

Roots and Shoots – Green Space of the Month – May 2003

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Roots and Shoots is one of the founder members of the Black Environment Network, having joined forces with other projects in London in the mid eighties to encourage ethnic participation in the environment. It is unusual in that it's a multi-use space, providing training facilities for disadvantaged young people; educational resources for schools; a garden centre for local residents; and of course it provides essential habitats for innumerable species of wildlife, such as foxes, newts, dragonflies and bees. The main features at Roots and Shoots are a plant nursery and a wildlife garden complete with apple tree walk, pond, wild flower meadow and paradise corner. The garden aims to provide a haven for wildlife in the heart of London and to make that haven accessible to all.



Hooray, Hooray, the First of May!

I arrived bright and early on May Day morning, after a night of spectacular stormy weather. There was a lovely fresh earthy smell in the air, and a calm but busy atmosphere among the staff, trainees and volunteers. A local resident, a retired City gent, who had been a friend of Roots and Shoots, had recently died, and his funeral cortege was preparing for the slow drive by. Linda Philips, the Scheme Manager of Roots of Shoots, was making up a posy for him, carefully binding together an array of freshly picked flowers.

Nurturing exotic plants and preserving cultural heritage

Trainees were getting ready for Open Day, pricking out seedlings to pot on for a plant sale. The training project offers courses in horticulture and carpentry to local young people aged 16-23. There are 21 trainees places available and 16 of these are currently filled. Linda introduced me to Samantha, a trainee who was recovering from a nasty cold. She helped to show me around the site. First we looked inside the polytunnel where the seeds are sown. Here trainees learn how to nurture the seedlings of many popular garden plants, including vegetables favoured by the African Caribbean community, such as tomatoes, okra, peppers and aubergines. Roots and Shoots is built on the site of an old lead factory, so the soil is contaminated with lead and also cadmium, and food crops cannot be grown directly in the soil. But there is one raised bed containing vegetables grown entirely from safe organic compost made here on site. Container growing is the solution to poor soil quality and lack of garden space in the cities. Linda spoke about an old West Indian chap who comes in to buy his seedlings, and brings them on in recycled cooking oil drums in his back yard. He is famous in these parts for his magnificent crops.

We inspected the damage done to the polytunnel's polythene roof by squirrel's claws, and by baby foxes who use the structure as a climbing frame, and slide down its curved sides! I thought this mammal activity sounded very endearing, but Samantha is not too keen on foxes. And the squirrels, apparently, steal all the walnuts from the walnut tree that was planted by the entrance when Roots and Shoots opened in 1982. The squirrels eat some nuts and bury others to save them for later. So we can expect to see the area covered in walnut trees a few years from now!

Samantha will soon be 18. She lives with her Mum in a flat about 5 minutes walk from here. She told me that she enjoys working with plants, but when she finishes her training she wants to get a job as a hairdresser, because it's a "proper job" ie with better pay. As a trainee working Monday to Friday, Samantha earns £56 pw; she pays housekeeping to her Mum and puts £10 every Friday into a Parners scheme. When she has saved up £500 she wants to go on holiday with her boyfriend. She says she'd love to go to Jamaica, as she's never been there before.



Totally inclusive, cradle to grave

We looked at Lambeth Walk Open Space along side Roots and Shoots, where residents in the tower blocks campaigned to create a toddler's play park. The space is fully accessible with just a low fence around it, and a sign asking dog-walkers to show respect (it used to be just a dog toilet before the campaign). Roots and Shoots helped to plant it up, and Linda told me that it looks beautiful in spring and summer, when it's ablaze with flowers. There is not much equipment - and no tarmac - just a crescent shaped bench for parents to sit on and grassy hummocks for toddlers to play upon, and they love it. While we were there the local Digibus came and parked up by the play area, and several of the trainees piled on board. They use it because IT is part of the basic skills training offered at Roots and Shoots, but there are no computers here.

