not on our current listing, is important.

Further in the future, I see the Federation changing its name to 'The Federation of Gardening Clubs', open to everyone throughout the UK, where information can be available to all.

Well, I could write about so much more, but I think this is enough for you to digest, and Mo won't be happy if I give her more to type!

Finally, I believe there will come a time when the Federation is owned by its members (as now) but also managed by them. When that day arrives, I will take the committee and their partners out for a lovely meal with nice wine and, at the end of the evening, we will all metaphorically ride off into the sunset, knowing that our Federation is in good hands!

God bless, happy gardening.

Erl

Bananas

Having lived in East Africa for many years, my house there was surrounded by banana plantations. The bananas were grown to make pombe, a local beer much enjoyed by the population.

After returning to the UK and living in a house 800 feet up on the side of the Mendips, I thought I would try a Musa basjoo. Not only did it survive for 27 years, but it also flourished and produced many offspring. These offspring are now living in Lancashire, Cambridgeshire, Dorset, Bristol, and in many gardens in the village.

I recently moved into the village centre, and my son brought two offshoots from the original plant which he had grown in Bristol. These are now established and planted among cannas and ginger lilies, creating a small tropical corner.

Little did I ever believe, when I started gardening 60 years ago, that I would be cultivating these wonderful plants.

Climate change is really with us.

Happy gardening,

Ruth Ardron

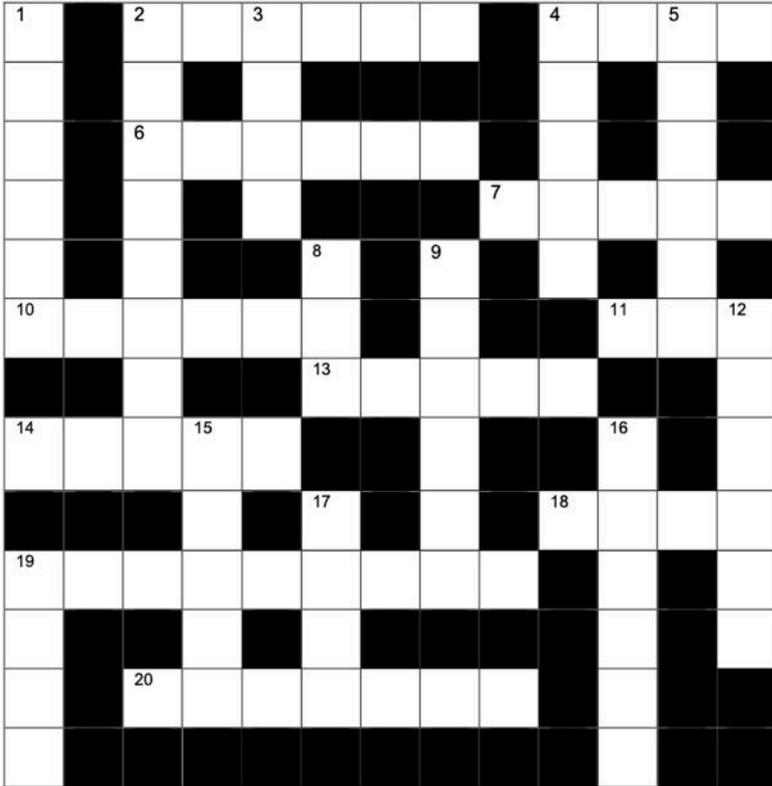
Please Note

When a member of a club needs to contact the Federation please ensure it is the registered authorised contact who makes the enquiry. For access to the Speakers and Judges Register, queries about an entry on the website, or any matters relating to your club, we can only respond to the registered authorised contact. Contact via email is preferred, as it allows us to carry out research and provide a prompt reply. Please refer to the 'Contacts' page on the SFGC website for further details.



<https://sfgc.org.uk/contacts.html>

Crossword by John Dunster



Across

2. Strange affair of the palm leaves.
4. Vegetable doesn't sound waterproof.
6. Suit for gardeners.
7. Stare out to see a flower.
10. Fruit ring is given scope.
11. The hush in the wood.
13. It helps to provide a cheap pleasant snack.
14. Shrub belonging to you in the past then me.
18. Just a tree outside.
19. No fancy arboreal feature we hear.
20. Flowers to provide with drink and food.

Down

1. The automaton envelopes juicy food.
2. Two girls useful in the kitchen.
3. Iris may droop.
4. Tether the french tree.
5. Trees that are no longer saplings.
8. That part of the peach that is a little green.
9. Heart of a tall tree from the mountains.
12. Can earthy word cause such laughter.
15. Fruit that gives a male drive.
16. Mother and child provide food.
17. Give up making pots.

