

The Friends of Queen's Park Gardens (FQPG) Annual Report and Accounts 2020



1. Background: why we exist and what we aim to do

Queen's Park Gardens is a green oasis at the heart of the Queen's Park ward (Westminster). It is also a green lung, with consistently the best scores for air quality tests in our area.

The park is much used and appreciated by a wide range of local residents, including families with children, young people for sports, dog walkers, and people of all ages who come to exercise, walk through or just to enjoy some quiet time surrounded by nature.

The Friends of Queen's Park Gardens (FQPG) was re-formed in 2012 (a group had existed previously in 2005/06). This was in response to complaints by several local residents on the state of the Wildlife Area (which had been created in 2007/08) and a request by Westminster City Ward Councillor Paul Dimoldenberg for people to come forward and help restore and maintain it.

The objectives of FQPG activities in Queen's Park Gardens (QPG) are to:

- Provide a peaceful outdoor space for the local community to enjoy.
- Encourage an appreciation of nature in the local community through the provision of an attractive, safe and sustainable area.
- Provide and maintain a habitat for native species in the Wildlife Area.
- Encourage community involvement in the use, development and maintenance of QPG.

Although the main focus of FQPG activities is within QPG, the FQPG also consider work on other green projects and incentives in Queen's Park Ward.

2. Who we are: our people

1. FQPG committee

Our committee aims to ensure that the FQPG objectives are met by providing co-ordination and support to gardening volunteers. All of the committee members are local residents and FQPG gardening volunteers, and give their time free of charge and without any remuneration.

In 2020, the committee comprised Ray Lancashire as chair, Simon Walton as treasurer (including managing Time Credits), and Alison Low Madigan.

We are extremely grateful to Ray, who took over the role of chair on 1 January 2020, replacing Astrid de Cosson, whom we would like to thank for her massive contribution to FQPG in her time as chair.



2. Gardening volunteers

The gardening work of FQPG is undertaken by local residents, who come together with a shared pleasure in gardening and the hope of giving pleasure to others as a result of their work.

We aim to run at least one gardening session a month in the Queen's Park Gardens, focusing in particular on the Wildlife Area and other areas of the garden that are not within the remit of the other gardening partners Continental Landscapes who have been working with the City of Westminster since 2000 or Hammersmith Community Gardens Association (HCGA). These are on Saturday mornings and run for two to three hours.

In normal years, we have a core group of six–10 volunteers, joined at times by other volunteers. We always welcome all new volunteers, whether they would like to garden with us regularly or occasionally.

The volunteers are not paid, but we are lucky enough to be part of the Tempo Time Credits Scheme, whereby volunteers receive a time credit for each hour worked in the park, which they can use for various cultural and sports activities, as well as for learning opportunities.

In common with many other organisations and individuals, the Friends of Queen's Park Gardens were considerably impacted by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic (as described in [Section 4: Our activities and achievements in 2020](#), below).

3. Communications co-ordinator

We are grateful to another volunteer, Susan Chedghey, who manages FQPG social media communications, as well as sharing the administration of emails etc. As at 31 December 2020, the FQPG Twitter account has 488 followers (an increase of 71 compared with 417 followers at the end of December 2019). We have 217 Facebook followers (compared with 145 at the end of 2019) and we had 181 Facebook page likes during the year, up from 130 over the same period a year ago.

3. Key partnerships and funding

The Friends of Queen's Park Gardens do not generate any direct income and we are extremely grateful for the funding and partnership support we receive from the following organisations.

1. Queen's Park Community Council (QPCC)

The FQPG report into the Queen's Park Community Council (QPCC) through the QPCC Place Committee and are represented on the committee by the FQPG chair, Councillor Ray Lancashire.

We are grateful to the QPCC for supporting the FQPG in many ways, including funding. In previous years, FQPG received funding from QPCC through their grant scheme. In 2020, this changed and QPCC funding to support our work was provided under a new budgetary arrangement via HCGA.

2. Hammersmith Community Gardens Association (HCGA)

Hammersmith Community Gardens Association (HCGA) is contracted and funded by QPCC to organise and run gardening-related activities in the area, including volunteer gardening sessions, events and plant sales.

In 2020, HCGA's contract with QPCC was expanded to include a budget to enable them to increase the support they give to a wider range of community gardening projects, including the work of FQPG. We are grateful to HCGA for their funding support during 2020, which enabled members of the group to purchase plants and seeds and continue gardening during this difficult period.

We would like to give special thanks to Cathy Maund and Ulla Johnson, both for supporting our activities through the new funding and procurement arrangements and for sharing their gardening expertise with us.

3. Westminster City Council and Continental parks management team

Close working with Westminster City Council and their parks management contractors Continental is essential as they have overall responsibility for the maintenance of Queen's Park Gardens. We appreciate the support both of the council and the contract teams, and aim to further strengthen these important partnership relationships in 2021.

