**Garden Volunteers Handbook: Garden Volunteering in the Sheffield Botanical Gardens**

**Welcome and background**

Welcome to the Friends of the Sheffield Botanical Gardens (FOBS) Gardens Volunteers Team. FOBS celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2024 and was established in 1984 with the twin objectives:

* To support the maintenance, improvement and promotion of Sheffield Botanical Gardens
* To advance the horticultural education of the people of Sheffield and surrounding areas.

We are very happy that you have chosen to volunteer with us and this handbook is designed to give you more information about your role and how it all works together. Volunteering in the Sheffield Botanical Gardens (SBG) is a partnership activity with the Parks and Countryside Service of Sheffield City Council, who have management responsibility for the site which is owned by the Sheffield Town Trust.

In the early 2000s the SBG underwent a significant restoration funded through the Heritage Lottery Fund, and this successful programme was underpinned by a partnership which still exists today, with the exception of the University of Sheffield. Partners aim to help support and deliver Botanical Gardens services including the maintenance, management and development of the landscape, plant collections and hard infrastructure. The partnership consists of:

* Sheffield City Council Parks and Countryside Service
* Friends of the Sheffield Botanical Gardens
* The Sheffield Botanical Gardens Trust
* The Sheffield Town Trust.

**General description**

SBG is a 19-acre site opened in 1836 and designed by the famous Victorian landscape and garden designer Robert Marnock[[1]](#footnote-1) (1800-1899). The Gardens are listed Grade 2 by English Heritage due to the preservation of much of the original design, and the concentration of historical listed buildings and structures e.g the Pavilions are Grade 2\* listed.

The Gardens house the Glass Pavilions which are some of the earliest curvilinear glass structures ever built. The site a popular open space with strong botanical and horticultural interest including a number of specialist plant collections. Entry is free and there is no charge except for certain events.

In addition to operating the Gardens volunteer programme FOBS operates a range of support programmes including the talks, lectures, educational and training sessions, tours and trips to gardens and specialist nurseries.

**Being a Garden Volunteer**

. We hope that garden volunteering with FOBS will give you the opportunity to:

* Help out with the basic maintenance of the Garden’s plant collections. This will include tasks such as weeding, pruning, dead heading, and general tidying.
* Help with other tasks such as planting, propagation, helping plant sales and potentially Gardens tours.
* Meet others and make new friends.
* Spend time outdoors in a beautiful location.
* Use your horticultural skills and learn new ones.
* Have the satisfaction of knowing you are keeping the Gardens beautiful and maintaining the plant collections to the highest horticultural standards.

Before becoming a garden volunteer, you will need to attend a health and safety session led by a Health and Safety Officer from the Parks and Countryside Service of the City Council. A member of the FOBS executive will also take part in the session. You should note that for insurance purposes it is mandatory for all volunteers to register and attend these sessions before they can become a garden volunteer. Volunteers will be asked to give some personal details and sign off that they have attended and understood the session.

This session is also aimed to make you feel welcome, give an induction as to how FOBS and the Parks and Countryside Service work together in respect of garden volunteers, and your role in that.

**Volunteering sessions**Volunteering sessions take place on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday from 1000-1200 operating in different parts of the Gardens. Most volunteers attend just one of these sessions where they become part of the local ‘teams.’ working alongside other volunteers and sometimes Gardens staff. If in doubt about any work which you may be asked to undertake always eek support and clarification

**Code of conduct best practice.**

**A commitment to equal opportunity**

* There is a commitment to the principle of equal opportunity for all irrespective of race, religion, gender, language, disability, or family background, and to the active support of initiatives designed to support this principle.
* All volunteers are responsible for ensuring that this policy is implemented. Equal opportunity means that discrimination on the basis of race, religion, disability or family background is not acceptable.
* Treat others with dignity and respect.

