

AHI article

Title:

Visitors in the garden: do you know them?

Intro. paragraph:

Philip Ryland briefly introduces some of the key themes emanating from recent garden tourism research and comments on their implications for interpretive practices.

Main text:

### Visitors in the garden

Like so many, I find it a delight to spend an afternoon strolling through a garden enjoying the landscape and admiring, sometimes jealously, many of the plants on show and it seems I am far from alone in this view. Recent visitor figures are impressive, an estimated 19.5 million visitors to the principle UK gardens each year and across the world, 250 million visitors to the main botanic gardens and arboretum. But, these figures only cover the larger gardens, in the UK for instance, the sheer number of small, private gardens which open under the National Garden Scheme may well mean that estimates as high as 300 million visitors per year could be possible. So, who are these visitors? According to Joanne Connell (2004/5), 36.2% are over 60, 48.4% between 40 - 60 and a mere 15.4%, under 40. Whilst the perception of the mature visitor may still be an accurate reflection for many gardens, recent studies suggest that there is tremendous opportunity for gardens to engage with a younger as well as a family orientated audience. Indeed, Dorothy Fox (2008) identified the importance of the influence of family and friends on garden visiting, with 58.0% being inspired to visit because of a friend's recommendation and 46.0% because of family.

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### Interests and motivations of visitors

So, what are these visitors looking for? In recent studies, Roy Ballantyne (2008) and Dorothy Fox (2008) both placed 'the pleasure in being outdoors in pleasant surroundings' (98.2% of visitors) at the top of the list, followed by 'the admiration of plants and garden scenery' (80.0%) and 'social interaction with the family' (64.0%). The 'ambience and setting' and 'tranquillity' (82.2%) were mentioned by many visitors as was the 'opportunity to relax' (90.0%), indeed some even talked about the 'spiritual and restorative quality' of many gardens. Connell (2005) reports that 60.5% of visitors have a 'general interest in gardening' and 10.0% a 'specific horticultural interest', she suggests that for many visitors 'gaining ideas and inspiration for their own garden' is important as is the opportunity to take photographs (51.5%), note down the names of plants (48.0%) as well as the enjoyment of viewing rare and unusual plants (73.6%). Those visitors with a specific interest in gardening also tend to visit gardens most frequently and according to Connell's study 'at least once a month' (47.1%), whilst 47.7% visited gardens two or three times a year. And how long do they stay? For most the dwell time is up to two hours (49.2%). But, some will spend a half day (37.4%) typically those who wish to take photos, make notes about the plants or, are seeking inspiration. 5.6% of visitors will stay for the whole day and these are typically those looking for relaxation.

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### Garden features and services

In terms of features, a recent study discovered that greenhouses with displays of exotics was typically the most popular feature followed by themed collections (herbaceous borders, rock gardens) and then specific plants groups (grasses, heathers). Beyond the garden, Connell (2005) identified a range of facilities which were important for visitors including the opportunity for 'a delicious home-made tea' (76.8%) and the need for a car park (77.5%) and toilets (81.4%). Plant sales remained important for many (70.2%) as did a shop (38.1%).

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### Garden interpretation: current practice

Connell (2005) also discovered that 52.5% of visitors would like a guide book, 42.4% were interested in garden events and 41.9% in a guided walk. Gardens are informal learning areas as well as recreational spaces with tremendous potential to inform and educate visitors on the conservation and management of plants as well as on global environmental challenges, typically achieving this through well designed and delivered interpretive materials and activities. Maps and guidebooks are commonly used in many gardens as are leaflets detailing perhaps the 'plants of interest' that month. Self-guided trails are widely used and are often linked to a particular theme, such as 'autumn colour' or a particular series of garden features, such as 'alpines and rock gardening'. In a summer house, tea room or visitor centre, displays and exhibits may illustrate the garden through the seasons or its development over the last century. Guided walks (optimum length: 1-1.5 hours) can be available when specific plant groups, features or recent developments / restorations are at their best. Walks may be led by the head gardener, section head or, may be run in association with a 'friends of the garden' group. Workshops are also valued and sometimes in conjunction with a local horticultural society or gardening club topics such as propagation, weed control, fruit / vegetable growing and water-wise gardening may be offered. Finally, plant labels can provide important information for many visitors who are simply anxious to know what a plant is called and where it comes from.

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### Garden interpretation: opportunities for the future

To attract families and younger audiences a number of initiatives might be considered, indeed community programmes (linked to a 'friends' scheme) have been suggested as a good way of attracting both groups. With the interest in 'instant gardens' and wildlife in general, workshops and activities focused upon creating and maintaining planters and 'instant' borders, attracting wildlife and 'fun' growing techniques can be a good way of attracting younger people. Events such as arts and crafts weekends and wildlife watching are also likely to be successful – indeed, many gardens now rely on a calendar of events running right through the year as a way of enhancing and broadening their appeal. Quizzes, discovery trails, plant hunts and wildlife-themed activities (building nest boxes) specifically tailored for children are also worthy of consideration. In terms of opportunities, the extended use of themes to enhance the story telling power of the garden and the use of worked demonstration gardens is important. The newer technologies also provide exciting opportunities with trails, walks and even guides which can be downloaded to a mobile phone. The use of augmented reality has tremendous potential in association with music, natural sounds and commentary to bring the restoration, development and/or changes in a garden over a period of time to life, in a quite extraordinary and powerful way.

(217 words)

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### Biographical details:

Philip Ryland is Deputy Dean (Education) in the School of Tourism at Bournemouth University. He can be contacted at; [pryland@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:pryland@bournemouth.ac.uk)

### Further reading:

Roy Ballantyne, Jan Packer and Karen Hughes. 2008. Interests and motives of botanic garden visitors. *Tourism Management*, 29(3).

Joanne Connell. 2004. Motivations of garden visitors. *Tourism Management*, 25(3).

Joanne Connell. 2005. Managing gardens for visitors. *Tourism Management*, 26(2).

Dorothy Fox and Jonathan Edwards. Ch. 13. Managing gardens. *Managing visitor attractions: new directions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (2008).

Pictures to accompany the article (to use as you wish and all taken by me)

1. - The Agave sculpture and Mediterranean Garden, Tresco Abbey Gardens, Isles of Scilly
2. – The Italian Garden, Compton Acres, Bournemouth
3. – The Palladian Bridge, Stourhead, Wiltshire

4. – Plan of the Potager, Chateau de Villandry, Indre et Loire, France
5. – Carved Owl, Compton Acres, Bournemouth