



CONNECTING PEOPLE PLANTS AND PLACES

*Gardens
Strategy
2023-2032*



NTS Gardens Strategy 2023-2032 Connecting People, Plants and Places

Introduction

The National Trust for Scotland's Corporate Strategy for 2022-2032 has set the course of the organisation for the next 10 years, with a new Vision for the organisation of *Nature, Beauty and Heritage for Everyone*. It clearly sets out the Trust's key objectives under the pillars of Conservation, Engagement and Sustainability and identifies key planning and implementation periods.

Our Gardens Strategy Aims

Our Gardens Strategy 2023-2032 has been written as a direct response to the challenge of how we might in practice find ways to deliver our Corporate Strategy objectives, focussing on the vehicle of our gardens, designed landscapes and the act of gardening to do so. It examines our Corporate Strategy objectives set for the whole organisation and looks at them through the lens of the subsidiary gardens vision *Connecting People, Plants and Places* and a set of subsidiary gardens objectives. Together they are a means of bringing our highest-level objectives closer and more sharply into focus for gardens and the gardens community so everyone can see how the work of gardens day-in-day-out helps to deliver our bigger corporate goals.

We aim to:

- conserve and celebrate the heritage of gardens – their features, history, plants and relevance.
- expand the provision of specialist skills training and learning, enabling more people to care well for gardens in future
- increase and widen gardens appeal through information, interpretation and engagement, growing accessibility so more people can benefit
- make our gardens more resilient, minimize use of chemicals, contribute more to biodiversity and help to meet our carbon negative target.

Our Gardens Strategy is intended to help our gardens and property teams to look after their places and to do their work, in the short, medium and longer term. It recognises that our gardens and property teams are already heavily committed to caring for our beautiful, special gardens and to welcoming visitors, and that this essential work needs to continue. The exact means by which the objectives and their initiatives are best delivered will move, like our Corporate Strategy itself, to being a focus for operational planning and budgets over the coming years in partnership across the Trust. We may be able to refocus existing resources in some cases and in others we will need to seek additional support.

Our Gardens Strategy Vision: Connecting People, Plants and Places

Our beautiful gardens and designed landscapes are powerful places where everyone can benefit from connecting with plants and nature. Our gardens are very much about people: the people who created them, those who work and volunteer in them, and everyone who experiences them. We are privileged to care for these special environments, richly layered in heritage and stories, and our ambition is to make them accessible to many more people and

keep them relevant, valued and resilient. In doing so, we will be helping to secure their longer-term future.

Context of the Gardens Strategy

Gardens, designed landscapes and their activities are uniquely placed to deliver our Corporate Strategy. Together they represent a major area of the Trust's work. They are the places where other key conservation activities of the Trust (natural heritage, collections, buildings heritage and archaeology) can come together, and they are very accessible to people. Our gardens and designed landscapes already touch on many of our Corporate Strategy objectives in their current activities and have great potential to do more. The aim of our Gardens Strategy is to highlight that potential, acknowledge their existing contribution and to identify major initiatives which would support our Corporate Strategy delivery.

We care for 39 major gardens through ownership or management and in addition we look after many other areas of garden, designed landscape and greenspace, making us Scotland's largest gardening organisation. We grow over 100,000 individual plants in those spaces with their interesting stories, opportunities for engagement and rare plant conservation. These places are not just about the act of gardening however, they include heritage buildings, such as historic glasshouses, walls and terraces, collections of sundials, statues and other art, wildlife and archaeology all of which add further layers of interest and diversity. They are places of beauty. Using this Gardens Strategy we want to care better for all those layers in our gardens and ensure they are accessible, stay relevant and so remain valued, through more interpretation, learning and participation, for the benefit of everyone.

Our garden spaces never stay still. They are fully alive and constantly growing. They need constant directing just to maintain them as they are and to keep on delivering nature, beauty and heritage. Managing this change is labour-intensive, taking a tremendous amount of collective work, so we employ around 110 gardening staff, including seasonal gardeners as well as many loyal volunteers, who all work hard to take care of our gardens and designed landscapes with everything that the Scottish climate throws at them. The COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, furlough and redundancies were a stark lesson to all in how quickly gardens and parks can decline without that day-to-day care by people.