We aim to ensure that all people who participate in volunteering with FOBS are given equal opportunity to participate in these activities in a supportive environment

**In line with best practice garden volunteers are also expected to:**

* Wear appropriate clothing and stout footwear.
* Wear a garden volunteer hi vis waistcoat at all times whilst working.
* Sign the attendance sheet at the start and finish of the volunteer session.
* Collect tools and equipment such as wheelbarrows and take safely to the work site and return them cleaned after the work session to the tool shed.
* Report any losses/damage of tools to a member of the Gardens staff.
* Gloves, secateurs and hand forks are not provided and volunteers should bring their own.
* .Keep the worksite in safe and tidy condition at all times.
* Leave bags of rubbish safely at the side of the path for Gardens staff to move ensuring the bags are not too heavy to lift.
* To volunteer reliably and to the best of their ability
* Follow instructions and advice from experienced Gardens volunteers and notably that from Gardens staff.
* Volunteers should only undertake work allocated to them.

**Health and Safety.**

* All volunteers must follow any health and safety instructions and training as they received it at their initial health and safety induction, and as instructed by members of the Gardens staff. This is especially when using any work tools or items of equipment.
* Have constant regard to the health and safety of yourself, other volunteers and members of the public at all times.
* Report to the ‘lead volunteer’ or a member of the Gardens staff any concerns around health and safety e.g. a tool not working properly or unsafe paths or steps.
* Musculo-skeletal strains are one of the most common injuries associated with gardening. Assess the physical demands of any task before starting and do not carry out jobs outside your physical capabilities.
* All volunteers are recommended to have a tetanus injection and should consult their doctor.
* Remember to cover exposed skin and use protective sun screen and a hat in warm and sunny weather. In hot weather work in the shade and keep well hydrated.
* Similarly, to cover from biting insects and be aware of plants that may sting or cause skin irritation e.g. *Euphorbia* especially in strong sunlight.
* If you have an allergy to bee stings or other insect bites to carry any necessary personal medication at all times.
* Hand washing and toilet facilities are based outside the Dorothy Fox Education Centre.
* Any accidents or injuries should be reported to the Gardens staff and the accident book filled in which is located in the Education and Engagement Officer’s office in the Dorothy Fox Education Centre.
* Risk assessments are completed regarding specific tasks and roles and are regularly reviewed by appropriate people. These can be viewed on the FOBS website for Lone Working, Herbaceous Border Maintenance, Plant Sales and the Nursery Area.

**Emergencies – what to do.**

**Injury/illness**

* If you are injured during your volunteering or start to feel unwell let your colleagues know and a member of Gardens staff if present. There are a number of Emergency First Aiders in the Gardens who can assist you, otherwise call the Gardens Team on **07713 158090.**
* First Aid boxes are located in the kitchen off the Dorothy Fox Education Centre and the Gardens staff mess room. For help or access call the Garden Team for access by ringing **07713158090**. The Dorothy Fox Building should be open Tuesday-Friday (and sporadic Mondays).
* Only give assistance within your capability or for which you are qualified, in an emergency dial 999 and state the appropriate access gate (Clarkehouse Road S10 2LN or Thompson Road S11 8RB.
* Please do not just go home without telling anyone, we are here to support you in your volunteering.

**Aggression/abuse**

* The Gardens are open to the public and therefore if you encounter any aggression or hostility from anyone DO NOT ENGAGE with them, walk away and report the incident to a member of the Gardens staff number **07713158090**. Do not hesitate to call the police (999) if you feel at risk.

**Fire**

* On discovering a fire, sound the alarm and dial 999 to contact the emergency services.
* Inform a member of the Gardens staff.
* If the fire is small in a building (wastepaper bin size) and you feel confident use the correct fire extinguisher to control or put out the fire.
* If you hear the fire alarm and are in a building evacuate and use the nearest available fire exit as quickly and safely as possible.
* Meet at the designated evacuation point.

**Contacts**

* Sheffield Botanical Gardens Team of Sheffield City Council **07713158090**
* Sheffield City Council Parks and Countryside Service **0114 250 0500** and

[parksandcountryside@sheffield.gov.uk](mailto:parksandcountryside@sheffield.gov.uk)

* Chair of FOBS [chairfobs@mail.com](mailto:chairfobs@mail.com)
* FOBS Gardens volunteer coordinator: [FOBS.gardenvolunteer@gmail.com](mailto:fobs.gardenvolunteer@gmail.com)

**Appendix 1: Guide to best practice gardening**

FOBS has been organising gardens volunteer work for many years and indeed many volunteers are experienced and knowledgeable gardeners and plants people. Equally others have very little experience and FOBS welcomes all garden volunteers no matter what their previous experience. Volunteering as a gardener with FOBS is a friendly experience where working with other volunteers and sometimes Gardens staff, enables you to have the chance to ‘grow’ your gardening knowledge, learn new skills and gain new experience.

