

FRIENDS OF CRARAE

Scottish Charity SC 033244

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held at the Visitor Centre on Tuesday 12th November 2024.

Present: John Hall (Chairman), Victoria Winters (Secretary), Richard Stein (Treasurer), Anne Paterson (Committee Member), Adrian Curtis (Committee Member), Derek Shankland (Crarae Head Gardener, NTS), Dilla Patrick (Crarae Visitor Services Manager, NTS), Tim Keyworth (Garden and Designed Landscape Manager, NTS), Kirsten Eadie (Gardener NTS), Grace Macleod, Sally Lovell, Laura Skelton, Bar Service.

1. Chairman's Welcome

John Hall welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Jennifer Deane (Committee Member), Ely and David Bittleston, David Sillar and Janet Foster.

3. Minutes of the last AGM - The minutes from 2023 AGM were approved. Proposed by Sally Lovell and seconded by Adrian Curtis.

4. Matters Arising –VW confirmed that the action from last minutes had been completed.

5. Chairman's Report

“ One of the first local words I learned when I first moved to Scotland in 1974 was “dreich” which I understood to be the equivalent of a combination of the Welsh *bwrw glaw* (raining) or *diflas* (dreary). We used to have wet and dreary Summers as I grew up in Wales but this past year here in Argyll is one to remember.

Inevitably, as we'll hear from Dilla, the weather has had a dampening effect on visitor numbers but she and her team have done a great job to bring in visitors even on dreich days and they continue to make the visitor centre a destination in its own right... and, of course, a great place to recover from a soaking in the garden.

The new path to Minard, opened last year continues to be well used and it has opened up Crarae to local visitors, many of whom are Friends, who see the Garden increasingly as a wonderful extension to the village. Thanks again to everyone who made the path happen.

The Garden is recovering from the recent flooding events and I'm delighted to see the Team re-imagining the Garden in ways which should improve resilience and also improve the visitor experience for people from near and far. We'll hear more about recent developments and future plans from Tim and our recently appointed Head Gardener, Derek. I'm sure you will join me in congratulating him on his appointment and wishing him every success in the future.

Our thanks also to Robert for his contributions in recent years.

Finally, may I thank the Friends' Committee (especially our hard-working Secretary), all the Friends who support Crarae in different ways and a special thank-you to all the Friends who turn up to help in the Garden on Thursday mornings (no matter how dreich).

I have it on good authority (seaweed) that the weather next year will be wonderful and I look forward to enjoying Crarae in the Sunshine.”

Anne added that she was very grateful for NTS continuing their support of the gardens following the October 23 flood. To open the gardens again after such a short time was an amazing achievement and extended thanks to all who worked so hard to make it happen.

6. Treasurer's Report and approval of Accounts 2017/18

The Treasurer, Richard, gave a verbal report for the past year's accounts.

The overall membership remained consistent with past years, with new members joining and older members leaving, either moving away or sadly passing away.

Richard commented that the membership income of £1,480 looked low in comparison to that of the previous financial year for the actual number of subscriptions paid in the year. This was because a few 2022 Christmas Gift memberships where "15 for the price of 12 month new membership" offers had been pre-paid washed through the year. The offer wasn't repeated at Christmas 2023 because the gardens remained closed after the October flood.

The donations comprised a very generous memorial gift of £1,000 received from the estate of Professor Downie and his wife, £170 from two long term Friends and £18.85 in coins were paid in from the countertop donations tin.

The Gift Aid total of £747.85 covers claims from two financial years as reported in the previous year's AGM minutes.

Expenditure remained at a minimum, last year it was reported that because of the floods in July 2022 the project priorities of the NTS had changed during that financial year leading to The Friends retaining £22,000 to support future Garden Projects.

Richard commented that because project plans were further delayed through 2023 and of course impacted by the second major flood event in October 23, The Friends' funds have been retained for the future. The closing balance on 29 Feb 2024 was £25,645.68.

Richard confirmed that the accounts have been reviewed and approved by an independent examiner (Chartered Management Accountant Mr Tim Wilcock) and will be submitted to OSCR before the end of November deadline by the Secretary, Victoria.

Richard proposed that the accounts be adopted and the accounts were seconded by Adrian Curtis.

