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Fig. 1 *Delphinium* Blue Bird Group

**I**t's 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 12 months ago life was 'normal' and, as gardeners, we were taking stock and planning for a busy 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

## Locked down but not out – gardening at Kew through the pandemic

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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 the year would turn out to be nothing like we had imagined.

I have a vivid memory of the meeting with our senior manager on 17<sup>th</sup> March. 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. While it was reassuring to know RBGK was taking the health and wellbeing of its staff so seriously in the face of the threat posed by 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 from the following

day. None of us had any idea that day 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 was in lockdown, and the gates to the Gardens were closed.

From 25<sup>th</sup> March, RBGK classified the few remaining horticultural staff members as 'key workers', responsible for the conservation of the valuable living collections held on site. Where possible, anyone for whom being at the Gardens was judged to be a safety risk was placed on furlough, as the organisation took advantage of the government's job retention scheme. I felt so lucky to be among just 20 percent of us 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 reduced even further.

To keep staff numbers using the communal areas as low as possible, maintain social distancing and help reduce fatigue and stress,



Fig. 2 Team meeting

those of us remaining were scheduled to work three days a week, with four or five of us working each day, overlapping on Wednesdays to keep continuity. And while it would be testing to maintain the Gardens on those numbers at the best of times, we were soon faced with the not entirely unwelcome but nonetheless challenging demands of an extraordinarily beautiful, very warm and dry spring.

With the nation in lockdown, it was vital for our skeleton crew to limit ourselves to essential work, and this took a little bit of negotiating; one person's necessity being another's

indulgence. Through thrice-weekly, socially distanced meetings (fig. 2) 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 prioritising irrigation, but to also continue with basic tasks such as mowing and edging (both done without collecting clippings), and the most urgent pruning and weeding. With the Gardens closed we could lower our standards for a while but, with the hope that Kew would reopen as soon as possible, we could

not afford to cease certain jobs altogether. Leaving lawns uncut and weeds unchecked would require a Herculean task later on, to bring the Gardens up to an acceptable standard for welcoming back the paying public.

Generally we worked alone, to have as little close contact with each other as possible, and everything we handled was sanitised after each use. We kept our own 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 a guide for those less familiar with an area to follow. One benefit of having the Gardens closed to the public was that we could leave irrigation out overnight, saving a huge amount of time each day.

While some found working alone highly productive and enjoyable, others clearly suffered feelings of isolation. On top of work responsibilities, we all had our own personal challenges: having to find a new place 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 our absent colleagues, stuck at home and unable to work. Despite the great service each member of furloughed staff was doing for Kew as an organisation, in terms of allowing it to maintain an income, many felt helpless and hopeless at times, as the days of lockdown

turned into weeks and months. There was a fear that there might arise a feeling of 'them and us', as and when those colleagues returned, and it wasn't always easy to reassure others from my privileged position of being still in work. It felt important to stay in touch as much as possible, but working days were 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 every day, without the need to call or text each one individually. She sent a group of friends a 'photo of the day', showing she was thinking of them, while still allowing her to focus on what she needed to do. I was inspired and adopted the idea, every morning sending a few close colleagues a photo of the Gardens I was so lucky still to be working in (figs 3, 4 & 5). In that glorious spring and early summer I was spoilt for choice as to subject matter. No matter how busy I was, taking and sending those photo-messages meant I allowed myself a few minutes every day to stop and look at the beauty around me.