Answers to the crossword on page 28

Somerset Federation of Gardening Clubs

AGM

Tuesday 12th May '26

**Hosted by Fosseway Garden Club at
Keinton Mandeville Village Hall
Christles Lane, TA11 6ES**

**Doors open 6.15pm for
7.00pm start**

**followed by a talk from
Chelsea Gold Medallist
CHRIS SMITH
of East Pennard Plants
'The Edible Garden'**

**Refreshments on arrival.
Plant Sale, Raffle &
Buffet after the talk.**

A letter from Canberra

“The vilest deeds like poison weeds Bloom well in prison air; It is only what is good in man That wastes and withers there”

Oscar Wilde

The old Grafton Gaol, located in Grafton, New South Wales, had a notorious legacy as one of Australia’s most formidable maximum-security institutions. Known as the "Prison of Fear," it was the destination for the State's most unmanageable and violent criminals for much of the 20th century.



It was built using brick, sandstone and terracotta with mock machicolations to give the gaol an imposing, medieval castle-like appearance. This architectural style was used in many old gaols in NSW.

In 1942, Grafton Gaol was designated as the prison for intractable prisoners—those who were too dangerous or disruptive for other NSW gaols. The historic site closed as a prison in 2020 when inmates were moved to the new, larger Clarence Correctional Centre.

Conditions at Grafton Gaol were intentionally designed to be the most severe in the State to break the spirit of inmates. For decades, the prison operated under a regime of strict discipline. Inmates were often subjected to long periods of solitary confinement in dark cells or separate treatment blocks.

Grafton housed the worst of the worst in the NSW prison system. The most infamous was Darcy Dugan, a notorious prison escape artist and bank robber. In June 1953, Dugan led a large-scale breakout attempt at Grafton Gaol. They were unsuccessful.

The 1976 Royal Commission into NSW Prisons exposed the systemic violence in Grafton Gaol. It confirmed that intractable prisoners had suffered severe physical punishment and unlawful and cruel treatment. Significant reforms were put in place.

My time in Grafton Gaol



Before moving back to Canberra, I became involved at the gaol through Kairos, an interdenominational Christian ministry. I did this work for some 3 years, getting to know and trying to understand inmates, “walking the talk” with them.

Notwithstanding the good intentions of Kairos, the inmates saw it as an opportunity for better food and time out from the boredom of prison life and showed little enthusiasm for the Kairos program. Two inmates involved in Kairos are worth mentioning. The first I’ll call Fred and the second, Michael. Both had attended Kairos and we thought there might be a better future for them.

Fred was seemingly a gentle soul, liked by fellow inmates, the Chaplain, prison officers and support workers. He’d been in gaol for a long time. Everyone believed he was rehabilitated and was released

on parole. Fred found accommodation at a caravan park in Coffs Harbour south of Grafton. Out for a few weeks and fuelled with alcohol and drugs, he murdered a park occupant and ended back at Grafton Gaol in maximum security.

Sadly, Aboriginals are over-represented in gaols and many are incarcerated for crimes of family violence. Michael, an Aboriginal, was committed to stand trial for the murder of his mother but convicted of manslaughter. He'd been in Grafton Gaol for 12 years and I assisted in his release on parole. I was able to organise accommodation and employment for him in the Grafton area. Despite my best efforts at keeping him trouble-free, Michael was taking drugs and associated with a local bikie gang. I was often called to the Parole Office in Grafton to get him out of trouble.

One Saturday afternoon, I received a call from the Grafton Police Station saying they had Michael in custody. He was caught by two off-duty policemen viciously assaulting his girlfriend. Convicted, he ended up in maximum security. I visited him there and had to say there was nothing more I could do for him.

After Kairos, I spent a further 3 years helping the prison Chaplain, usually with small groups of inmates in both medium and maximum security. The Chaplain and I became, and remain, good friends. We rarely talked about religion with these groups but had wide-ranging discussions on many subjects. The inmates trusted us and opened up because we were non-judgemental and made them feel wanted; sharing their lives was a "first" for them because the Gaol Code was silence.

Looking back over my time at Grafton Gaol, I saw a more responsive and caring prison system quite different from the early days of the Gaol. But I felt like other support workers at Grafton Gaol. It was a bizarre experience, a whole other existence, an unrealness. I was an outsider on the inside and had access to incredible stories that were tragic, amusing, entertaining and thought-provoking.

Sadly, I saw little empathy in prison inmates. Whether this is "born or made" is debated in modern neurocriminology. The current consensus is that it is both. It is rarely a single criminal gene at work; rather, it is a complex interaction between a person's genetic makeup and their environment ... genetics loads the gun, but the environment pulls the trigger.

Bill Upton
January 2026

Shrubs in My Garden

When our three children left home, we decided it was time to downsize. We looked at many properties, sometimes with an estate agent. We drove past our present home, saw the sale sign, and decided to have a look. The owner showed me the huge garden; there was a pond and a greenhouse. The garden had even been open to the public under the National Garden Scheme.

I noticed a beautiful Daphne in full flower with a delightful scent; meanwhile, my wife was looking at the house. After a brief discussion, we decided this was the house for us. In effect, that Daphne bush sold me the house.



