

Our environment matters
Our community matters
Our wildlife matters

We do an awful lot of good things – not for the publicity, not to ‘be seen’ doing the right thing but because it is simply the right thing to do. Lots of our activities take place ‘behind the scenes’ so this booklet becomes an opportunity for us to communicate with our staff and our supporters just how fully we are prepared to step up, dig deep and get involved.

We like to think that seeing a list of our contributions all in one place can perhaps inspire us to look at further ways of improving ourselves. If you spot a gap – something we already do but forgot to mention or even better, an opportunity for us to do even more, don’t hold back. Contact Steve by email Steve@thegardensgroup.co.uk to share your thoughts.



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COMMUNITY

Working with schools

Visits IN

Throughout the year we receive many visits from groups of school children. The majority of these are arranged for younger children who will split into groups. Each group will have a tour of the site looking at plants that are topical to their curriculum activities such as the sensory garden plants and herbs. They will also be helped to plant up a 10 litre pot with bedding plants to take home with them. Each pot has a label for them to write their name on and our logo to remind parents where they can get additional care information if required.



We also receive visits from older students fulfilling various curriculum projects and we make a point of welcoming these and assisting in any way we can. A great example of this is the annual loan of our restaurant in Yeovil to the catering Department of Yeovil College. The students take over for a day as they prepare meals and serve customers (including lots of their family members) in a real working environment.

Visits OUT

We are frequently invited to visit schools to offer support with garden projects. Wildlife and sensory gardens are top of the list with raised vegetable plots a close third. All of these projects are granted a fixed 25% discount plus as many other resources as we can give including split bags of compost and plants that have fallen below retail standard.

We also provide growing competitions and support with activities such as business 'speed dating' activities where young people are able to get a picture of many possible career options in 5 minute bursts.

In addition to this we are able to run short educational sessions on moths, followed by the overnight loan of a moth trap and a return visit to help identify the species captured.

As part of our huge commitment to Sherborne in Bloom we support an annual event with The Gryphon School which sees a number of small groups of students accompanied by a teacher linking up with members of garden centre staff. Each team will work on a dedicated area of the town to plant it up and enhance its appearance before the summer. These areas appear to benefit from greatly reduced levels of vandalism as local young people feel a degree of ownership towards them.

Teacher Support

Following on from last year's success, our 2017 spring forum will be focussing on bringing school teachers and their local gardening clubs into closer proximity and investigating how they can best help one another.

Gold Club Schools

Currently under development, we are hoping to bring all of our school related activities together under a single banner. In addition to the current provisions we aim to offer newsletters at the start of each half term, to offer regular growing competitions with prizes and an award ceremony, a seasonal discount cards (covering children's tools, herbs, seeds and seed trays, hardy plants) for the school or possibly month by month vouchers for school projects, seasonal vouchers for school children's personal use and FREE advice visits twice a year.

Working with local clubs and societies

The Gold Club

Corporate members of our Gold Club benefit from free talks at their meetings, selecting from a list of 60 topics which are expanded every year. They also benefit from a number of discounts as well as special shopping events when the garden centre opens for an evening exclusively for a group who will enjoy a short talk, free hot drink and 25% off any purchases made during the evening.

Another popular benefit to the groups comes in the form of growing competitions. Traditionally we would provide materials for a potato growing competition and a spring bedding plant competition. Recently the potato has been swapped for a daffodil and the clubs are encouraged to recycle their competition entries by planting them in a community space for all to enjoy in the future.

As a further benefit to Gold Club members we produce all of their show stationary free of charge.

The Gold Club has also begun to host a series of **annual forums**. The inaugural topic in 2016 was aimed at supporting annual shows. With over 125 attendees and a panel including professional judges, significant local competitors and a speaker from the Royal Horticultural Society the event was deemed a great success and a follow up meeting requested for the end of the show season to review the impact. Topics covered included attracting new entrants, finding judges and much more. The event attracted comments and support at a national level and featured in national media. Our website now hosts a page where all of the notes and presentations can be accessed alongside an online forum for subsequent discussions of the different proposals.

