

# Changing society

The RHS is evolving at a faster pace than ever before. How is Sue Biggs, Director General, inspiring the Society – and the nation – to grow?

Author: **James Alexander-Sinclair**, garden designer and member of RHS Council.  
Photography: **Paul Debois**

In the *Return of Sherlock Holmes* our hero wakes Watson in the middle of the night. 'Come, Watson, come!' he cries. 'The game is afoot.' The same could be said of the Royal Horticultural Society. There are all sorts of things going on – those who have been to any of the four RHS Gardens recently (or read this magazine over the last year or so) do not need to be as perspicacious as Sherlock Holmes to have noticed that there are diggers and people in hi-viz vests cluttering up some of the usually peaceful pathways. There are gaps where buildings once stood and new shiny edifices are popping up in their place.

So what exactly is going on? It is not just at RHS Garden Wisley – there has been change happening at Harlow Carr, Hyde Hall, Rosemoor and, of course, at Bridgewater in Salford where the Society's new fifth garden is under development. It seems that after a couple of centuries of stately progress the RHS has gone into overdrive. This is a process that began in 2014 with a plan to spend £27 million and since then has escalated into a massive programme with a £160 million budget – much of which needs to be funded by donations – and radical change all over the place.



## Sharing our knowledge

The question is, of course, 'why'? It seemed sensible to seek this answer straight from Sue Biggs, RHS Director General, who has been the driving force behind this initiative. We began by talking about Wisley where there is to be a new Welcome Building opening next March. This seems eminently sensible, as it was decidedly difficult to get more than a million visitors a year through the original entrance. 'There will be an amazing avenue of flowering cherries and a new garden designed by Christopher Bradley-Hole,' says Sue. 'It also gives us the chance to build a new restaurant and shop with a fantastic plant centre.' This will not be the same as most garden centres >>

**RHS Director General Sue Biggs talks to James Alexander-Sinclair.**



as, in line with the RHS Horticulture Matters campaign, it will promote the work of smaller British nurseries and stock a good selection of rare and unusual plants.

The next stage will be a new, modern building on the site of the old glasshouse range (up the top, past the Bowes-Lyon Rose Garden) which will be the new home of RHS science. A great zinc-roofed, glass-fronted building full of light sitting on top of the hill in the middle of an historic landscape is not only a challenge architecturally but also financially. Surely we should be spending less money on buildings and more on gardens? Sue is confident that it is the right time to invest in the work this building will be home to – namely science.

Science is an area of the charity's work that may seem more opaque than simply building a new entrance. What are our scientists doing to deserve such a shiny and expensive building? Currently they work in The Laboratory, an undoubtedly beautiful listed building, but picturesque surroundings do not necessarily make for good scientific conditions. 'The new building will provide state-of-the-art facilities for our horticultural scientists,' says Sue. In short, the RHS will be creating the first National Centre for Horticultural Science and Learning. At a time when new pests and diseases are continuing to challenge many gardeners and professional growers, the time is right to be supporting the better understanding – and importantly the sharing – of such knowledge. Many millions of people across the globe have taken advantage of this knowledge. Through personal enquiries, the website, books and via social media, gardeners benefit from RHS research into soil science, climate change, entomology, pests and diseases. Researchers will be able to consult the extensive Herbarium (which is being digitised to make it even more widely available) and visitors can browse the library or admire the diverse art collection – which not only needs preserving, but also enables people to learn from the vast wealth of RHS resources.

**Bedding in design**

Not all of the changes will be that visible to visitors, especially as most of them will have come here to see plants and gardens, not buildings and cafés.

'Rest assured,' says Sue, 'that all of these developments at our gardens will be embedded



within beautiful, inspiring spaces designed and built by the best designers and craftsmen that horticulture has to offer.' At Wisley, Christopher Bradley-Hole has designed the area around the Welcome Building. Around the national science centre, three new gardens are also planned for later in 2020: a garden for wellbeing designed by Matt Keightley, and two gardens by Ann-Marie Powell – one for wildlife and one productive.

Over at RHS Garden Hyde Hall in Essex, Xa Tollemache's extraordinary new Global Growth Vegetable Garden supported by Witan Investment Trust opened last year and has already won awards (see April, pp43–48). Hyde Hall will also share new buildings, too: the Clore Learning Centre and a restaurant (mostly nearly finished) are well worth a visit, all surrounded by new gardens masterplanned by seven-time Chelsea Gold medal winner Adam Frost. It is 25 years since the RHS took over Hyde Hall, and the garden has changed beyond imagination.