I love the garden and it is my pride and joy; I walk in it daily to lift my spirits. There is a large Camellia which bears large red blooms in early spring. Camellias are members of the tea family and are native to Japan and China. Interestingly, tea is even grown commercially in Cornwall.

I have a prickly Mahonia which bears pendulous flowers in early spring. It also has a delightful scent (see picture).

I have several Rhododendron bushes which produce beautiful pink and red blooms in late spring. These shrubs favour a

shady place and lime-free soil.

My Buddleia bush is cut down almost to ground level in winter, but it grows vigorously and produces highly scented flowers which are loved by butterflies.

I also have several gooseberry bushes which, unfortunately, produced no fruit last year! I have just given them a vigorous prune and hope they will bear fruit this year.

Finally, I have a Cistus which bears pretty, pink, papery flowers. It prefers well-drained soil in full sun.

John O'Neill

It's Spring Showtime

On Saturday 7th March 2026, Banwell Gardening Club will host the first of its two annual shows, the Spring Show. With all the spring flower exhibits, it's a wonderful sight and is a signal that warmer weather and longer gardening days are on the way. There are many categories to choose from with a great selection for children.



Banwell Gardening Club 2025 Spring Show



The second annual show is the Horticultural Show in September. For more details of both shows go to banwellgardeningclub.org.uk

Banwell is situated on the A371 between Weston Super Mare and Bristol. The gardening club is a very active group in the village. Last year we supported the local Primary School with 'Operational Daffodil' where we donated Daffodil bulbs for the children to plant in the school grounds and hopefully when spring arrives, the school will be the prettiest part of the village.

The club itself has 60 members and we meet on the last Thursday of February, March, April, May, September, October and November. Our speakers have been quite diverse ranging from The Self Seeded Garden (Catherine Crouch) to a talk from Kate Groves on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, its beginning and how climate change is affecting them



This year we have speakers booked talking about the Art of Topiary and Somerset Butterflies and moths.

We look forward to meeting new guests especially in March at our annual Spring Show where the competitiveness is awesome. Then enjoy a cuppa with homemade cake to finish the day.

See you in March.

Eileen Pitts
Banwell Gardening Club

Tuscany

My husband Trevor and I did a tour of Liguria and Tuscany in September, which we can highly recommend. Despite the year's extreme temperatures across Europe the countryside was lush and green due to the region's rich fertile soil and favourable climate.

During our travels we passed Vannucci Piante a huge nursery, which had miles of cypress firs, huge, bagged olive trees, topiary balled yews, oleander and nandina. I was curious to know a little more about Vannucci and discovered it was opened in 1938 by Vannino Vannucci a trained horticultural worker who wanted to start his own business in Pistoia. He was subsequently joined by his son Moreno.

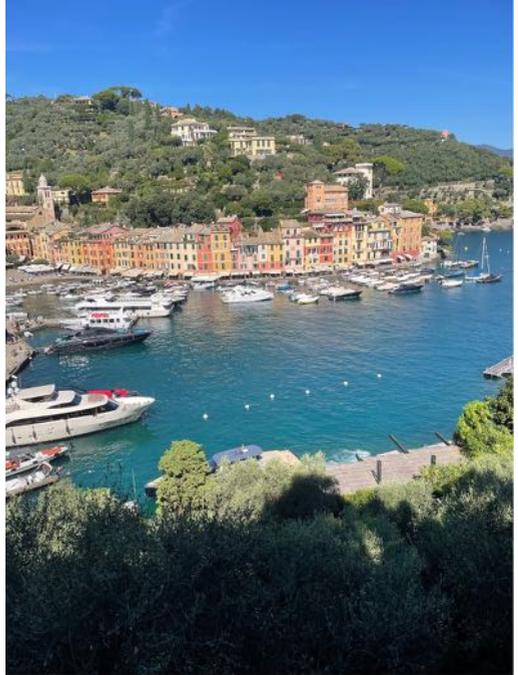
The nursery is still run by the same family but has expanded and is now known globally for the quality of its horticulture, supplying plants for the Olympic Games, Buckingham Palace and Chelsea Flower Show. Seriously impressive and probably with price tags way beyond most people's budgets.

We were based in Montecatini Terme a UNESCO World Heritage spa town and



Montecatini - Terme Spa

stayed in the lovely Adua Hotel. Like a lot of Towns in Italy, the original village was on a hillside now known as Montecatini Alto and accessed by a funicular opened in 1898. We had two free days, so one day we visited the old town and another the Spa. Both were absolutely beautiful. The Spa had stunning grounds, a fabulous restaurant,



Portofino

and an art gallery. 16 Euros covered the entry fee and two cappuccinos - an absolute bargain.

We travelled by coach to Rapallo, Portofino, Florence, Pisa, Lucca and the Cinque Terre - five towns. None of which was more than a 2-hour journey away. This did however mean a number of early starts and a lot of walking.