Friends of Crarae		Scottish Charity No: SC033244
Income and Expenditure for the year to 28th February 2024		
2022/2023		2023/2024
	INCOME	
1585.00	Subscriptions	1,480.00
200.00	Donations	1,188.85
0.00	Carol concert	-
0.00	Grants	-
0.00	Gift aid	747.85
97.43	Bank interest	-
1882.43	Total Income	3,416.70
	EXPENDITURE	
0.00	Donations to NTS	0.00
24.00	Garden support	24.00
0.00	less job retention refunds	0.00
0.00	AGM	0.00
0.00	Events	0.00
50.00	Promotion	50.00
105.68	Website	123.60
52.80	Postage/stationery	48.96
91.86	Insurance	119.41
324.34	Total Expenditure	365.97
1558.09	SURPLUS/DEFICIT	3,050.73
	Balance Sheet as at 28 February 2024	
	CURRENT ASSETS	
0.00	Cash on hand	-
22594.95	Bank of Scotland Current Account	25,645.68
0.00	Debtors	-
	CURRENT LIABILITIES	
0.00	Creditors	-
22594.95	TOTAL NET ASSETS	25,645.68
	REPRESENTED BY	
21036.86	Working Capital at 1st March 2023	22,594.95
1558.09	Surplus/Deficit for year 2023-24	3,050.73
22594.95	TOTAL FUNDS as at 28 February 2024	25,645.68
	All funds are unrestricted	
	Signed: Victoria Winters	
	Date: 25-Mar-24	

7. Secretary's Report.

Membership at the end of 23-24 was 118 paid up members and 13 honorary members, the membership changes in the year were 8 new members, 3 resignations and 7 either passed away or moved away.

The Friends of Crarae website had 12,671 visitors since the last AGM, 62,575 since inception. The pages that were most popular were the home page, contact us page and Galleries. The website views were down from the previous year, especially during the summer. Website traffic came primarily from direct search engines and from links in social media posts. Victoria reported that Instagram followers stand at 391 up 8% on last year.

Twitter followers are at 147 up 52% on last year and a new Threads account was opened after the flood of October 23 and is followed by 118 people (82% UK, 18% USA).

A nesting bird survey was not carried out this year but Victoria reported that on one volunteer day she used the bird ID app Merlin and identified a group of Goldcrests and she, along with Kirsten and Anne followed the sounds to discover the site of an active Goldcrest nest.

Victoria also offered many thanks to Phillip and Theresa for taking on the task of feeding the squirrels and birds in the garden. This activity has transformed the visitor experience for many coming to the gardens as they have

been able to see their first red squirrel. Dilla confirmed that a number of red squirrel sightings have been recorded in the visitor comments book.

Victoria mentioned that the volunteer crew returned to their Thursday morning schedule in January 24 after the flood event stopped volunteer work for 3 months. She also thanked Anne and the Garden team for arranging the Volunteer Sign Up Saturday event in early March 24, where 6 new garden volunteers were recruited. Alongside the original Friends team of five, the Thursday morning Work Crew can now split into multiple small teams to work on discrete areas within the garden when required. A summary of the work crew achievements this year was provided during the walk through the gardens just prior to the AGM so a written summary is included in the Appendix to these minutes. Photographs of the highlights will also be included in the Spring 2025 newsletter.

8. Garden & Visitor Centre Report

Dilla began the NTS Team feedback with her Visitor Centre report. They started the season with some new members of the visitor services team as well as several returning from the previous year, which meant they had a full team for Easter which, although early, made a very positive start to the season. There are some new way-finding maps in the garden as the old colour coded routes were no longer accurate or, indeed, possible due to enforced changes in the path network. Wayfinding is still a work in progress and Dilla mentioned she intends to work with the garden team to improve this further for next season.

The number of visitors to the garden reduced this year by approximately 7% mainly due to the weather and many more people going abroad, however this was counter-balanced by an increase of 76% of visitors to the café and shop. So we have seen an overall increase of visitor numbers by 3% over last year.

Dilla reported hosting many more locals and regular travellers to and from the islands and Kintyre coming to the café which has helped to boost the numbers.

The new Trust blend coffee, homemade scones and soups as well as the specials have helped to achieve an increase of 16% in catering sales over the previous year.

The cafe has just purchased a high speed oven which will enable us to offer a wider range of specials and update menu items for next year.

The shop has also performed very well this year with our garden range, Crarae merchandise and books proving popular, Dilla reported an increase in sales by 21%.

Events

The team started the year with an Easter Trail which this year was sponsored by NTS and MooFree, it was very successful with a trail round the garden to find woodland animals and clues and a crafting table in the visitor centre. There were 60 participants over the weekend and the feedback was all very positive.