And then there is RHS Garden Bridgewater, in Salford, Manchester: 'I probably shouldn't say this but... I think I am most excited about the new garden at Bridgewater,' says Sue Biggs. All the other four RHS Gardens have come to the RHS thanks to generous people or groups having donated their gardens to the charity, but Bridgewater is the first time that the Society has taken on an overgrown site and created a new garden from scratch. 'There will be a 4.5ha (11 acre) walled garden designed by Tom Stuart-Smith which will open in 2020. Parts of this garden are »



The Welcome Building under construction (top left) at RHS Garden Wisley; volunteers (top) at RHS Garden Bridgewater; the new Clore Learning Centre (above) at RHS Garden Hyde Hall; and RHS Community Outreach staff (left) helping people to grow.

### The RHS seven major developments

- The 10-year plan of improvements and development of the RHS, our Strategic Investment Programme, was launched in 2015. Within it are seven projects around the nation that will help us better share horticultural science, practice and know-how, and inspire everyone to grow in many ways.
- RHS Garden Wisley**, our flagship garden in Surrey, will have a new Welcome Building, state-of-the-art National Centre for Horticultural Science and Learning, and a vibrant Wisley community village.
- RHS Harlow Carr**: we are building on the historical connections and amenities that our North Yorkshire garden offers, restoring the historic Harrogate Arms and link to the existing bath spa.
- RHS Garden Hyde Hall**: our Essex garden will gain a raft of new areas, including a new events building, restaurant and Clore Learning Centre (to be used by schools and students), plus new garden displays.
- RHS Garden Bridgewater**: our new garden in Greater Manchester is being created from scratch through the work of expert designers, RHS staff and local community volunteers.
- Community Outreach**: we will be guiding and supporting communities and people to help transform lives as part of our Greening Grey Britain campaign.
- RHS Lindley Library**: we will continue to share our collections and archives by making them easier for people to access digitally and through our refurbished Lindley Library.
- Horticulture Matters**: we are backing the horticultural industry's campaign to show the importance of horticulture as a career and to train the next generation of gardeners and botanists.

*'...the power of people growing plants can help change the world.'*



being built in partnership with the local community, and that is a wonderful thing,' says Sue. 'So much of what we do is to encourage people to garden: look at the communities supporting RHS Britain in Bloom across the nation, through the Campaign for School Gardening working with primary and secondary schoolchildren. All of this and much more – including links to local universities – is coming together across the RHS, but especially at Bridgewater, and it is absolutely thrilling.'

### People, plants, planet

For me, we can parcel up what the RHS is trying to do at the moment into three conjoined categories: people, plants, planet.

Of course, it is about people: helping people to garden better and to feel the benefits of gardening in every aspect of their lives. We know that gardening, or just being in a beautiful garden, makes us feel better physically, mentally and spiritually.

What is it about gardens that make us feel better? It does not take much to work out that it is not patios or sheds. It is very much about plants. Be they flowers, trees, vegetables, meadows or even something as simple as a house plant, there is so much power in plants. The power to heal, the power to feed and the power to bring joy to peoples' lives. The RHS is here to show the world's gardeners how much plants matter and how anybody can garden no matter how small their garden or how unpractised they may be.

The final category is a big one. By helping people to garden, by encouraging them to appreciate nature and the wildlife with which we share our gardens, we can contribute a little bit to keep this glorious green planet on which we all live healthy. The RHS, science, inspirational gardens and, more than anything, the power of people growing plants can help change the world. We cannot do it all – and certainly not without members and the wider communities – but we will have fun trying. ○

Sharing our collections: young gardeners entranced at the Wisley Garden Library.



*'Parts of this garden are being built in partnership with the local community and that is a wonderful thing.'*

### Resources

To download a podcast of James Alexander-Sinclair's interview with Sue Biggs, visit [rhs.org.uk/podcast](https://rhs.org.uk/podcast) and click on Episode XX.

For a video of Sue talking about the difference the RHS can make to the world of plants and gardening, visit: [rhs.org.uk/???](https://rhs.org.uk/???)

### Your chance to change the future of horticulture

The National Centre for Horticultural Science and Learning will be a landmark project in the heart of RHS Garden Wisley, protecting the future of plants, people and the planet. To achieve this we need your help to raise £2 million towards the creation of this new centre.

Thanks to the support of generous donors, charitable foundations, supporters and members we have raised nearly 70 percent of our fundraising target of £11.3 million, which together with our own contribution will bring this vision to life. As an RHS member, please make your mark on the future of horticulture and support our appeal.

There are many different ways you can support us and we have suggested three levels below, but alternatively please talk to us about how you can become involved.

**Alder:** under £1,000. You will be updated throughout the construction of the centre and invited to visit once it is opened.

**Willow:** £1,000 or more. In addition to regular updates, you will be invited to celebrate with us at the opening of the centre.

**Birch:** £5,000. As well as your support, will be publicly recognised within the centre.

For gifts with a value of more than £5,000 please talk to us to discuss your support. Please contact us on 020 7821 3125 with any questions, or donate online at [rhs.org.uk/donate](https://rhs.org.uk/donate)

Thank you so much for your support – we couldn't do this without you.