

MEETING REPORT - Royal Gardens

Mark Lane, whose official title is Royal Gardens Manager, but prefers Head Gardener, gave us a wholly delightful talk on the gardens of the Royal palaces. In the 40 years he has been in this employment, he has seen huge changes. The geraniums at the front of Buckingham Palace are still a red variety chosen to match the tunics of the Coldstream Guards, so some traditions endure. To the rear of the Palace are 39 acres of garden, originally laid out in the mid-1800s. There are 2.5 miles of paths, meaning 5 miles of edging, which of course has to be pristine. The vast herbaceous border, up to 5m deep, is 156 metres long and carefully planted with tender plants and hardy perennials to provide colour and interest, particularly during the main garden party season. As this now starts in May, it is a challenge. Roses are pruned in November for early flowering, and for garden parties the lawns are immaculately mowed into triangular stripes to increase the impression of length. As there are 7,500 people per party, lawn maintenance is always ongoing.

The garden provides an oasis of peace for the Royal Family, with a 3 acre lake, now planted in a more naturalistic way to encourage wild life, and an artificial waterfall to aerate the lake and prevent what used to be a bit of a stink! James I was a great influence, ordering the planting of mulberry trees which he hoped would feed silkworms and produce home grown silk. This venture failed but the garden now holds a National Collection of mulberries, including white varieties which are delicious. The Duke of Buckingham, after whom the palace is named, grew jasmines and citrus fruit. George IV had the gardens remodelled and the house was altered to remove Marble Arch which was originally in front of the house.

As well as the Palace, Mark oversees Clarence House, Kensington Palace and Marlborough House in the Mall. In 1993, the whole garden was inventoried for every living thing: plant, tree, bird, insect, fish and animal and a conservation plan developed.

The Royal household is self-sufficient in honey, and 99% of all material is reused, composted or shredded, apart from persistent weeds.

There are 200 different types of Camellia, and a superb area planted with white foxgloves. Rhododendrons are the highly fragrant King George variety, and Hamamelis also scent the air. The magnolia dell has glorious examples of Magnolia "Darjeeling", which has flowers 10 inches across, and the lilac Syringa vulgaris "Congo" with enormous flowering heads. All this is worked by 9 gardeners and a one-year apprentice. Mark was so enthusiastic and knowledgeable, and his love of the garden shone through his talk, although he confessed he hates Hibiscus. We are delighted to say that he has agreed to speak to us again next year on the plants in the Royal Gardens. Don't miss it.