In the old building which houses the kitchen, a hall and the loos (there are plans to do it up), I met another trainee, a young man who suffers with a mild learning difficulty and quite severe anxiety. He was extremely conscious of health and safety issues, and most insistent on expressing his concerns to me. Later, I saw him at work in the big greenhouse, transplanting seedlings, and he was very much calmer, deeply engrossed in his task and clearly enjoying his work. Again one sees evidence of the 'biophilic effect' – a scientific term for the way that the love of nature can bring a sense of wellbeing to the troubled human soul.

The next stop on our tour was the little memorial to a lady who used to be in the women's land army during World War II. She became a very keen plantswoman, and put in lots of energy to Roots and Shoots. There is a beautiful wooden arbour seat, in her honour, constructed by carpentry trainees, set amidst a sea of glorious, blood red wallflowers and tulips.

Cultural gardens link people and plants from diverse roots

We passed along a pathway – neatly paved, fenced with willow hurdles, planted with spring bulbs and decorated with an attractive display of ceramics, all the work of trainees – and this led through a rustic gateway into the wildlife zone. My senses were immediately assaulted by the powerful perfume of roses, the vivid colours of abundant flowering shrubs, joyful birdsong, buzzing honeybees, and a rich diversity of textures underfoot – springy, uncut grass, moist soil and soft leaf mould. Moreover, this is a genuinely multi-cultural garden. Among the many established species of British hedgerow plants, and familiar European herbs, I recognised the towering spike of an echium; not the knee-high Viper's Bugloss (*echium vulgare*) common on British coasts but the seven foot tall bright blue spike of a giant echium from the Canary Islands. Then to my great surprise, a banana tree! On closer inspection, the latter is firmly rooted in a large pot wrapped all around with insulating material to protect it from the frost.



In this job I am often lucky enough to have the chance of seeing plants from around the world being cared for in greenhouses. Here at Roots and Shoots I spotted Swiss Cheese Plant (not from Switzerland at all, but from the tropical rain forests of South America), Aloe Vera and Prickly Pear under glass. But never before have I seen such a collection of tender fruits grown successfully *outdoors*. Because the garden is enclosed on three sides by buildings it is a sun-trap, and the many larger plants create windbreaks. Hence the garden has a favourable microclimate for tender plants. In paradise corner, the sunniest spot, there are three varieties of passion flower, a Brazilian pineapple guava and a Tree of Heaven. An old-fashioned English hazel tunnel supports a mass of tangled kiwi vines. Kiwi fruit was first grown as a commercial export crop in New Zealand, where it got the name, but originated in China. Another Chinese plant, the buddleia, brought to this country as an ornamental garden plant but now a common sight on waste ground in Britain, is a favourite with butterflies. How wonderful to be able to lose yourself in a buddleia jungle in the heart of London.

When BEN's Director, Judy Ling Wong, was developing the first cultural garden at neighbouring Walnut Tree Walk School, she asked a friend trained in horticulture at Windsor about identifying plants which came from the countries of origin of the inner city children. Her friend laughed and said, "The typical British garden is but a collection of glorified foreign weeds!" You can read more about the origins of British garden plants, and their meaning for people who share their origins, in Judy's article [The World in Your Garden](#) in BEN's Key Articles, vol 1 p21 – which can be downloaded from the Resources section of BEN's website. To obtain a resource sheet of plants from different countries, contact Rachel@ben-network.org.uk



Children inspired by nature

Linda introduced me to David Perkins, Wildlife Outreach Worker who teaches ecology to visiting children from local schools, and creates wildlife gardens in the schools' own grounds. David has been working with Roots and Shoots for 3 years and has built up this work a lot in that time. Linda points out to me that this is a valuable resource for this area, where few people have a garden of their own, and many live in tower blocks. The site itself is surrounded by Victorian houses, which create a sheltered spot, and in turn benefit enormously from the view of lush greenery.