The Walking Theatre production of “A Wonderland Adventure” in May was not as well attended as hoped for, but they will run another one in May next year with amended timing.

The Halloween event at the end of October was very popular with the weather holding for most of the weekend, there were 50 participants over the weekend and again the feedback has been positive. A big thank you to the team and especially Faye who put a huge effort into making this happen.

There will be a sale day on 30th November 10.30-15.30 a 20% discount in the shop, the café and garden will also be open.

Dilla confirmed they plan to hold all similar events again next year with the addition of an archaeological dig in front of the cairn during the summer; the date for this is still to be confirmed.

Future Planning

This winter the team will start work on a new family-friendly educational trail through the garden with the hope of having it in place for next season, this will hopefully encourage more families to use the garden. Dilla

confirmed that Anne from the Friends will be included in the planning, utilising her extensive education experience.

Dilla confirmed the team intended to develop the catering offering with more specials and greater variety to encourage more local trade.

Dilla concluded by saying that they have had a positive season and she is very much looking forward to working with Derek Shankland, the new head gardener and his team, to take the garden forward into next season.

Richard asked about wider publicity and a discussion was had about contact with 'Gardener's World' and other such groups. The gardens had been featured in The Beechgrove Gardens in April this year and Dilla confirmed it did increase visitor numbers, but sadly the magnolias featured on the programme had finished flowering but the feedback on the program was very positive. Tim agreed that more publicity would be welcome for the garden but he wanted to have a plan in place for the future development before making contact. Victoria confirmed that she had in fact been in contact with GW in the past but had not heard back.

Dilla also confirmed that better signage would be installed (the previous Visit Scotland brown signs were erected in the wrong places and blew down almost immediately). The potential for signs in Inveraray was also being explored.

Dilla also confirmed that she was going to improve the social media coverage of the café and gardens particularly for the local area/Lochgilphead as many remain unaware of the café and shop facilities.

Grace asked about the potential for re-opening Plant Sales in the garden, Tim confirmed that this was no longer possible due to biosecurity concerns.

Tim Keyworth gave the garden report, a few highlights are mentioned here, the full Garden report is appended to these minutes for more details.

Tim began by praising the garden and volunteer staff, not only was the garden open in time for an early easter, more of the garden was open to the public than the previous year! He confirmed that with Derek in place as new Head Gardener their focus is to complete the Future Plan for the garden and to improve the resilience of the path network, opening more of the plant collection to the public.

He mentioned the Plants Collection Team who have completed the cataloguing exercise, entering the results on the IRIS botanical system. This tool will help the gardeners manage the collection in the future. The team will be engaging with rhododendron ID specialists from the Scottish Rhododendron Society and Rhododendron Species Conservation Group to ID a number of specimens where labels / records have been lost or moved.

The team will be managing invasive species (gunnera and skunk cabbage) more aggressively, Derek has been trained and will be able to do some of the specialist treatments in house so they will be less reliant on contractors.

Tim mentioned the possibility for redeveloping the mill-lade area of the garden, Anne asked what this would entail and Derek described their board walk idea, linking existing pathways through a different vantage point. The Friends were asked if they would be able to support the purchase of materials to allow the team to undertake the work in house alongside the volunteers. Victoria confirmed that a 'Friends sponsored' area of redevelopment has previously been discussed and given a plan and approximate costing the committee would be happy to consider this. Adrian asked if recycled plastic materials had been considered, reducing the need for ongoing maintenance. ACTION. NTS to fully describe and approximately cost the boardwalk project. VW to add this to agenda for the next committee meeting

Victoria also mentioned that it was very encouraging to see tree and shrub planting in the gardens. Tim confirmed that new specimens had been introduced and also that Crarae propagation and seedling collection would increase as plant movement restrictions and biosecurity challenges were making it more difficult to purchase/exchange plant materials.

Anne and Richard asked about the possibility of sharing the stories of the flood damage with visitors to illustrate how the gardens have changed over the last few years and highlighting future plans. Tim confirmed that this

idea could be realised with a display on the outside of the VC. ACTION. Add this to the agenda for future Committee Meetings.

Richard asked if The Friends or NTS had had contact with Balfour Beatty Community Impact Initiative. He mentioned that BB will be working in the area and have been contacting local community interest groups for projects to become part of. Tim confirmed that they had not had any direct contact. ACTION Richard to provide contact details to Victoria to make initial contact and scope the potential.

9. Election of Committee Members and Office Bearers

There were no changes to the Committee with all members continuing in position. Victoria did confirm that she would poll the wider Friends network for a volunteer to help in the Treasurer position.