As time went on, without aviation or traffic noise, the thousands of daily visitors, or the staff to do all the work we normally would, the Gardens became a quieter, softer, perhaps



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Fig. 3 *Wisteria sinensis*



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Fig. 4 *Trollius x cultorum* 'Orange Crest'



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Fig. 5 *Cypripedium macranthos* in Woodland



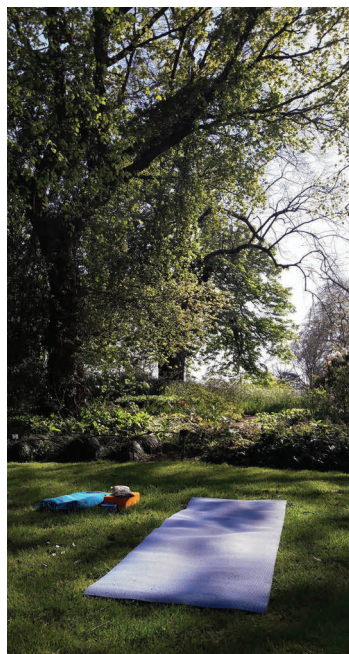


Fig. 6 Woodland yoga studio

wilder place. The birdsong and humming of insects were crystal clear. A family of foxes took up residence in an old badger sett, and we would often see four mischievous, gingery cubs playing outside their den in the middle of the day. Despite the relentless gloom of the daily news bulletins, 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 (fig. 6), not something I would ever have the chance to do with the Gardens open! Not a day

went by when I didn't feel an immense gratitude for having the job I do, for being able to continue doing it, and in such a special place.

There were low days of course, when it felt like we would never finish all the things we needed to, or would think about the loss of a whole season's work, and the price to pay in the future. In the Woodland Garden for example, we have spent years waging war on the dreaded weed *Allium paradoxum*, and have made some progress by completely renovating the worst-affected beds, while simultaneously hand-digging through those less badly affected.



Fig. 7 Woodland garden last April



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 create a whole new generation. It is normally a task we do *en masse* over several days or weeks in late spring, and in recent years we had begun to see a reduction in numbers. But in 2020 we hadn't the time or the staff numbers to catch the bulbils before they fell. And so we will have lost way, and I must admit to a certain dread at what we will be faced with this April (fig. 7).

For those who care passionately about our work, as do many of us here, 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 (fig. 8). Reportedly nearing 300 years of age, it may be the oldest tree in Kew, and it 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 (fig. 9). 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 would pass.

For a time, it seemed that lockdown would never



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Fig. 8 Friends

end and the Gardens would remain closed for many more months, but on 1<sup>st</sup> June the gates re-opened to a limited number of RBGK members. This brought its challenges too, as we had grown used to being able to work undisturbed. There were concerns among staff that the Gardens were not up to our normal standards, that we would now come into contact with people we didn't know, and that our already limited productivity would be further reduced.

In order to keep us, and the public, safe we were provided with barriers to block off certain areas, allowing us to work without visitors getting too close or stopping to talk. Our usual

enthusiasm to interact with them was now dampened, for reasons both of health and time. The vast majority of visitors were respectful and kept a safe distance, and comments were largely positive. Many expressed a huge sense of gratitude that they could return to what is often described by regulars as 'their garden', and only a few commented on how 'sad' things looked, or wondered where all the vegetables were.

Gradually the number of visitors was allowed to increase, and the paying public returned. The weather was blissful, but suddenly the place felt overcrowded and noisy, sometimes oppressively so.



Fig. 9 Majestic *Juglans nigra* at Kew

For every lovely person who said how much they appreciated our hard work and what a joy it was to return, there was another who couldn't understand why you'd prefer their children not to play with the irrigation or run amok through the borders or

(worse still) use them as lavatories. Nonetheless, just as we had got used to and revelled in our haven of peace, so too we have adapted to the place becoming populated 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, thrive and be inspired. 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 a solo experience for many (myself included) and, despite the knowledge that a vaccine is being rolled out, it seems clear that there is some 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 we all have carried in this dramatic year, the winter will end; another spring will come. And where there's spring, there's hope. 🌱

**Pin Dix** began gardening nine years ago, following a career change from stage management. Over seven of those years have been spent at RBG Kew, where she completed the one-year traineeship, subsequently securing a job as a Botanical Horticulturist in the Woodland Garden. In some of her recent work, she has gratefully benefited from a grant from the Kenneth Black Bursary Scheme.