Often, refugee and asylum seeker children first gain access to the project through school. One such boy returned, after a school trip, bringing his Mum here – they were from a rural, farming community in Eastern Europe and they miss the greenery which is otherwise absent or relatively scant in their new urban location. A class visits Roots and Shoots from one local school or another on most days. Today it's the turn of Keyworth Primary. Three small groups of evidently culturally diverse youngsters are exploring the many facets of the wildlife garden.

Suddenly, one of the children pops up out of the verdant undergrowth and announces that she's seen a dragon's lair. Enchantment radiates from her lovely black face. I tell her I don't think they have real dragons in London, but she's adamant: she's read the sign. True enough, I did find an area cordoned off with a sign. I guessed this was in fact a compost heap, or perhaps an area of garden under construction. The point is that the children have a fantastic time exploring along the winding pathways through the shrubs. The wildlife setting inspires the imagination and restores faith in natural magic.

David called to the group to come and see what he'd found in the pond. There in a dish was an amazing creature with frilly gills on the side of its head. It looked a lot like a miniature dragon, but in fact it was a baby newt. A group of children gathered round to get a closer look. In another dish David showed them the larva of an actual dragonfly. They were delighted.

Bees and budding bee keepers

Meanwhile one of the teachers was showing another group the apple tree blossom and the beehives, and explaining the relationship between them to her fascinated pupils. Bees are valuable not only because they produce honey, but more importantly because they are vital pollinators for most of our food. Yet due to urbanisation and intensive farming practices there is serious concern about the risk to our food supply from a new strain of bee disease. You can read more about this in *The Guardian*, Sat April 26th p11 or go to their website (see below).

Roots and Shoots is home to the London Beekeepers Association who hold regular meetings and run courses. I spoke to Jo, who attends David's bee keeping course, and she described the many rather eccentric people who come from all around London to study apiary. One old lady always comes and always falls asleep. One woman who comes from Japan intends to move to Hawaii and become self-sufficient in honey. One local artist makes artworks involving honeycomb, which you can see at the Open Day (details below) and he's involved in volunteering to build a new bee-house observatory from hazel hurdles grown and made on site. These will be too high for children to see over the top, so David is going to create slots at eye level for kids to look through and watch the bees doing their work. There was a batch of honey waiting to be separated from the wax. They do it by turning the honeycomb in a barrel, a bit like churning butter. Jo couldn't tell me how much wax to honey you get but apparently, 30 jars from 2 hives raised £145 at last year's honey auction.

David and I speculate about how many people from ethnic communities may be involved in bee keeping. There are about 35,000 bee keepers in Britain, including a great many in London, but there are also significant numbers of lone bee keepers, so one cannot really know how diverse they may be. But since the acquisition of a set of protective bee suits, schools groups and trainees can get very close to the hives at Roots and Shoots and

learn more about bees. So perhaps increasing numbers of local children will take an interest in this fascinating hobby and potential cottage industry in the future.

Plans for the future

Roots and Shoots are fundraising to replace their leaky old building with a state of the art community hall, classroom and workshop space, complete with solar panels for water heating and a sedum covered 'green roof'.

Roots and Shoots Open Weekend 7th and 8th June 2003 from 11am to 4pm.

Admission £1 adults 50p children

Saturday is aimed at children with juggling workshops, face painting, possibly Brockwell Drummers, a raffle and much more.

Sunday is more adult oriented with tours of the wildlife garden, activities such as willow weaving, and an exhibition by local artists and photography club members, whose work will be for sale.

Resources

To read more details about the plants and wildlife at Roots and Shoots, check their website at www.roots-and-shoots.org or phone and ask for an annual report.

An article in Gardens Illustrated May 2002 by Widget Finn includes further details of the plants and animals to be found in the wildlife garden and marvellous photos by David Loftus.

www.guardianunlimited.co.uk

for the article *Honeybees under threat from 'apian Aids'*