Finding a local gardening club online becomes much easier with the tool we have developed through our website. We now host a Google map displaying pins for all of our member gardening clubs and societies. Clicking on the pin reveals information about meeting times/dates and venues alongside contact telephone numbers and/or email addresses for the group.

Our speakers are often called on to act as judges for growing competitions and annual shows.

Talks to other groups

We also provide a speaker to a number of other community groups, whose charitable status makes us disinclined to charge a fee. These tend not to be hard core gardeners but often groups of people with illnesses or disabilities that may be helped a little by the therapeutic nature of gardening.

Space to meet

We are able to offer our Butterfly House to local groups as a free venue for a wide range of activities. It is popular with art exhibitions, business breakfasts and award ceremonies. A dedicated member of staff looks out for charities who may wish to use this space a venue for fundraising activities.

Our Engine Room Restaurant plays a similar role, hosting regular displays from local artists as well as local community meetings such as those of the Poundbury Residents Society.

In Yeovil we are pleased to host and supply speakers for regular meetings of **Yeovil Allotment Society**, as well as hosting their annual Horticultural Show.

With a huge range of foods prepared to cater for specific dietary requirements, it is no surprise that we have developed close links with the coeliac community. Our Apple Tree Farm Shop and Restaurant at Brimsmore Gardens host regular meetings for the Dorchester branch of **Coeliac UK**. We also host a monthly knitting circle and a book club.

Literary Societies

We support Yeovil Literary Festival and Sherborne Literary Festival every year by sponsoring one of the speakers as well as offering our restaurants as a venue. Our speakers for these events have included

Jo Swift, Chris Beardshaw, Carol Klein and Toby Buckland with Monty Don already booked for next season.

Birthday presents

As part of our birthday celebrations in 2017 we invited school and community groups to apply for a range of give-aways. These include lots of trees, gardening kits and vouchers toward community projects.

Working with media

We are frequently able to support local publications such as event schedules and show programmes with a paid for advert. In addition we support the local radio station with gardening related articles and the local newspaper with both gardening articles and regular recipes from our chefs.

Working with local business

In addition to providing a committee member for the local Chamber of Commerce, we make a point of sourcing locally wherever possible. This includes day to day items such as stationary and DIY supplies as well as technical support with local tradespeople and IT support.

We have very close links with local traders and we regularly collect used packaging boxes from some of these to be recycled at our tills as packaging for customers plants.

Another close business link we have is with a local independent book shop. Winstone Books arrange high profile speakers for evening talks and book signings. We are pleased to provide them with a venue for these events and to promote them to our customers - it creates a fantastic 'feel good' factor.

Working with the public

Throughout the year we run a series of free events aimed at encouraging young people's interest in wildlife and gardening, however the highlight of the year (for staff as well) is our annual summer party which attracts a lot of young people for a themed fancy dress event.

Our Spring and Summer/Autumn series of free talks are very well attended. These are mostly developed by members of staff on a gardening theme, with occasional guests speakers to bring in expertise from related fields such as bats, bees and other wildlife orientated areas of interest.

Charity collection stands are a regular feature of the garden centres. We regularly welcome manned displays from Dorset Wildlife Trust, The Woodlands Trust, RSPB and others.

Gardens Group gift tokens are sold with a greetings card. With between 4 and 8 designs in use at any time, we regularly change the images used. Our images are typically photographs, and all are locally created by staff and customers.

Charitable Donations

We are able to support many local fundraising activities and events by way of donating a voucher to be raffled off. Last year we recorded more than 130 such donations. Events that receive this support often get a mention on our Facebook or twitter feed to further help promote them.

Our recently launched 'What's on guide' aims to promote both garden centre events and local community events that we are supporting.