Our first tour stop was Rapallo which has a stunning bay and lies to the north of Portofino. You will know Portofino as its iconic pastel painted facade features in lots of adverts for Italy. Portofino is super glamorous, Spielberg's yacht was in the harbour and his guests were the Obamas. We actually preferred Rapallo which was very picturesque, easier to get around and a lot cheaper!

Next stop Florence, which is simply stunning. The Duomo is amazing, but it is so big that it is difficult to take a photograph that does it justice. We walked across the Ponte Vecchio Bridge, saw Michelangelo's statue of David and explored the Santa Croce. Sadly, we could not go inside the Uffizi to see Botticelli famous Birth of Venus, because all of the tickets had been presold, so prebook before you travel.

Then on to Cinque Terre, a string of seaside villages with beautiful harbours, colourful houses and narrow winding streets packed with restaurants and gelato shops.

Access is via a ferry. There are five towns, but we only visited two - Monterosso and Vernazza.

Sadly, it was raining when we visited Pisa, but we still managed to get the iconic shots of the leaning tower, the Baptistry and the Duomo. The final stop was the walled city of Lucca, the birthplace of Puccini where over lunch we met some people from a local Bowling Club where my husband sometimes plays, you just never know who you are going to bump into on your travels.

Finally, a comment on the food. Forget the diet - it is a total carb fest - Panini's, Pizza, Pasta, thick Tuscan soups, Cannoli, Tiramisu and of course Gelato. What's not to like.

Linda Hodgetts



Ponte Vecchio, Florence

Sour Grapes.

My home is close to the wooded slopes of Mendip.

I have heard the unnerving cries, barks and shrieks of foxes throughout November, December and into January. Though sounding horrific this is normal behaviour. Foxes are crepuscular being active usually at dawn and twilight. They are searching for a mate, defending their territory or creating a new territory in which to bring up a family. The gestation time is 52 days so cubs are born in March or April.



There is much folklore about foxes presumably because for hundreds of years they have been a common sight in the countryside.

My title began when I wondered what the expression ‘sour grapes’ means. It means disparaging something that one cannot attain. The expression comes from one of Aesop’s fables, ‘The Fox and the Grapes.’ and is about a fox that cannot reach some grapes. Instead of admitting defeat or asking for help he announces that they are sour anyway. A lesson to be learned!

Foxes are very territorial and within their territory have several hiding or sleeping places called lairs but to give birth they build more substantial dens that have several entrances for safety. The cubs stay in the den for about 3 weeks usually in March feeding on milk but in April or May they emerge to explore and play near the den.

Once the cubs are about 2 months old the mother will leave them at dusk or dawn to hunt for food but at times they are forced to hunt in daylight and this is when trouble comes for the fox and poultry keepers. Foxes are completely opportunistic looking for almost any meal. They can climb a 6-foot-high fence or squirm through pig netting. They are omnivores eating a wide range of foods including small mammals like mice and rats, garden birds and their eggs, invertebrates such as slugs and earthworms, fruit and nuts in season and carrion. Even with such an availability of food the fox is still, on occasions, forced to hunt in daylight to feed its cubs as my photo shows. It is 9.30 am. in May and the fox is looking around. He/she decides it is safe to enter the goose house. It is empty. Unlucky this time! It may have been a fully grown cub told by its mother ‘You’re on your own now! Find your own food.’



Despite this threat mainly in May and June I have a respect and liking for foxes.

They have been persecuted relentlessly for hundreds of years so that their numbers are declining in rural areas This is partly because killing of foxes and their cubs is indiscriminate using legal and unfortunately illegal methods such as poisoning and blocking dens in the cubbing season. Foxes are not highly protected like badgers (that kill more hens in my experience!) or deer (that have a close season) They are protected from abuse and cruelty by Act of Parliament 1996 but this must be hard to enforce.



Meanwhile, foxes are finding more food and safety in towns.
Di Redfern

Glorious Gardens: How your garden can change lives.

Gardens have a quiet power. They slow us down, invite us to breathe



a little deeper, and offer moments of calm when they are needed most. At St Margaret's Hospice, gardens are far more than beautiful spaces — they are places of comfort, reflection, and connection for our patients, their families, and friends.

Time spent outdoors can bring a sense of peace during life's most difficult moments. The gentle movement of leaves, the scent of flowers, birdsong in the background — these small, natural details can help ease anxiety, spark memories, and provide a welcome distraction from pain or worry. For many of our patients, simply sitting in a garden, feeling the fresh air or warmth of the sun, brings a sense of normality and reassurance.

Out in the community, we support people to remain independent at home for as long as possible. For many, their gardens are a source of pride and solace. When illness makes it difficult to keep up with maintenance, our teams help patients apply for attendance allowances and other support so they can continue to enjoy tidy, beautiful gardens — spaces that nourish wellbeing even during challenging times.



This is why Glorious Gardens feels so special: it reflects what we see every day — the power of gardens to bring people together, provide peace of mind, and nurture both body and spirit.