10. Any Other Business

Bar Service led a vote of thanks to the Committee for their hard work. John Hall thanked the group for their participation in the meeting, and the AGM was closed.

APPENDIX 1 NTS GARDEN REPORT



Crarae Garden Friends of Crarae Annual Report 2024

Operational Update

It has been a year since the report of 2023. Crarae enjoyed a largely successful season this year with visitor numbers remaining steady, all be it less busy than previous years with the summer weather being so disappointing. The café once again proved popular and is consistently used and enjoyed by the local community. It was a spectacular flowering year for Rhododendrons and Magnolias.

Staffing

- Robert Carrol has left the Head Gardener position at Crarae, with Derek Shankland succeeding him in the position. It's an exciting time with lots of opportunity as we look to make Crarae more resilient to the changing climate and to safeguard the garden for future generations to enjoy.
- Andrew Hay was employed as a seasonal grounds person up until August 2024 and Kirsten Eadie continues in her role as gardener.
- We are in the process of recruiting for an Assistant Head Gardener and we hope to fill the position in the coming weeks. This presents a fantastic opportunity to create a strong, passionate and forward thinking team at Crarae.

Staff Training & Development

- Eco plug pesticide training was carried out at the end of 2023 which will mean that invasive species can be more easily tackled next year.
- Kirsten Eadie completed her Basic Tree Inspection course this year with tractor training and Chainsaw training also planned for Kirsten before the end of 2024.
- Both Derek and Kirsten attended the NTS gardens leads conference in September. The subject of the conference was grassland and meadow management. Future meadow areas are planned for Crarae in the future to increase biodiversity.

New machine Purchases

- A handheld compacting plate was purchased to help with future path work in the garden. A new hedge trimmer was also purchased. Plans for a new poly tunnel are progressing with the aim to have a new 30 x 12 ft tunnel erected adjacent to the existing greenhouse by the beginning of the new visitor season.

Plant Heritage (NCCPG) & National Collection of *Nothofagus* sp.

- There continues to be concern over the suitability of this collection to the site. An assessment will be conducted in conjunction with our Curator of Plants, Dr. Anna Florence, who is also responsible for NTS Plant Heritage National Collections. We have been in dialogue with our (NCCPG) co-ordinator, Katrina Clow, and in the coming months we will be in a better place to make a judgement call on the collection status and therefore suitability to Crarae garden.
- By way of additional explanation and information, it should be noted that the garden is managed in an extremely wet East facing hillside and in order to get most plants to grow, the water is managed by a series of ditches running off and down the hill. This wet situation coupled with the micro-climates created by the plant collection serves up the perfect recipe for wet loving woody pathogens such as honey fungus and Phytophthora sp.

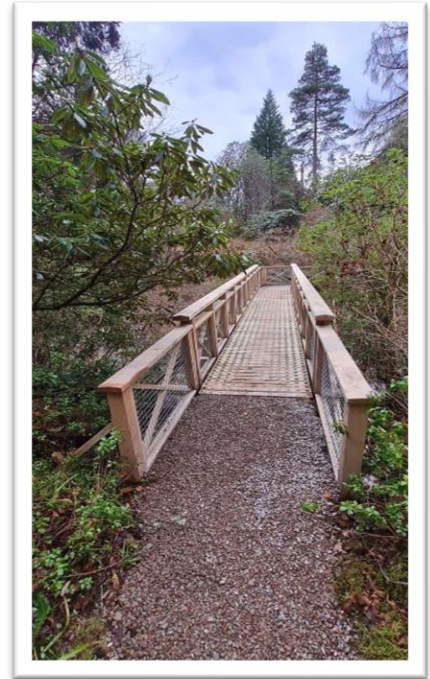
Volunteers

Our volunteer group continue to offer invaluable support to the gardens on a Thursday morning. Committed, dedicated and hardworking, our volunteers truly are the unsung heroes of the Crarae workforce. Rain, hail or snow, they bring an upbeat and enthusiastic team spirit no matter the job.

Garden Developments 2024

New pedestrian waterfall bridge replacement

- The damage from the Autumn and Winter storms of 2023 was assessed, which then allowed the team to plan which paths to reinstate so that a visitor journey could be created which takes in large parts of the woodland garden, while still taking in views of the spectacular gorge which is the gardens unique selling point. This has been achieved by the replacement of one of the pedestrian footbridges across the gorge. The bridge that has been replaced sits high above the gorge and is set back from the Crarae burns banks so should be protected from further weather events in the future. It was quite a challenge for the contractors to build!