Christmas in the community

Whilst the build up to the festive season is a particularly busy time in the garden centres it also brings the opportunity to support the wider community.

This year we are pleased to again donate a quantity of decorations to the childrens ward at Yeovil Hospital, and a fresh Christmas tree to a Yeovil nursing home.

Each year a local church holds a **Christmas Tree Festival** whereby around 40 local groups each decorate a small Christmas tree. Collections for charity are made at the entrance as well as by each organisation at their decorated tree. In recognition of this fantastic show of cooperation within the local community we supply these trees free of charge, fixing each into a stand, and collect them for shredding after the festival.

Sherborne Abbey boasts an enormous fresh Christmas Tree every year and we are delighted to contribute all of the labour required to get it standing upright (no mean feat!) and suitably decorated with the many metres of lights that this requires.

Other churches benefit from our free loans of plants and Christmas tree stands, particularly over the Christmas periods.

Each year we team up with the **Weldmar Hospicecare Trust**. Poundbury Gardens create a magical grotto within their Christmas display where volunteers from Weldmar raise money through visits to Father Christmas. We also host a Light Up A Life ceremony on their behalf at Castle Gardens.

In 2016 we were pleased to also support a student from Yeovil College with his design project. By supplying a Christmas tree and lights as well as a prominent display space, Craig was able to demonstrate his device that allows the public to change the colour of the lights on the tree by directly Tweeting it!

Our farm shop also gets in on the giving, with discussions currently underway regarding support for Lord's Larder and other organisations providing Christmas Dinners to homeless people.

The Green Shed

This is one of our proudest opportunities to support a local community group. Adults with learning difficulties are supported in a workplace environment. Their community recycling projects include the conversion of our unwanted wooden packaging and converting it into kindling which the garden centre purchases to retail. This project at The Whitehouse Centre was under threat of closure until Castle Gardens offered them a new home on our site and helped them to secure ongoing funding.



Sherborne in Bloom

In addition to the Gryphon School projects day, director Louise Burks stands as horticultural advisor to the committee and dedicates many hours to ensuring the success of each year's efforts.

Yeovil in Bloom

Litter Pickers

We are proud of the efforts of Sherborne volunteer litter pickers and to show our appreciation we provide them with vouchers for a free hot drink to help them relax after doing their bit for the community.



ENVIRONMENT

Environmental Policy

We are very conscious of the ability of every gardener to make a positive contribution to the local environment as well as the ease with which we as gardeners and consumers can have a detrimental effect. Our environmental policy is available on our website and a printed copy is displayed at least once at each site. Our goal is to gently lead and support our customers, offering examples of 'best practise' and the guidance of knowledgeable, well-trained staff to encourage the most positive techniques and products. We believe this is a more effective approach, supporting the national trend towards more conscientious gardening.

Of course, it is critical that we practise what we preach! Look out for our maturing tapestry lawn this summer as well as our demonstration organic vegetable plots. Not forgetting our the restaurant's own garden at Castle Gardens where the staff grow herbs and other produce in planters strategically placed throughout our outdoor seating area.

Renewable resources

At Castle Gardens we have installed **air source heat pumps** to warm our Butterfly House lecture theatre. Our next target is to use our water resources better. A Victorian sump runs through our site and extracts the majority of our rainwater. We hope to be able to recycle this water, distributing it through our irrigation system to keep our plants happy in dry weather.

Brimsmore Gardens are particularly proud of their recently installed biomass heating system and solar panels, whilst Poundbury Gardens boasts a huge subterranean water tank which collects water from all of our roof space to be reused throughout the site.

Our tree planting service used to use a peat based multi-purpose compost. As we became increasingly aware of the issues arising from peat production we took the decision to move toward using an **organic, peat free planting** medium wherever possible.

Alongside our regular multi-purpose compost '3 bags for £12' deal, we aim to have a permanent special offer on at least one peat free growing medium throughout the year. Nature's Haven peat free compost is on display in a prominent position amongst our compost ranges.