4. Other networks/organisations

FQPG treasurer and volunteer gardener Simon Walton continued to participate in London Friends Groups meetings and QPCC meetings on behalf of FQPG.

FQPG continued to support Grow-Wild Website (run by Kew Gardens to encourage people to visit and volunteer at green spaces near them).

FQPG are also proud to support London as a National Park City.

4. Our activities and achievements in 2020

FQPG gardening sessions were carried out as normal in January, February and early March 2020.

Then, on 21 March 2020, the chair of FQPG decided to suspend future FQPG gardening sessions, as a precautionary measure in response to the increasingly severe impact of Covid-19 and Government guidance. Two days later, on 23 March 2020, the Government announced the first national lockdown and official FQPG gardening sessions continued to be suspended for the rest of the year.

1. Individual volunteers gardening safely during the pandemic

The Government lockdown meant that significant restrictions were placed on many activities, but individuals were permitted, and indeed encouraged, to take an hour of outside exercise a day.

At the time of the lockdown, a small number of local residents (some, but not all of whom were regular volunteers with FQPG) decided individually to use one or two of their permitted daily one-hour exercise slots each week for gardening in Queen's Park Gardens.

Although these individuals weren't officially volunteering as part of FQPG, their activities are included here in the FQPG Annual Report, because they deliberately took on gardening work that would in other circumstances have been carried out by FQPG.

The individual volunteers who opted to garden in Queen's Park Gardens during the pandemic chose to do so because of the personal benefits of gardening exercise for their physical and mental health.

They also wanted to make a positive contribution to the wellbeing of people in the local community, by ensuring the garden continued to be well-maintained and as beautiful as possible – something that they felt was particularly important during a period of heightened stress for many people, and when so many other leisure venues were closed and activities banned because of the virus.

At all times, physical distancing was maintained by the gardening volunteers, with people working mostly in separate beds and using their own tools (rather than FQPG tools).

These informal gardening sessions took place on Wednesday and Saturday mornings. As Government restrictions were eased, the initial one-hour sessions were extended to two/three-hour sessions (in line with the applicable Government rules on outdoor activities). Other FQPG gardeners came at other times and worked separately, doing activities such as re-filling the bird feeders.

2. What we did in 2020: gardening within Queen's Park Gardens

Our planting schemes are designed to be largely self-sustaining and sustainable, with the aim of maximising the impact while taking account of our limited financial resources and the small number of volunteers we have.

During 2020, the volunteer gardeners continued to maintain some existing areas of FQPG work and also started to develop two new beds, chosen because of their high visibility within the garden. However, their focus of work was more limited than in recent years because, as a result of the pandemic, there were fewer regular volunteer gardeners.

Triangular rose bed (by Fourth Avenue entrance)

This is the most mature of the flower beds gardened by the FQPG volunteers, with a mix of rose bushes and a border of low-level bedding plants and perennials. During 2020, we:

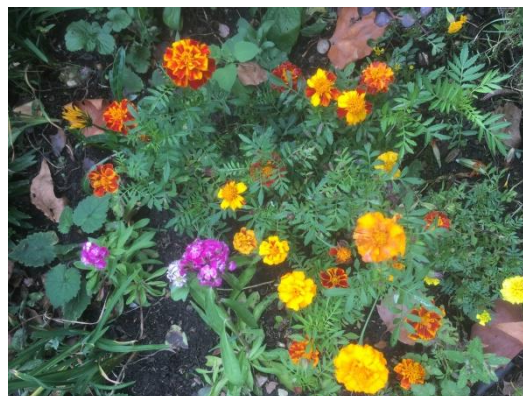
- Spread mushroom manure at the start of the year (pre-lockdown).
- Planted new lavender shrubs to fill gaps in the borders.
- Grew marigolds from seed.
- Maintained the rose bushes, including regular deadheading and pruning.
- Dug, weeded, watered and hunted for bindweed a lot!
- Identified gaps in the bed and rose bushes that are coming to the end of their natural life span and will need replacing (see [Section 8: Looking ahead: plans and priorities for 2021](#)).



Circular flowerbed (by Third Avenue entrance)

This bed was worked on by the FQPG volunteers in 2019 for the first time in many years. We were delighted that the planting of a mix of bulbs in autumn 2019 resulted in an abundance of irises, croci, daffodils and tulips in spring 2020, followed by other plants grown from seeds planted in 2019. In 2020, we:

- Planted seeds for a mixture of annuals and perennials, including marigolds, calendula, nasturtium, poppies, clary sage, etc.
- Bought and planted a small number of shop-bought bedding plants.
- Also weeded and watered a lot.
- Repaired damage to the bed when plants were crushed/uprooted (see [Section 7: Challenges](#) below).