New bridge over waterfall in the middle of the gorge

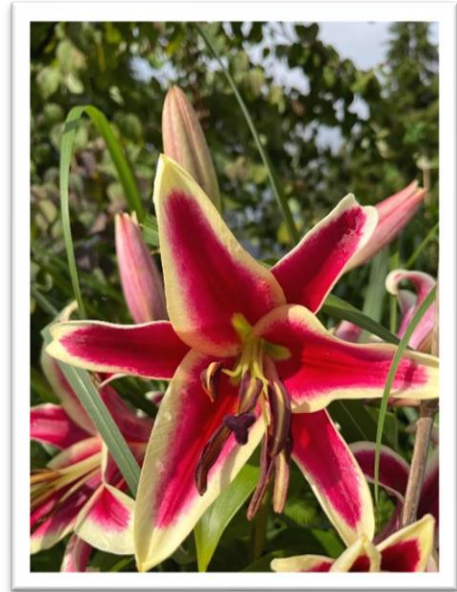
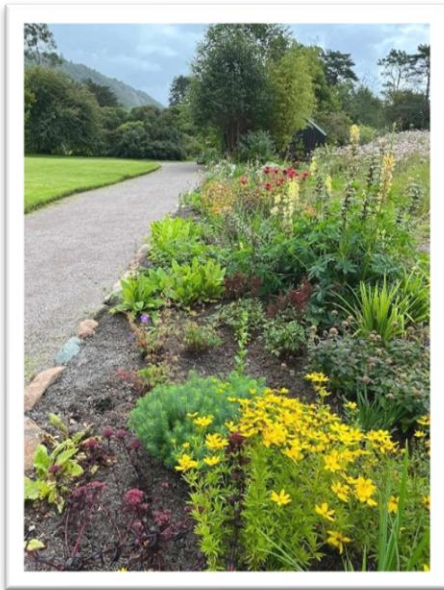
Resurfacing of the access road into the garden

- The first major job post the Autumn/Winter storms of 2023 was to rebuild the forest garden track which allows the garden team access into the woodland (at least in part) with machinery for easier maintenance. The track had washed out leaving a crack waist deep. The team had this completed for Christmas 2023 with the ditches and surrounding drainage network cleared to prevent this happening again in the immediate future. Importantly, this has weathered well throughout 2024, and the intensive drainage and ditch work completed in the early part of 2024 has so far proven to be worthwhile. As we enter another Winter, the team will continually monitor the ditch network making sure any pinch points are cleared and hopefully avoid a repeat of the disaster of October 2023.

New border in lower garden

- An extensive new mixed border has also been created and planted in the lower garden to improve the visitor offering and experience in the lower garden, as the lower access to the burn has been lost. This focuses mainly on herbaceous planting and provides a good splash of colour throughout the year.
- The Meconopsis river (blue poppy border) is establishing well with a further 80 M. 'Lingholm' added to the border this year purchased from Kevock nurseries. Meconopsis 'Lingholm' was chosen as it is a more reliable, longer-lived variety. Although the river is planted in its entirety another 100 plants will

be purchased this year to thicken out the planting. We are also keen to increase the number of M. 'Crarae' within the border as a feature plant of the property. A thick layer of 'strulch' (part composted straw) was added this year as a mulch, which has been excellent as a weed suppressant and the plants also seem to be enjoying.



New border planted in 2024 near to the garden entrance

New interpretation and garden map

- I am pleased to say that due to the teams hard work over the Winter months the garden was able to re-open to the public towards the end of March 2024. A new map and interpretation boards were created that plot the garden route currently open to the public for the immediate future. Due to new path networks being constructed, much more of the garden was open for visitors to enjoy in 2024 although a large section remains closed parallel to the burn.

Cataloguing of plant collection and plant records

- The plants in the garden were surveyed and recorded in their entirety during the summer of 2024, as part of the PLANTS project by the NTS to provide plant records for every garden in the organisations care. The plant records were then updated to a plant recoding system called IRIS which enables the gardens team to manage the plant collection effectively. This is a crucial project as it enables a full understanding of the gardens plant collection and compliance to current legislation. It also provides the information which will guide a propagation plan to conserve the plantings in the future. Some of the plants are original introductions from the plant collectors of Edwardian period and are of high importance to the garden.

Using this information, we can label and interpret the plants effectively and better tell the story behind the garden at Crarae for our visitors to enjoy.