We have caught up again ourselves and are excited to be refreshing and developing gardens once more, having taken on more people to do so. We are helped by a further 11 people in training and as the largest employer of heritage gardeners in Scotland it is right that through this Gardens Strategy that we take a lead on growing more people with the specialist skills we need – given the acute shortage in our sector.

The constant change of our gardens and designed landscapes is one of their true draws for visitors; every day our gardens are different and no two seasons are alike in terms of displays. Repeat visitation is a driver of membership. Our gardens and designed landscapes exist primarily for people – as they always have done. They are places for

recreation, relaxation, shared time and informal learning – about heritage, about plants, about nature and about the environment. They are also places where craft and traditional skills are passed on from one generation to the next. For the Trust, above all, they are spaces through which we can really engage with people, as they sit and spend time in nature, or happily linger, play, walk their dog, become curious on-line or get 'hands-on' as volunteers to help us directly with our care. The role of gardens and greenspace in health and well-being is widely recognised and in this Gardens Strategy represents a clear area for the Trust's own future growth, to bring nature, beauty and heritage to everyone.

The challenges of managing change have been dialled-up in recent years with greater awareness of climate change. Through this Gardens Strategy we want to plan and act now for that future, in particular the long-term resilience of the woodlands in our gardens and designed landscapes. Our gardens community has been asking to operate more sustainably for some time and is motivated to do much more, given support, access to information, shared purpose and direction, to reduce the negative environmental impact of what we do, including through reduction of use of chemicals and to actively build upon the positive natural capital value of our gardens and designed landscapes.

Our Gardens Strategy Objectives

Set out below are the 12 gardens strategy objectives we have developed

- Improve the condition of the tangible elements which make our places special (glasshouses, garden walls, built heritage and collections), in addition to our ongoing care for gardens
- Help individual gardens plan for their future, including a focus on woodland plans for heritage, climate and resilience
- Create new gardens, fresh garden spaces and a range of different garden experiences, ourselves and in partnership
- Develop and promote understanding of the true value of our gardens
- Healthier, more biodiverse and biosecure gardens, to encourage nature to flourish and to widen their appeal
- Better explained and interpreted gardens, on-line and in-person and providing more opportunities for informal learning and experiences
- Equipping gardens to deliver the standards of presentation we ask of them, and ensuring they can provide diverse visitor experiences
- A centre of excellence in growing the gardeners we need – from taster opportunities to training and career development
- Using our gardens for research and publication, to better support conservation, engagement and sustainability
- Include and involve more people, more often, in gardens and gardening for their general health and well-being, widening our audiences and appeal
- Measurably improve the sustainability of our garden operations, reducing our negative environmental impact

- Improve communication and shared resources within the Trust's gardens community, developing this community of interest

Major Initiatives

The Gardens Strategy objectives are being developed into a series of initiatives and tasks aligned to our Corporate Strategy planning and implementation periods. Some of these are continuations or developments of current activities and others are new. The exact means by which the objectives and their initiatives are best delivered will move, like our Corporate Strategy itself, to being a focus for operational planning and budgets over the coming years in partnership across the Trust. To deliver the Gardens Strategy some redirection and focus will be required and is possible. However, it is important to recognise at the outset that maintaining business as usual is making a very valuable contribution to the work of the Trust but it is already a stretch of operational capacity and support. To do more and to achieve better or new outcomes and impact, more input will be required. This will be factored into planning and budgets as individual proposals and projects come forward within our wider operating context.

Major new initiatives over the strategy period include:

- A close look at our heritage glasshouses and garden walls across the Trust, developing a new prioritised approach to their care
- A sustainability focus on composting, materials use and energy
- A specific plan for each garden's woodland, enhancing their already significant natural capital with future resilience to climate change, pests and diseases
- Multiple exciting projects that deliver new garden experiences, refreshed or restored gardens across Scotland, small, medium and large-scale
- Improved information, interpretation and engagement opportunities for people, in and about our gardens
- A fresh gardening training programme to help fill the national skills gap
- Increasing and evidencing the use and value of gardens, designed landscapes and greenspace for people and nature
- A specific 'centenary' garden project in place for our 100th anniversary in 2031, with a wider celebration of our gardens then

Implementation, monitoring and reporting is to be overseen by a new cross-Trust gardens working group.

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