Glorious Gardens is a campaign we run every year where generous garden owners across Somerset and Dorset open their gates to the public. By sharing their much-loved green spaces, they are helping to raise vital funds for St Margaret's Hospice — ensuring we can continue to provide compassionate care to people and families when they need it most.

Each garden is unique, reflecting the personality, creativity, and care of its owner. From small, intimate spaces filled with colour and scent,



to larger gardens offering sweeping views, wildlife havens, and quiet corners to pause and reflect — visitors will be welcomed into places that have been lovingly tended and thoughtfully shared. Along the way, there's also the chance to meet fellow garden lovers, exchange ideas, and enjoy the simple pleasure of being surrounded by nature.

Just as our hospice gardens offer sanctuary to patients and families, these open gardens offer visitors the opportunity to slow down and enjoy the restorative benefits of the outdoors — all while supporting hospice care in their local community. Every visit helps make a difference, contributing to specialist care, emotional support, and comfort for those facing life-limiting illness.

If you're inspired to explore some of the gardens that are taking part, Glorious Gardens brochures will be available from April in all St Margaret's Hospice shops you can also find full garden listings and opening details on our website:

<https://www.st-margarets-hospice.org.uk/event/glorious-gardens/>

Whether you're an experienced gardener, an enthusiastic beginner, or someone who simply enjoys spending time outdoors, there's something for everyone to enjoy. By visiting a garden, you're not only treating yourself to a peaceful and uplifting experience — you're helping us continue to offer comfort, dignity, and compassionate care to patients and families across Somerset.



If you have any questions about the Glorious Gardens campaign, would like to get involved by volunteering at a garden opening this summer or would be interested in opening your garden for St Margaret's Hospice in 2027 please do get in touch.

Holly Hackett

holly.hackett@st-margarets-hospice.org.uk

01935 70949

Roots of Revolution: Restoring the Gardens of Washington, Jefferson, and Madison through Virginia's Historic Garden Week

The Garden Club of Virginia's Historic Garden Week offers an opportunity to visit many sites connected to early Virginians who helped shape American history during the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, which is taking place this year. In her compelling book, *Founding Gardeners*, British author Andrea Wulf links the Virginians Washington, Jefferson, and Madison's love of the land to the birth of our country. These revolutionaries viewed the native species as patriotic symbols of the agrarian republic they were fighting to build in their quest for independence from England.

From April 18-25, the owners of nearly 130 of Virginia's most stunning private properties will open their homes for tours to help raise funds for restoring and preserving public gardens and landscapes, in an event similar to National Garden Schemes, which opens "gardens of quality, character and interest to the public for charity." Historic Garden Week began in 1929, just two years after the first Garden Schemes, with interruptions during WWII and COVID, making this year the 93rd anniversary of the fundraiser. Historic Garden Week is the only statewide house-and-garden tour in the United States.

Showcased properties range from farmhouses to urban townhomes and mid-century masterpieces, and from intimate courtyard gardens to backyard meadows filled with native plants and wildflowers. Each tour offers a captivating selection of three to five private homes and gardens, many of which will be open to the public for the first time, along with access to numerous state and national historic landmarks. Tours will take place in 29 cities and towns across Virginia over eight consecutive days, during what is typically the peak of springtime blooms, when dogwoods, redbuds, and azaleas are at their most glorious.



The Garden Club of Virginia (GCV) has completed dozens of garden and landscape restorations, including several tied to the nation's 250th anniversary, funded by Historic Garden Week. While other organisations were called upon to preserve the homes of Virginia's Founding Fathers, the Garden Club of Virginia played a crucial role in restoring and interpreting the landscapes and key garden features at

some of these properties, as well as at others linked to Virginia's early history. Here's a snapshot of what Historic Garden Week tours have made possible at three of our most well-known partner sites:

Mount Vernon – The Garden Club of Virginia funded the restoration of Mount Vernon's bowling green, preserving the existing



tree canopy and adding an understory of native shrubs, according to George Washington's original design. Located approximately 15 miles south of Washington, D.C., the original house was built in 1734 and expanded in the late 1750s and again in the 1770s, transforming it into a

21-room mansion. The gardens are extensive and comprise four distinct areas, including an upper garden, a kitchen garden, a fruit garden and nursery, and a botanical garden.

Monticello - Since 1926, the GCV has completed projects at Thomas

Jefferson's beloved Monticello, ensuring historical accuracy. These include an early effort to preserve trees, some dating to Jefferson's era; the restoration of flower beds, paths, and the fish pond according to Jefferson's design; the realignment and restoration of the Kitchen Road, connecting the working side of the house to the stables, dairy, workshops, and enslaved workers' dwellings; and rebuilding the approach and steps to the Jefferson family cemetery.



Montpelier – The Garden Club of Virginia funded the extensive



restoration of the two-acre Annie duPont formal garden at Montpelier, the lifelong home of James Madison, the fourth President of the United States. The project transformed the area by reestablishing an early-20th-century-style garden, featuring restored terraces, boxwoods, brick walls, sculptures, iron gates, and perennial beds. The GCV funded

restoration work in 1990 and again in 2008-2009.