Recycling

We have an excellent relationship with the recycling firm Perry's, going so far as sending staff to visit their site to understand how all of our waste products are recycled and reused.

We also offer an unusual recycling opportunity to our customers. Plastic pots are difficult to recycle using traditional schemes, however we encourage our customers to deposit their used plastic pots in a crate at the bottom of our car park. Periodically we can send the unusable **plastic pots for recycling** but we additionally encourage our customers to rummage through the pot collections and take any that they can reuse directly – a great saving on the energy required to turn the old pots back into usable material.



Hand in hand with recycling is the issue of litter. **Sherborne Litter Pickers** are a community group that self-organises. We take appreciate their efforts to keep our local environment clean and safe, so we provide each of them with vouchers for free hot drinks as a gesture of gratitude.

Recycled Christmas

Our Christmas displays attract visitors from across a large area. Within our displays we have a series of themed 'rooms' and one theme that we will repeat from year to year (although looking very different each time) is that of 'recycled Christmas'. We offer a range of decorations and gifts that have been created from recycled or upcycled materials, as well as lots of items that have been hand made by skilled local artists including some of our own staff.

Christmas tree recycling is also part of our promise. Any tree purchased from us can not only be delivered for free, we will also collect it for free after Christmas. We shred these trees and use the mulch – no extra fuel miles required.

Free delivery

Within the scope of our free delivery are a couple of big environmental assets. Some of our customers phone an order to use directly rather than visit in person – this saves their fuel consumption. By delivering to several destinations within an area we use far less fuel than individual trips to the garden centre would consume. This becomes particularly efficient in January and February as more than 100 garden clubs that belong to our Gold Club offer each of their members the opportunity to fill out a pre-season compost order form. These are special orders at a discounted price allowing us to deliver a season's worth of compost to any given village in one very efficient trip.

Packaging

A big source of waste for many companies, packaging is important to us. At our tills we offer cardboard boxes that have been repurposed from goods delivered to us. We also receive used boxes from other local businesses to be reused in the same way. We have ethically produced jute 'bags for life' and we also supply sturdy take-away style paper bags made from recycled paper.

Wooden packaging, especially in the form of pallets, is welcome at Castle Gardens. Any material of this sort is recycled by **The Green Shed** and the resulting products are sold back to the garden centre.

Educating our customers

In addition to our peat policy, FSC timber policy and overall environmental policy available on our website, we have a huge range of factsheets to help our customers get the most from their gardening experiences. Within those leaflets we aim to share the best advice, always offering the most environmentally and wildlife friendly techniques alongside traditional answers as long as the traditional methods remain appropriate. Topics include organic gardening advice, companion planting tips and rethinking your lawn.

Many of our free talks to our customers in the spring and summer seasons contain an element of environmental 'best practice' advice. Recently this has included help determining if an insect is 'friend or foe' and chemical free ways to deal with the foes.

Our speakers include a strong environmental message in a number of the talks we deliver to clubs and societies. These include Gardening for climate change, Pest and disease control and Organic gardening.

A new set of displays have been planned for this year focussing on our suppliers of environmentally friendly gardening products. Our customers can expect to see lots of encouraging material, particularly from Agralan and Neudorff.

Educating our staff

Hand in hand with getting the message through to our customers is the process of making sure our staff are well informed. This is an ongoing process, a recent example being 5 vegetable plots being handed over to members of staff at Castle Gardens. These are highly visible in the front car park and they will be totally organic. Our new plot holders include team members who are new to gardening. Part of the exercise for them is to chart their learning curves through Facebook and in store anecdotes, as they research and discover everything they can about chemical free methods of controlling any pests or problems that they might expect to encounter in their veg plots. By sharing their experiences through social media and in store we expect that our customers will also benefit.