Upcoming winter works 2024

The following work is planned for the upcoming months:

- To extend and develop new path networks into areas of the garden away from the burn that haven't previously been opened to the public. The first project being to build a board walk and path network through the mill lade and to provide further interest in this part of the garden.
- To prune overgrown trees and shrubs to improve the views and re-introduce lost garden vistas and to carry out renovation pruning so that the burn can become central to the visitor experience.
- To re-develop the garden entrance and car park planting to create a better first impression for visitors.

- To start work on re-labelling and better interpreting the plant collection and the story of the garden at Crarae to better improve the visitor experience.
- To produce a propagation plan so the rarest and most important plants to the garden can be conserved.
- To continue the work to remove invasive species in the garden. In particular skunk cabbage and Gunnera.

Much of the work post storms has been reactive, and short-term fixes. It is now important over this winter that we start to look towards the future and create a mid and long-term plan to safeguard the garden at Crarae for future generations to enjoy. The garden is perhaps one of the most challenged in the NTS by the changing climate and more frequent severe weather events. It is important that we make the garden as resilient as it can be for the years to come.

We would like to place on record our thanks to the Friends of Crarae Charitable Trust for the continued support of Crarae garden.

APPENDIX 2 Volunteer Work Crew Annual Summary

January 24

Tidying flood damage along the lower banks of Crarae Burn, assisting with two enormous windfall trees at the edge of the bird hide area.

February 24

Pruning back the bamboo along the rivers edge of the burn, new drystone walling to close the damaged bamboo tunnel trail, weeding the lower garden beds ready for spring planting.

March 24

The new volunteers were welcomed, brash clearance at the bird hide, barrowing aggregate to fill the new steps that lead from the lower, riverside garden to the magnolia area. Raking new compost into the brand new herbaceous border that had been created at the end of last season following the archaeological dig. The Mekanopsis beds were weeded and the team removed significant amounts of Rh. Luteum, blow in seedlings and brash from the Eucalyptery, as well as helping dig out blocked ditches to improve drainage in the area.

April 24

The bare earth areas in the riverside lower garden were top dressed for grass seed, lower garden paths were edged and hoed. *Libertia grandiflora* was removed from what's to become a rhododendron nursery bed. The enormous *Eucalyptus urnigera* from the lower riverside garden was taken down by contractors and cut up in situ and the volunteers barrowed the sawdust away and helped clear all the processed logs from the lawn area. 86 new Mekanopsis plants were planted out and other new plants added to the herbaceous / shrub collection.

May 24

The herbaceous perennial cuttings and divided plants at the greenhouse were weeded and potted on, the stone edging at the visitor centre, around the external seating area and down towards the Crarae burn was lifted and re-seated and any mis-matched stones replaced. The team worked in the Jurassic area removing overgrown Rh. Luteum and opening up vistas back towards Crarae burn, blow ins and brash removed, the mossy edges of the paths raked clean.

June 24

More luteum was removed from the understorey of the Eucalyptery and surrounding areas, a number of recent planting ginkgo biloba trees were uncovered. The boundary hedge at the graveyard in the carpark was removed and the edges of the car park hoed and tidied up. The flight of steps into the mill-lade area was replaced, more brash removed from the Squirrel hide area. The old greenhouse site was cleared of brambles and blow in shrubs ready to be planted up to form a shady border.

July 24

Bamboo was cleared from along the burn again, bracken pulled from the river banks, magnolia seed pods raked off the lawns and car park edge work continued. ¼ acre of Rh. ponticum was removed from the ridge above the mill-lade, uncovering Rh. Crarae and some specimen trees. Three unlabelled specimen rhododendrons were discovered after the bracken was pulled from the ridge line. The herbaceous border in the lower garden was weeded and seed heads collected for future use.

August 24

Ponticum and bracken removal continued.

September 24

The central bed in the pond garden was tidied, gunnera and skunk cabbage roots destroyed and the rhododendron nursery bed weeded again and top dressed for planting out.

October 24

The top path on the west bank near the top bridge was the focus of October, thinning out Rh naomi, humming bird and yellow hammer, removing the rh luteum and cutting back of the remaining deciduous pentanthera rhododendrons to transform the views of the river. Blow ins were removed from the moss surrounds of the top path. Raking up of the meadow grass in the lower garden.

Early November 24

Leaves! Tidying the perennial beds and dividing and potting up herbaceous perennials at the greenhouse.

Every week Phillip and Theresa top up the squirrel and bird feeders.