More than just a fundraiser, Historic Garden Week is a treasured springtime tradition for the GCV members who organise it and for more than 24,000 annual attendees. The Garden Club of Virginia, founded in 1920, is an association of 48 member clubs representing 3,400 volunteers statewide. Last year, visitors from 42 states and 16 countries traveled to Virginia to participate in what is also America's oldest house-and-garden tour. In addition to public garden restorations, the proceeds support a historic landscape research fellowship program that is building a comprehensive library of Virginia's notable landscapes. This year marks the program's 30th anniversary.

For the complete tour schedule, the 2026 Guidebook, and Historic Garden Week tickets, visit www.GCVirginia.org/historic-garden-week

Photo captions and credit

George Washington drew the plans and specifications for **Mount Vernon**, the design for the grounds, and the survey of the road and gardens. According to Rudy J. Favretti, who designed and implemented the restoration of the bowling green for the GCV, it is “an example of one of the earliest late 18th-century English landscapes to be established on American soil ...” Photo courtesy of Roger Foley.

Jefferson designed **Monticello's** flower gardens based on his interest in the informal style of landscape design, which he had admired during a 1786 trip to English gardens with John Adams. Photo courtesy of Catriona Tudor Erler.

William duPont purchased **Montpelier** in 1901. The family oversaw it until 1983, when it was transferred to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Trust initially requested assistance from the GCV in restoring the garden, emphasising that the garden's interpretation must relate to both the Madison and duPont periods. Photo courtesy of Jacob Neff.

Part of a 160-acre working farm featured on the Albemarle County tour this April, these private flower and prairie gardens feature flowing drifts of perennials and grass paths. Framed by the Blue Ridge Mountains and anchored by a historic barn, the gardens include over 14,000 native American plants. Photo courtesy of Roland Hartley.

Karen Cauthen Ellsworth, Director of Historic Garden Week

South West Orchid Society - 40th Anniversary

2026 marks four decades of the South West Orchid Society. The shared passion, friendship, learning, and the love of orchids has brought us together year after year. What started in 1986 as a friendly group of amateur orchid growers has grown into a thriving society where we have been able to share knowledge, expertise, plants, and the joy of orchids in bloom.

Over the years, the Society has become so much more than a monthly meeting or an annual show. It has become a place where friendships have grown, where beginners have found mentors, and where experienced growers have passed on their wisdom.

The meetings have included eminent speakers from the world of orchids and also many practical sessions from our own members willing to share their knowledge and expertise. We have an annual orchid show and also attend other shows during the year, including the Taunton Flower Show. In 2025 we had our first display at Gardeners World Live in Birmingham, winning a silver medal. The plants used in the displays are provided by the members who have earned accolades, rosettes, and admiration for their growing skills.



Liz and Ian - original members of SWOS.



SWOS Gold Award at the Taunton Flower Show 2025

Our meetings are held on the 2nd Sunday of the month at West Monkton Village Hall, near Taunton, from 2.30-5pm. If you only have a couple of orchids or a large collection, you will be welcome at the meetings.

Website: sworchids.uk

Email: swos.secretary@gmail.com

Marian Saunders - Secretary

A View from the Blackdown Hills: Jewels in the Snow

Many years ago, my neighbour (in country terms, a quarter-mile away) purchased, at a knockdown price as he often reminded us, a large sack of snowdrop bulbs. Planted on the grass bank bordering the A30 that runs past his farm they multiplied prodigiously to the delight of passers-by, some of whom return each year to photograph those massed white heads tremulous in the wind.

Does your heart leap, as mine does, at the sight of the early bulbs? Harbingers of the stirring earth, their air of fragility is an illusion. Consider the little winter irises. Reticulata hybrids 'Katharine Hodgkin', a mix of Oxford and Cambridge blues streaked with butter-yellow, and plum-coloured 'JS Dijt' deserve a place in any garden, but those crossed with iris *histrioides* are to my mind even finer, with broader, showier falls that are weather-proof to a remarkable degree. Even if it is snowing hard these natives of mountain slopes in Asia Minor somehow keep their heads erect, doggedly emerging to look like a handful of jewels scattered on a crisp white tablecloth.



The true species *histrioides* is scarce nowadays, superseded by hybrids, each about four inches tall, the best being 'George', a lovely mid-purple gem and clear-blue 'Lady B. Stanley'. Two perfect *reticulata*-*histrioides* crosses exist in sky-blue 'Harmony' and violet-pink 'Pauline'. I grow these and other bulbs - tiny crocus, species tulips - in pots on shelves in a cold greenhouse so



that when they are in bloom, I can look them straight in the eye. Sheltered from the elements the green noses appear early, just when winter begins to seem too long. There is something about them that shouts: "It may be grey,

but spring is on the way!"

