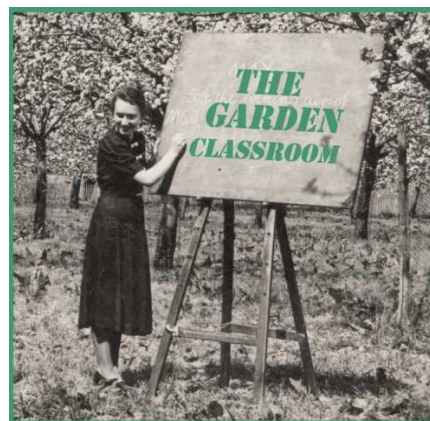


## CHAIR'S REPORT

25<sup>th</sup> May 2011



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2010 was another significant year for The Garden Classroom, seeing a growth in funding, a growth in the number and variety of projects and a growth in staffing. With more and more successful projects to its credit the organisation is also growing reputationally and in the demand for its services. This brings both challenges and opportunities and it will be a major task throughout 2011 to develop longer-term strategic objectives, to facilitate growth without losing touch with our core purposes and to put in place the infrastructures that will enable that growth to happen. All this is taking place within a rapidly changing national and local scene. There has been an increasing awareness nationally of the importance of local food growing and an increased emphasis on the role to be played by voluntary organisations within wider society. But this has also been against a backdrop of national recession and of cuts in the budgets of funding organisations including Islington Council, our partner in many of our early projects. It will be the job of The Garden Classroom's Board, over the coming year, to build on the organisation's excellent track record in planning and adapting to the future. This is a task we have already begun and through it we will ensure that through The Garden Classroom more and more people, and especially those most deprived, are able to obtain direct experiences of the natural environment and a better understanding of the living world.

### **The Year Behind....**

The calendar year 2010 saw 19 different projects completed or underway, involving an estimated 3,500 children and adults. These included food growing schemes, wildlife trails, holiday workshops, nature days, projects with individual schools, including special schools, in Islington and Hackney and London's first Darwin Trail at Caledonian Park. They also involved a wide and growing range of partners including Islington and Hackney Councils, Cambridge Education, the Ernest Cook Trust, the Charles Darwin Trust, King Henry's Walk Community Garden, the City Bridge Trust and the Royal Horticultural Society . One particularly innovative project involved a partnership with Beauchamp Lodge, bringing the Regents Canal Floating Classroom into Islington for the first time for science projects with schools. This wide range of partnerships—and their diversity—is a considerable source of strength for the organisation.

An important part of the year was the way that new, experimental or pilot projects provided the experience and paved the way for future developments. From our involvement with the Edible Islington Project we have been able to go on to establish our Global Growers Project funded by Local Food Lottery, with three schools participating in the first year. Similarly, our pilot Tree Education Project funded by the Forestry Commission using 'Docwra's Wood' has fed into Heritage Lottery Funding proposals under the Future Partnerships Scheme. Our Grass Roots holiday programme has also provided valuable experience and this model of trading is likely to form an important component of our forward business planning. We have also conducted Continual Professional Development training with teachers on behalf of the Royal Horticultural Society and this too is likely to be an important fund-raising activity for us in the future.

Not surprisingly these innovative and exciting projects have received wider recognition in a variety of ways. These include the 2010 'London Trees and Woodlands Award' for the most successful urban trees project, our accreditation as an official food growing site under the Mayor's 'Capital Growth Scheme' and accreditation as a 'Growing School Garden' with the Botanic Gardens Education Network.

In implementing these projects we have built up a panel of skilled and enthusiastic project workers, led by our Chief Executive Officer, Marnie Rose, whilst Juana Montaya became our first six months placement under the Future Jobs Fund. The year also saw some changes in our Board of Directors with Rohan Knox standing down as Chair after having served for two years as our very first Chair. Bob Gilbert was a new recruit to the Board, becoming Acting Chair in December 2010, and full Chair in May of this year.

### **The Year Ahead....**

As described above, the coming year provides both significant opportunities and a range of challenges for the organisation. Through its 'Big Society' agenda the Government has signalled a new and increased role for voluntary organisations but at the same time cuts in Government spending have led to reduced funding for many organisations including local authorities and, ironically, many voluntary organisations themselves.

It will be a key task in the coming year to further diversify our funding sources. This will not only involve the identification of potential new funding and grant-making sources but, more significantly, the further development of our own trading base. Discussions are also underway on the advantages and disadvantages of creating links with corporate funders.

Changes within local authorities in particular have created a number of areas of potential development as they seek new ways to deliver services and The Garden Classroom is already in discussion with both Islington and Hackney Councils concerning the delivery of activities at a number of their outreach centres. In connection with this we have begun delivering a programme of activities at Islington Council's Whittington Park centre and, significantly, have taken on responsibility from the Council for overseeing the partnership-funded Sustainable Schools Officer post

for the next six months. Another important new direction for the organisation has been early work on the provision of a horticultural diploma course for young people with learning difficulties. Following the closure of Islington Council's horticultural training centre this has taken on an added significance.

From its fairly informal beginnings The Garden Classroom has followed a trajectory of sustained growth. With this has come a number of new responsibilities and requirements—not least those of being an employer of full-time staff. In response to this the Directors have specifically undertaken to develop the organisation's infrastructure, to formalise processes and policies and to adopt more strategic approaches. Following the Board's Awayday in February, the early months of 2011 have seen the overhaul of the organisation's financial processes, including the appointment of new accountants, the adoption of a number of new policy documents including a revised Health and Safety policy, the expansion of our volunteer base and the start of work to improve our marketing, including a review of our website. In support of this we have also seen Board members take on specific roles with Matthew Loveday leading on finance and Stuart Roweth on Health and Safety. This adoption of more specific roles within the Board is likely to be further developed in the future.

In recent months we have been very pleased to welcome two new patrons to The Garden Classroom; the well-known TV horticulturist and journalist Joe Swift, who has a long association with King Henry's Walk Garden and with our work, and Dallas Campbell, BBC Television presenter for 'Bang Goes the Theory' whose mantra is that you don't need to be a scientist to be in love with science. We are grateful to both of them for offering their support.

### **....and finally**

On behalf of the Executive Board thanks are due to our CEO Marnie Rose for her continued leadership and unstinted enthusiasm. I would also like to thank Rohan Knox, my predecessor as Chair, for steering the organisation through its early years, Matthew Loveday for his work on improving our financial reporting and Rosey Lyall for the many hours she has put into the often tedious work of fund raising and completing grant applications in addition to overseeing the quality of our education outputs. I would also like to thank all of our funders and partner organisations but particularly King Henry's Walk Garden for allowing us to use their beautiful site for meetings and for many of our education projects and events.

The demands of modern lifestyles, the pace of urban development, the growing issue of urban deprivation and, not least, the decreasing amount of outdoor activity that many of our young people participate in, all serve to underline the importance of the work that The Garden Classroom is doing. Our work in 2010, and going forward into 2011, has continued to provide children, young people and adults alike with opportunities to explore the natural world, to experience the excitement of growing things and to understand more about our relationship with the environment on which, ultimately, our continued survival depends.

Bob Gilbert