This guide is aimed at those with little or no experience but it is also hoped that others will find it useful. The object is to give basic advice on matters specifically relating to working in SBG.

With regard to the tasks to be undertaken volunteers are reminded that they must approach all tasks with caution. If the work is too heavy or requires too much bending, it is always up to the individual volunteer to decide whether or not the task is within their capabilities.

1. **Maintenance of herbaceous areas – deadheading and cutting back.**
   1. A great deal of a volunteer’s work is helping to maintain the herbaceous borders as a wide variety of herbaceous perennials are grown and their maintenance is often labour intensive, involving several horticultural techniques. Weeding, planting and mulching are common as is deadheading.
   2. **Deadheading i**nvolves the removal of spent flower heads and whilst this is desirable to prolong and encourage repeat flowering, the task is too great to apply to the whole of the Gardens.
   3. Therefore, deadheading is often selective and advice will be given. Over the last decade or so there has been growing change in attitude and perspective that encourages some plants to be left to develop their fruit and seed, partly to encourage self-seeding and creating spontaneity in borders, but also to provide food for wildlife during the winter, so extending the season of interest when seed heads and fruit can give colour, shape and form during the winter months.
   4. **Cutting back** is an ongoing process throughout much of the growing season and should only be undertaken when specifically instructed. The reasons for cutting back (or not cutting back) vary e.g. to encourage growth, to remove unsightly foliage, to preserve seed heads for birds and other wildlife, or to preserve attractive features such as grasses through the winter. All very akin to reasons for deadheading.
   5. Cutting back should usually be done just above ground level unless it is necessary to indicate the location of plants by leaving a couple of spikes. There is no reason to leave a couple of inches of dead stems which will never regrow.
   6. As usual walked on areas should be lightly forked over ‘tickle’ before leaving the site.
2. **Maintenance of herbaceous areas - weeding.** 
   1. Identification – always ask if unsure. This is especially important in a botanic garden situation where ‘wanted’ plants may self-seed and even create new unknown hybrids, so it is important to always ask if you’re not sure. There is no shame in asking, that’s how we all learn!
   2. Weeding a large patch – wherever practical work from the outside edge of the patch in order to avoid walking on weeds which must later be removed.
   3. Work slowly, carefully and methodically – it is not a rush! Working where plants may grow close together, which itself helps prevent the spread of weeds by denying them bare soil to grow in, means being watchful and taking care as to where you put your feet.
   4. Make sure that all the root is removed- essential for perennial weeds although sometimes difficult.
   5. Try and work with your trug nearby so reducing stretching when depositing the weeds.
   6. Always check under the foliage and remove any weeds which are there – essential.
   7. Try not to let any weeds drop their seeds at any time -remove the seed heads if it is not convenient to remove the weed entirely.
3. **Planting – plants grown in pots.**
   1. Remove all the weeds and surface compost (which may contain weed seeds) from the pot-essential.
   2. Ideally water the pot before removal of the plant.
   3. Dig a hole about half as wide again as the pot (refer also to mulching).
   4. Fork the bottom of the hole. Water the bottom of the hole if the soil is very dry-if practical.
   5. Remove the plant from the pot and gently tease out roots if pot bound.
   6. If badly pot bound and dry soak the potted plant in a bucket of water, and do not remove until air bubbles cease to rise.
   7. Plant at the same depth in the pot unless advised otherwise. Use a cane to lie across the hole to check depth as an aid.
   8. Backfill with soil and firm. In clay soil do not compress too heavily.
   9. Always water the plant in well.
   10. Lightly fork over the site around the whole area before leaving the site.
   11. Note that frosty and waterlogged conditions should be avoided for this work.
4. **Transplanting.**
   1. In dry conditions water the plant to be lifted.
   2. Before lifting, estimate the size of the new hole and excavate. This reduces the amount of time the roots are exposed to the air and therefore at risk if drying out. In warm or sunny weather, they should be covered or placed in the shade and sprayed with water to ensure they do not dry out.