They will be in nurseries and garden centres now, pot-grown and in bud. Buy as many as your pocket allows, and savour the exquisite

flowers and plant in the garden immediately they begin to fade. They appreciate sun and well-drained but not bone-dry soil; mix in a generous handful of horticultural grit when you plant them and scatter grit over the top of the soil to deter slugs.



We gardeners often dream – or at least I do: next year will be better, next year I will do this or that. Sometimes the dream comes to reality, sometimes it fades upon ‘the light of common day’.

But I have remembered that Goethe said something along the lines of ‘If you can dream it, you can do it,’ and so I am planning a little garden room which I hope does not sound pretentious. It is beneath the spreading arms of a magnolia ‘Brozzonii’ that we brought with us as a youngster when we moved to this hillside nearly forty years ago. The ‘room’ is perhaps some 15ft in length, and I have placed a path of paving stones (free, a friend was taking them to the tip) from the magnolia to the bank of rhododendrons at my boundary hedge. The narrow borders on either side of the path will be filled with bulbs, ribbons of little irises, humps of golden aconites, pools of crocus, starry anemones, jewels in the snow maybe but each year’s flowering reminding one that warm days are not so very far away.

Miranda Gudenian

Photos and GDPR

Using identifiable people in online photos counts as processing personal data under GDPR, so consent is usually the safest basis. Ideally, tell attendees in advance that photos may be taken and shared, or obtain permission afterwards if needed. Legitimate interest can apply for public event photos, but only if the use is necessary and doesn’t override individuals’ privacy rights. To reduce risk, use group shots, avoid clear faces, or blur individuals. Provide a clear privacy notice and a way for people to request removal. Keep simple records of any consent you obtain.

David Talling - Magazine Compiler

Wonders of the Wormery

There's not a lot of activity in the wormery during the cold winter months; however, I know of a special treat that will bring the worms to the surface: a banana skin. They just love them! After a few days, I take the lid off and gently move the banana to one side. Underneath, the worms are visible, but they quickly make a retreat below the surface to keep warm.



I've had the wormery for a few years now, kindly donated by a neighbour who no longer wanted it. There are various models, but mine is called Can-O-Worms. It has four levels; the bottom is a sump for the liquid that drains through and can be removed via a tap. Diluted, I use it as a fertiliser, though I must say that I have read conflicting opinions about whether it could contain harmful substances. I feed my worms mostly vegetables and have used the drainage liquid for some years without any problem.

Above the sump are three working trays. The worms are initially placed in the tray above the sump in bedding—which can include shredded newspaper, damp cardboard, or hemp—and they work their way up through holes in the tray above into which you've placed tasty food scraps. When the top tray is full, most of the worms will have left the bottom working tray, which can then be harvested. This involves separating the worms from the worm compost, which is rich in nutrients and used in the garden.

If you're interested in starting a wormery, there's a lot of information available both in print and on the internet. I initially read "Composting with Worms: Why Waste Your Waste?" by George Pilkington. The paperback is full of information but easy to read, clearly set out, and includes a review of commercially available worm bins.

I have to admit, I was terrified of killing the worms to begin with and kept lifting the lid daily to check on their welfare. They have survived despite my sometimes misguided ideas of what to feed them. I tried citrus one summer, but this resulted in a cloud of fruit flies when I took the lid off and the worms did not seem to be impressed; I had a bit of a sludgy mess to deal with, which improved by adding vegetable

matter. Generally, I find vegetable peelings to be very good; they like a mixture. You can also add torn-up cardboard, like toilet roll tubes, and they like tea leaves, coffee grounds, eggshells, and even pasta, apparently—I must give that a try. Everything in moderation, but no meat among a few other things.



The wormery was initially sited in the side alley of our house, close to the kitchen and easy to pop out to with any leftovers. However, a couple of years ago the summer was very hot, and since worms don't like extremes of temperature, I moved it to the end of our garden which is shady; they seem happier there. I watched a video which recommended adding a layer of cardboard over the food in the top tray to keep the worms warm in winter and cooler in the summer, and I think this works very well—they seem to appreciate it. As it's very wet at the moment, I'm regularly opening the tap at the bottom to drain the rainwater away.

I think for minimal effort, a wormery has been an excellent addition—a good use for vegetable waste and another source of compost for the garden. With the cost of keeping pets much in the news at the moment, perhaps wormeries will grow in popularity. I must admit they're not very cuddly, but at least you don't have to take them for a walk!

Rachel Hill

**THE SOMERSET FEDERATION
of GARDENING CLUBS
NEEDS YOU!**

To help us to grow the Federation, we need new committee members. Ideally people with ideas and commitment, willing to work in a team. We meet three times a year to consolidate our ideas.

**Contact the Chairman - Erl Plomgren
Chair@SFGC.org.uk - 01278 741152**



An Unexpected Visitor

Occasionally tiny shrews come to the garden especially in the late summer and early autumn. They like to keep hidden but sometimes their high-pitched squeaking is heard. They are very fast and easily recognisable by their long snouts covered with bristling whiskers.