Railings bed (along the play area close to Fourth Avenue entrance)

This bed is narrow and shallow which makes it hard for growing many plants. In 2020, we:

- Planted allium bulbs and sunflowers early in the year for blooming in 2020 – generously donated by HCGA (pre-lockdown).
- Enriched the bed with compost from our compost heap.
- Planted daffodil, crocus and iris bulbs in the autumn for first blooming in spring 2021.

A big thank you to Claire Hickey for first planting the bulbs and then replanting them each week after they were dug up by squirrels.



Benches bed (along the main path from Third Avenue entrance to Fourth Avenue entrance)

This is a highly-visible bed, which used to have a number of attractive shrubs. These were cut back a few years ago to give greater visibility through to the Wildlife Area, after which, the area became overgrown with weeds. In 2020, we decided to develop it and we:

- Dug over the ground area and cleared it of weeds.
- Enriched the soil with compost.
- Planted daffodil, tulip and iris bulbs, for first blooming in spring 2021.
- Planted wallflower plants – generously donated by Nigel Snuggs – for first flowering in spring 2021.

Wildlife Area

This area is in many years at the heart of our gardening work. However, this year, it was much used by local people during the spring and summer, making it more difficult for gardeners to work safely with appropriate physical distancing. As a result, less work was carried out in the Wildlife Area than would normally be the case. In 2020, we:

- Planted foxgloves (pre-lockdown).
- Planted alliums – generously donated by HCGA (pre-lockdown).
- Planted a crab apple tree (pre-lockdown).
- Planted willow whips for the willow dome (pre-lockdown) – these were sadly later pulled up and the willow dome was destroyed (see [Section 7: Challenges](#) below).
- Sowed packets of shop-bought wildflower seeds in the wildflower meadow in the late winter for flowering in summer 2020 (pre-lockdown).
- Sowed wildflower seeds harvested from other parts of the garden in the wildflower meadow in the autumn for flowering in summer 2021.
- Maintained the compost and leaf mulch heaps –using the results to enrich the soil in other parts of the garden.
- Dismantled the bug hotel following persistent damage (see [Section 7: Challenges](#) below).

Other activities

- Pruning the hedge alongside the Wildlife Area.
- Providing general gardening and maintenance support in other parts of the garden, including leaf sweeping and litter picking.



3. Other community gardening

Members of the FQPG also contributed other community gardening projects in the area, including planting and watering plants at the QPG Hub.

4. Special events

As in previous years, FQPG took part in the annual RSPB Bird Watch weekend. We are very grateful to Andrew Peel from RSPB who joined us for a couple of hours on 27 January 2020 and helped us identify and count a wide variety of birds that flew over and landed in the garden. During the one-hour period recorded for the RSPB Bird Watch, we spotted 14 different species, including pigeons, seagulls, robins, blackbirds, sparrows and a goldfinch.



Queen's Park Gardens - Wildlife Area

Time: TBA

As in previous years, we had intended to take an active role in the QPCC summer and winter festivals, which are held in the gardens and where we normally run stalls and organise nature activities for children. However, as a result of the coronavirus, the festivals were cancelled this year.

5. Special thanks

As in previous years, we have been indebted to the generosity of many supporters, including our partner organisations listed above.

In 2020, we would like to give particular thanks to Simon Walton and Nigel Snuggs, who have made an outstanding contribution to Queen's Park Gardens, bringing huge benefits to the many local people who have made use of the gardens during the year. Their dedication and hard work have been an inspiration and a much-appreciated support for the individual volunteers who chose on a personal level to continue gardening in the park, ensuring that gardening was undertaken safely and in line with government guidelines throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

Without them, the gardens would have become neglected and overgrown with weeds, while other plants would have died off from lack of watering.



6. Feedback from park users

One of the greatest pleasures we enjoy when we are gardening is the chance to meet other garden users. During the pandemic, the gardens were extremely well used, in particular during the spring and summer lockdown, when so many other leisure and exercise facilities were closed. Many people stopped and, maintaining a safe distance, thanked the volunteer gardeners, expressing their appreciation of their work to make the garden a more pleasant and safer place to be. One person even gave us some cakes to share!

7. Challenges

1. Vandalism and antisocial behaviour

Vandalism, littering and other antisocial behaviour are ongoing problems affecting the gardens at all times, but particularly so this year. This was probably in large part due to the added pressures and tensions experienced by many people as a result of the pandemic.

The greatest damage was inflicted on the Wildlife Area, including damage to trees and shrubs, some of which was irreparable. This included the pulling up of the willow whips planted earlier in the year and the destruction of the willow dome structure, which had been a feature of the garden for many years. The bug hotel was also destroyed and the pallets used for its structure were smashed up.