At Poundbury Gardens we have managed to go a step further with '**Plot 33**'. A new member of staff who considered herself a 'non-gardener' now has a traditional allotment near the garden centre. She is learning about fruit and veg growing with a wonderful enthusiasm and sharing her discoveries through as many channels as possible, including a series of short videos. The support of other gardeners within the allotment area has been wonderful.

Local purchasing

Our policy of sourcing as much as possible locally is not just aimed at supporting our local community. We also help to reduce fuel miles when we buy locally grown food and plants or locally made products.

WILDLIFE

We are passionate about encouraging wildlife in the local area and we have so much to share. Our Facebook and Twitter accounts are a good source of evidence for this as we often post pictures of our 'little discoveries'. We have had one or two rarities and surprises, including a daytime visit from a stoat to a section of our dry stone wall.



In the Garden Centres

For a number of years we have sown an **annual wildflower meadow** in at least one of our car parks – great tool for promoting biodiversity and a huge magnet for pollinating insects.

We run a regular **moth trap**, with moths being released the following morning unharmed after identification. This is a lovely tool to monitor the health of the local populations, as well as a great discussion piece and inspiration to younger gardeners. We also lend this kit out overnight to local schools with a 'Steve' to run an educational session before hand and an identification session the following day.

We like to **demonstrate methods** of gardening that don't involve chemicals or other techniques that can be damaging to local wildlife. This year we have 5 organic vegetable plots being managed in our front car park at Castle Gardens.

Another great demonstration tool is in our '**wildlife alley**' at Castle Gardens – a space that we have started to develop to educate and inspire our customers. Our insect hotel is designed to look attractive as well as be very functional – with thanks to the children who visited at half term to help build it!

Also under development is our **encounters board**. We are starting to build a species list of wildlife that we spot throughout 2the year and as soon as we have a healthy looking list it will go on display and continue to be added to across the seasons.

Tapestry (grass-free) lawns are a great wildlife and environmental feature. With less mowing and more plant species there is so much to gain. We have invited members of our Gold Club to help us grow the different parts of the lawn, ready for assembly in Sherborne this summer. Additional details can be found on our website and at the end of this document.

Events to inspire – each year we like to run holiday events and activities. These always include an animal themed day such as Hedgehog Day which helps to inspire the next generation of gardeners to look out for the wildlife around them. Relevant charity groups are usually involved and the opportunity to handle the subjects makes for a very exciting visit. Owl Days and Birds of Prey visits are also very popular.

The prize winner of a competition during one of our February events has won a 6ft high insect hotel to be installed in the wildlife area at her school.

FREE talks to the public. Our talk season runs January – March and August – October. Within the gardening themes our speakers (plus an occasional guest speaker) love to emphasise the benefits of gardening for wildlife.

As part of our birthday celebrations in 2017 we invited school and community groups to apply for a range of give-aways. These include lots of trees, gardening kits and vouchers toward community projects.

The 2017 birthday celebration also provided a thrilling opportunity to arrange a visit from our good friends at Dorset Wildlife Trust to run a **Bioblitz** at Castle Gardens. A concentrated event aimed at finding and recording as much as possible of the biodiversity around the site.

Our good friends the Dorset Wildlife Trust hold an annual **wildlife friendly gardening competition**. It is a source of great pride that we are invited to support them with judges and to host the award ceremony each year.

As Poundbury developed, our garden centre was created in the original buildings of Poundbury Farm. Prince Charles was very anxious that we work to preserve the large area of lichen growths on the front of the barn that eventually became our shop.

Online

Our factsheets include many wildlife gardening tips but we also have a range of factsheets that are specifically aimed at gardening with wildlife in mind. Look out for 'creating a wildlife garden' and 'welcoming birds' amongst others.

We also include a lot of wildlife gardening orientated information with our newsletter to **The Gold Club**. A recent 'Stock Pot' article was entirely dedicated to our top tips for creating a wildlife friendly garden.