Though 'my' cat (a stray) enjoys catching shrews she never eats one as she would a mouse. I found out why. Glands in a shrew's flanks emit a powerful scent that repels mammals such as foxes and cats! Their saliva is also distasteful. Birds do eat shrews. They have a poorer sense of smell. Shrew glands are mainly used to mark their runs and territories.

When a shrew decided to visit my home I began to take an interest its life story. In the early evening I would sit and wait for the diminutive shrew to emerge. The shrew all alone – they are solitary animals except during the breeding season – would immediately make for the cat food. Soon cat food was out anyway! A shrew has a strong sense of smell but poor eyesight. Normally they eat insects such as spiders, wood lice and gnats and also invertebrates such as slugs, snails and worms.



They must eat 90% of their body weight daily to survive. They must eat day and night every few hours otherwise they will die. If there is not enough food they are forced to eat their own species. They do have brief rests every hour or so.

To survive times of food scarcity, some shrew species, like the common shrew, can reduce the size of its brain and even its skull and body by reabsorbing nutrients from non-fat tissues!

Shrews are not often seen because they spend time just under the ground or they scurry along tunnel-like runways through tussocky grass or through leaf litter or soil. They do not hibernate but spend the winter in hedge bottoms, old nests and holes and amongst leaf litter (yet another reason for being cautious about strimming)

I grew rather fond of the shrew but did not know whether it was always the same one. It was likely because they are very territorial. Their lives are short perhaps only a year or eighteen months but enough to produce several litters of around 5 babies The youngsters are able to look after themselves when only a month old.

It seemed to be leaving time. I bought a humane trap and set it with apparently a favourite food – chocolate! It worked immediately. Instructions stated that the shrew should not be left longer than 4 hours without food. That was not a problem. Naively I released the shrew back into the garden. Next day it was back enjoying chocolate and then finding itself released further away this time on the verge along the adjoining lane. Still back. Next, it was released across the busy main road into a friend’s garden. Back again.



Finally, and I should have researched this at the beginning, the shrew was taken, as instructed, at least a mile away. The shrew did not return. I felt rather sad and hoped that it had found a suitable home in a new territory with other shrews not too far away. But I also wonder whether the shrew found another human home as well!

Di Redfern

Crossword Answers

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The Everyday Benefits of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer just the stuff of sci-fi - it is



woven into everyday life, making things more efficient, accessible, and even a little magical. For the average person, AI offers countless benefits, often working quietly in the background to improve convenience, safety, and creativity.

Virtual assistants like Copilot, Siri, and Alexa help people manage schedules, find information, and even control smart home devices. Whether it's setting reminders, answering questions, or adjusting the thermostat, AI streamlines daily tasks with ease.

For artists, designers, and writers, AI can be a fantastic brainstorming partner. It helps generate ideas, refine designs, and provide inspiration. From helping with poster layouts to suggesting colour palettes, AI boosts creative output in ways both practical and whimsical.

AI powers wearable fitness trackers, helping individuals monitor their health, sleep patterns, and exercise routines. It also supports medical professionals by analysing patient data to assist with diagnoses and personalised treatments.

Streaming services use AI to recommend movies, music, and books tailored to individual tastes. GPS systems find the fastest routes, while smart shopping assistants help users discover new products. AI ensures the world feels more personalised and efficient.

For those involved in clubs, charities, or local events, AI simplifies organisation. It can help design flyers, schedule meetings, and manage member communications, keeping communities thriving with less administrative hassle.

From simplifying tasks to fuelling creativity, AI enhances daily life in ways many people don't even realise. As the technology continues to evolve, its ability to empower individuals and communities will only grow.

I have outlined the benefits of A.I. here but there are drawbacks and perhaps we can discuss them in a future missive.

Just for fun, I asked an AI assistant to compose a poem about Somerset gardening clubs and their members. Here's the result:

Where Friendship Sprouts

They meet with pockets full of seeds
 And pockets full of tales,
Of roses that behaved themselves
And beans that went off the rails.

They swap the gossip of the beds,
 The triumphs and the flops,
And whisper of a courgette plant
 That simply never stops.

They argue over compost heaps,
 Debate the perfect hoe,
And boast of pumpkins so immense
 They barely deigned to grow.

They trade advice on stubborn shrubs
 That never quite comply,
And laugh about the mystery pests
 Who nibble on the sly.

They praise the rain when rain is scarce,
 Then grumble when it pours,
And share the tricks for coaxing blooms
 From plants with secret chores.

They marvel at the novice's luck,
 The veteran's steady hand,
And raise a cheer for anyone
Who dares to try something grand.

But when the kettle whistles loud
 And biscuits make the rounds,
The gardening club becomes a place
 Where friendship truly sprouts.

For in that cosy meeting room
 Where muddy boots are lined,
They find a gentle fellowship
 That's rare and hard to find.

And though they love their gardens well,
 Each plot, each pot, each tub,
It's clear the brightest things they grow
 Are grown within the club.

David Talling - with a lot of help of A.I.