The circular bed also suffered a period of persistent damage in the spring and early summer. Most of this was caused by children crushing plants as they crawled over them to get under the central bush. There was also a period when a lot of plants were pulled up or their flower heads were snapped off. Unfortunately, this impacted on the appearance of the bed during much of the main flowering season. But the bed seems largely to have recovered by the end of the year.

Antisocial dog owners were another problem, with aggressive behaviour by dog owners, dog fouling and dogs let off their leads. As in other years, we are thankful to Crissie Chambers of Canine Culture for her work to encourage more responsible behaviour by dog walkers.

2. Coordination with other groups

While we enjoy good partnership working with the park management organisations, some of the challenges of the past year have highlighted where better communication and closer coordination are needed.

There were difficulties with the access to the yard and water tap being locked during some of our Saturday sessions, meaning that during the hot weather we had to transport water into the gardens. We are grateful to members of the Continental team for opening up the yard and giving us access to water. However, we would appreciate a more sustainable solution to enable us to access the tap more easily.

3. Volunteer numbers

The amount of work we are able to undertake is dependent on the number of volunteers joining the gardening sessions and we are keen to encourage more people to join FQPG.

8. Looking ahead: plans and priorities for 2021

Projects proposed for next year include:

Triangular rose bed

- We have identified a number of gaps in the bed and are working with HCGA to purchase six additional bare-root rose bushes – three David Austin Hyde Hall and three David Austin Gertrude Jekyll – to be planted in early 2021.
- We will continue planting this bed with annuals such as nasturtiums and marigolds, which provide colourful flowers over a long period of the summer and are relatively low maintenance.
- We will consider adding other additional plants to add more variety.
- We will continue to monitor the two winter-flowering cherry trees in the centre of the bed. These seem to be in poor health and could be heading towards the end of their natural lifespan. We will take this forward with HCGA and Westminster Council.

Circular bed

- We will continue to develop this bed, building on the work started in 2019 and 2020, with a mixture of spring bulbs, perennials and low-maintenance annuals to provide long-lasting colour.

Railings bed

- We will work with HCGA to source hardy, low-level plants for this bed, such as sunflowers, which will be grown from seed by HCGA under cover and then transplanted when sturdy enough.

Benches bed

- We will work with HCGA to source and purchase more flowering plants to bring colour to this bed across several seasons. This is a particularly shady bed which limits planting options. Ideas under consideration include aconites for spring, snapdragons, and wild geraniums for ground cover.
- We will work with Westminster Council to establish the viability of planting low-level, low-maintenance shrubs, taking account of health and safety requirements (the previous shrubs were cut down to improve visibility following antisocial behaviour). Suggestions include skimmias, viburnum, hellebores and camellias, all of which are winter flowering.

Wildlife Area

- Continue to maintain and enhance the Wildlife Area.
- Laying woodchip on the path: this is something we normally do annually. The path has become very muddy and slippery. We are working with HCGA to source woodchip.
- Bug hotel: rebuild the bug hotel; this will require sourcing of pallets and other materials, and drilling holes for bugs to nest.
- Wildflower meadow: continue to work on encouraging a greater diversity of wildflowers to take root and reduce the amount of grass, with a focus on bee-friendly natives. Working with HCGA, we have identified a range of wildflowers we would like to grow, with a mix of seeds sown directly into the ground, seedlings grown from seed by HCGA in greenhouse conditions and plants transplanted from other parts of the garden.
- Wildflower meadow sign: arrange with Westminster Council for the sign to be relocated to the edge of the wildflower meadow. At present, it is down by the side of the boardwalk.
- Compost bins: the wooden planks that box in the compost heaps are rotting and need to be replaced. We will need to work with Westminster Council for this.

Special events

- We hope that circumstance will enable us to take part in the QPCC Summer and Winter Festivals once again, following the cancellation of these events in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Environmentally sustainable practices

- Continue to increase the number of bee-friendly flowers and plants in the gardens.
- Water bottles: to aid in cleaning up the environment, we have decided to stop providing water in plastic containers. Alternatives include asking volunteers to bring refillable water bottles, or purchasing two refillable water bottles to take to each gardening session (bottles will need to be sterilised before each session). Hopefully the refurbished hut will provide a longer-term solution with access to drinkable water.
- Paper: we already use very little paper other than for notices; to further reduce paper use, we will print these on both sides.
- Prizes at Summer Festival: as in recent years, we will give fresh fruit such as strawberries and grapes as the prizes for winners of the nature treasure hunt, rather than anything plastic wrapped.

Volunteer recruitment

- We will continue to search for new volunteers to assist both with gardening and with administrative tasks, supported by social media and direct communications with local residents.