Out and about

Among the 60 talk subjects we currently offer to the corporate members of **The Gold Club** there are few subjects that lack some aspect of wildlife friendly advice. Subjects that specifically target wildlife friendly projects include titles like 'gardening for bees and butterflies'.

Schools often invite us to help them with their wildlife areas. We are usually able to assist with advice visits, shopping trips to the garden centre, discounted plants and even free plants and compost.



What is a tapestry lawn?

Also known as a freedom lawn or a grass-free lawn, the tapestry lawn is a beautiful, environmentally friendly alternative to traditional grass lawns. A mixture of lowing growing species are grown together to form a diverse sward that benefits from light footfall.

These lawns need no fertilising, much less mowing (although it will need a chop several times a year so you can't do away with that lawnmower just yet!) and a little attention to detail as the occasional few blades of grass will have to be weeded out!

Why grass free?

The monoculture of a traditional grass lawn is high maintenance and not very beneficial to pollinators or the environment. The tapestry lawn reverses this and is being increasingly adopted by parks and other public spaces in the UK.

How to start

Research the species that you wish to introduce to start your new lawn. For success you will need a minimum of 12 varieties but the more you can include the better.

Establish your new plants in seed trays, with a single variety in each tray. These will have a nice density and effectively prevent light from reaching the ground beneath them when planted.

Remove the existing surface layer of the area you intend to convert – this is often turf – wherever possible. This will take off both nutrients and weed seeds.

Lay your blocks of plants out, directly from the seed trays, in as mixed a fashion as you can. Some species may not thrive and this mosaic pattern will help to minimise any early bare patches.

Although your lawn will not normally require watering, don't forget to water at least twice during the first week or two to help your new lawn plants establish themselves.

Maintaining your lawn

Mowing is important. If your lawn is not mown occasionally the taller and more vigorous species will start to dominate and you could end up with something closer to a meadow than a lawn.

Cut down to approximately 5cm and allow the lawn to grow no higher than 9cm. This will happen more frequently in the first couple of years but eventually you can expect to be mowing your lawn as little as 3-5 times a year. This will vary slightly for everybody and your choice of species will influence this.

Yes, you will cut off all of the flowers. Bear in mind that for every hundred blooms that are mown off there will be hundreds more before long.

Use a lawnmower that will remove the clippings in order to prevent the build-up of a thatch which can adversely affect the flowering species of your lawn.

There is no need to fertilise as clover and other legumes will be fixing sufficient nitrogen to keep your green space looking marvellous.

Weeding – a few of your local weed species may introduce themselves to your lawn – if they integrate well then consider them welcome. Do remove any grasses as they make themselves known – they are easiest to spot in the spring as they tend to get moving faster and grow higher than the surrounding sward.

Which species will suit my tapestry?

Most low growing plants that spread by rhizomes or runners will work, including a lot of British native species. Some experimental lawns in the UK are trialling up to 70 different species. More information can be found online but to get you started we would like to suggest the following...

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| • Purple Bidibidi | <i>Acaena inermis</i> |
| • Yarrow | <i>Achillea millefolium</i> |
| • Bugle | <i>Ajuga reptans</i> |
| • Bellis daisy | <i>Bellis perennis</i> |
| • Chamomile | <i>Chamaemelum nobile</i> |
| • Ground Ivy | <i>Glechoma hederacea</i> |
| • Bachelors Buttons | <i>Leptinella dioica</i> |
| • Matted pratia | <i>Lobelia pedunculata</i> |
| • Creeping Jenny | <i>Lysimachia nummularia</i> |
| • Mouse-ear Hawkweed | <i>Pilosella officinarum</i> |
| • Creeping Buttercup | <i>Ranunculus repens</i> |
| • White Clover | <i>Trifolium repens</i> |
| • Germander Speedwell | <i>Veronica chamaedrys</i> |
| • Sweet Violet | <i>Viola odorata</i> |