   3. Prepare the planting hole as in 2.3 above.
   4. Lift the plant retaining as much soil as possible around the roots.
   5. Enlarge the planting hole if necessary to accommodate the roots comfortably.
   6. Proceed as in section 2 above except that the plant should be lifted and shaken slightly several times whilst backfilling to help settle the soil around the roots to avoid air pockets.
   7. Reinstate the soil in the hole from which the plant was removed.
   8. Lightly fork the area walked on.
   9. Note that frosty and waterlogged conditions should be avoided for this work.
5. **Mulching.**
   1. This should be preferably be done when the soil is moist- certainly not when dry or frozen. The object is to suppress weeds, retain moisture, help condition the soil and add some nutrients.
   2. Apply the mulch evenly to a depth of around 7cms (2”-3”).
   3. Keep the mulch away from the stems of woody plants in particular otherwise they might be damaged.
   4. Before planting, lifting or transplanting in an area already mulched, remove enough mulch to avoid mixing it with excavated soil. Replace the mulch when the task is completed.
   5. Note that too little depth of mulch may encourage weed growth rather than the reverse.
6. **Pruning**
   1. There are different objectives in pruning and it is not the purpose of this guide to describe them. Methods we adopt in our own gardens may not be appropriate for a botanical garden and many species have their own specialist requirements. [[2]](#footnote-2)
   2. It follows therefore, that pruning should only be undertaken when advice on the method to be adopted has been given by an experienced volunteer or Gardens staff.
   3. One factor however may be of interest. Trees and shrubs and some herbaceous perennials have hormones at their growing tips which inhibit growth lower down their stems and branches. Removal of the growing tip also removes the hormonal inhibition and often results in a profusion of shoots lower down.
   4. This maybe the effect which is required e.g. in hedges or topiary, or to increase the density of a shrub. However, if it is not required, it can be avoided by cutting back to the point of origin of the shoot or the branch. Giving a plant a ‘haircut’ may completely spoil its appearance, hence the need for advice.
7. **Propagation.**
   1. Within the FOBS Gardens Volunteers Group there is a propagation team and it may be possible for volunteers to join this team. The team focusses primarily on growing herbaceous perennials that are growing in the Gardens, and therefore often of interest to members of the public at Gardens plant sales.
   2. Potting up: as well as plant material obtained from SBG some maybe bought in by volunteers from their own Gardens.
   3. Advice will be given on the method of dividing this and the plant sizes required.
   4. Select a pot size which will completely accommodate the plant after a little peat free[[3]](#footnote-3) compost has been placed in the bottom of the pot.
   5. Remove any weeds and the surface compost which maybe mixed with the plant material – essential.
   6. Put a little compost in the bottom of the pot, place the plant material in the pot and dribble compost around the roots – shake the plant to remove any air pockets
   7. Continue to fill the pot with compost, lightly firming ti until the planting is completed.
   8. The plant should be at the same level in the pot as it was in the ground and space should be left in the pot for watering.
   9. Never squash a plant into a pot which is too small for it. Water well and transfer and label.
8. **Site considerations**
   1. Always leave a site tidy and free from hazards.
   2. Do not undertake a task unless there is time to complete it.
   3. Ensure that all tools are taken back to the tool shed and cleaned before being put back.
   4. Place plant debris in the large bags provided and MAKE sure the bags can be lifted onto the vehicle by one member of the Gardens staff. Test the weight frequently.
   5. Do not include woody items which should be left to one side.
   6. Sweep paths and grass verges before leaving.

**FOBS executive April 15th 2024**

1. <https://www.sbg.org.uk/celebrating-marnock/introduction-to-marnock>

   <https://www.sbg.org.uk/news/blue-plaque-for-robert-marnock> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/beginners-guide/pruning-plants> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.rhs.org.uk/soil-composts-mulches/peat-free> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)