

Penny Snell

The vast majority of gardeners will have heard of the National Gardens Scheme and their iconic publication, *The Yellow Book* – a directory of about 3,500 gardens throughout England and Wales that are open to the public. Incorporating everything from the grandest stately landscapes (the Queen opens hers) through old rectories and cosy cottages to tiny backyards in the middle of cities. The whole project is kept on the rails by a finely oiled network of organisers. Every county has a bevy of hard-working coordinators rushing around finding and vetting new gardens, tactfully winnowing out those that are not quite good enough yet and

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encouraging successful gardeners on to bigger and better things. At the top of this many-branched tree is Penny Snell, the current chairman.

Thirty years ago Penny was living in North London and helping out on the Islington Gardens Committee. “Somebody casually asked me to help out with the NGS and before I knew it I was the London organiser,” she remembers. She held the position for 30 years, during which time the number of gardens open rose from just 30 to more than 250. She took over the chairmanship about a year ago and, in spite of an inauspicious start – she broke her hip in the snow – is working hard to increase the number of gardens.

In addition to her duties as chairman, Penny runs her own floristry business and organises monthly lectures at her home near Wisley in Surrey. She trained with Constance Spry in London. “I loved her free-flowing style, although when we went off to do work for clients we still had to dress very smartly – and wear hats.” Penny

Being at the helm of the NGS, which opens thousands of gardens a year, requires boundless enthusiasm and charm

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPH CHARLIE HOPKINSON

then set up her own business and was responsible for the flowers at the Victoria and Albert Museum for years.

Nowadays her job is to travel around the country supporting her NGS organisers and seeing as many of the participating gardens as possible. “The gardens are selected according to various criteria. We look for evidence of good design, horticultural interest, a high standard of maintenance and, most importantly, nice owners who

will welcome visitors and who are happy to chat and answer questions. Some of the gardens I love, others not so much, but we are always careful not to let our personal tastes influence the selection.” There are also more mundane considerations, like parking and access. “In London and other cities it’s particularly tricky because the gardens are smaller, so we try to group nearby gardens to open on the same day.” Naturally Penny opens her own one-acre garden every year. “I have lots of topiary but I keep replanting the borders.” She also has beehives, chickens and a remarkably fine “high-maintenance” avenue of whitebeams. “Thankfully I have a wonderful gardener called Andrew who helps out: I do whatever he says.”

The motivation behind all this activity is primarily to raise money for charity. The National Gardens Scheme was the brainchild of Elsie Wagg, who in 1927 wanted to raise money for the Queen’s Nursing Institute (which provided District Nurses before the

creation of the NHS). That first year 609 gardens raised £8,000 and the scheme has gone from strength to strength ever since. Today the NGS raises in the region of £2.5 million every year, which is divided between eight worthy charities. As Penny explains, “It really is a perfect win-win situation. The charities need to raise money (the NGS is Macmillan Cancer Support’s biggest single donor), some people want to show off their gardens, other people want to see gardens. This way everybody is happy.”

We can’t really talk about the NGS without mentioning cakes: it wouldn’t be natural. “Obviously the teas are a big draw. Some people head straight for the cakes!” The plant stalls are also extremely popular – rightly so, as you will almost always come across plants that you’ll never find in most garden centres. “We’re always looking for new ways to attract people into the garden: this year I entertained visitors with a jazz band. I also scatter toffees around the garden for children to find.”

Penny is one of those irrepensible and indefatigable Englishwomen without whom many of our national institutions would grind to a halt: charming, persuasive, energetic and always busy. The National Gardens Scheme is in good hands. □

• More details about the National Gardens Scheme and a listing of open gardens can be found at www.ngs.org.uk. Alternatively you can buy *The Yellow Book 2010*, £8.99, ISBN 978-1905942138. (See issue 158 page 16 for details of our reader discount.)

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