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## SUSTAINABLE GARDEN TOURISM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM OR WHAT'S BEHIND THE FENCE?

Barbora ČAKOVSKÁ

Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, Slovak Republic

As the garden visiting is rapidly taking place in the character and role of the leisure in the UK there is the need to gain more knowledge on motivation of garden opening and to complete the previous researches aimed mostly at visitors. Although the significance of charity openings, in many cases with personal and local interests, is undoubtedly a manifestation of the success of the National Garden Scheme (NGS), there are many other reasons why the owners decided to share their gardens with the public. The study has captured the owners' motivation and divided it into six categories revealing different motivations why people took part in The National Garden Scheme. Such an approach uncovers connections between the garden and the owner and the garden opening can be therefore understood in a variety of ways and plays a different role for each owner.

**Keywords:** private gardens; the National Garden Scheme; qualitative research; garden visiting

Gardens have always been recognized as a part of social life (Hyams, 1971). In 16th century the growing taste for gardening as recreation became prominent and pleasure gardens and parks became a central feature of country houses (Thomas, 1983; Hoskins, 1988). Served as social and cultural centers for friends and associates, gardens were a significant part of aristocratic leisure time (Girouard, 1978). Landowners took pride in the presentation of their houses and gardens, and landscaping became a major preoccupation on many estates towards the end of the 18th century (Gard, 1989). Gardens often contained a bowling green, later badminton and croquet area (Thacker, 1979). Some private gardens functioned as tea gardens offering meals, concerts and dancing (Ross, 2001). The origins of participation of the working-class population in country house and garden visiting can be traced back to the early-Victorian period (Atkins, 2001). According to Mandler (1997) this was also the first age of mass country houses and gardens visiting and the first attempts at managing visitors are evident. The factors that stimulated the demand for garden visiting included: transport improvements and cheaper fares; increases in leisure time and disposable income; the desire to escape from urban life, and changes to attitude to rural environment (Glyptis, 1991; Patmore, 1983 linked by Connell, 2005). Small numbers of gardens and historic houses charged an entry fee as a means of controlling numbers, and some estates placed a strict entry limit on the number of tickets available each day (Mandler, 1997). For some landowners, the rising number was a key to more profitable openings, developing more innovative ways of managing estates for visitors, including publication of an opening schedule and using entry fees to pay professional guides (Atkins, 2001). In 1927, the

number of gardens opened to the public expanded with the introduction of the NGS and the 'Gardeners' Sunday Scheme' (Hunt, 1964). Owners of fine gardens were invited to open them for charity on one day by the Queen's Nursing Institute (QNI). As many as 349 gardens took a part in the first opening: such as Sandringham in Norfolk, Chatsworth in Derbyshire, Carborne Manor in Dorset, Hatfield House in Herefordshire; mostly those handed down with estates through the generations, and nearly 164,000 people took advantage of the opportunity to enjoy gardens that had never before been open to the public (Atkins, 2001). This event was so well supported that the committee of the Queen's Nursing Institute (QNI) decided to continue the scheme in next years (NGS, 2012). In the 1970s, the middle classes expanded, generating a section of society with high levels of education and cultural capital, and this is often reflected in leisure trends (Connell, 2004a). Day trips within reach and garden tourism became accessible to all (Mandler, 1997). People travelled further, and visited gardens seeking inspirations and ideas. The NGS has been transformed from the opening of modest numbers of large-scale gardens for the benefit of a single charity, into the current scheme, which includes small private plots behind terraced houses, additionally supporting local charities specified by the garden owners (Hunningher, 2001). In the 1970s, many garden owners offered to open their gardens, rather than waiting to be invited (Atkins, 2001). In 1982, the English Tourist Board suggested that more than 2000 gardens were open, and also the gardens in the National Garden Scheme opened around 1440 gardens (NGS in 1980) that expanded in 2012 to 3800 mostly small private gardens. Evans (2001) claims that most of the garden visitors possess their own gardens and Littlejohn (1997) suggested

**Contact address:** Ing. Barbora Čakovská, PhD., Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, Faculty of Horticulture and Landscape Engineering, Tulipánova 7, 949 01 Nitra, Slovakia, ☎ +421 37 641 54 06, e-mail: [barboralipovska@gmail.com](mailto:barboralipovska@gmail.com)

that visitors are oriented mainly on flowers – visiting to see whether the flowers in other gardens are more varied and impressive than theirs.

As the garden visiting is rapidly taking place in the character and role of the leisure in the UK there is the need to gain more knowledge on motivation of garden opening and to complete the previous research aimed mostly at visitors (Connell, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2005).

## Methods

The study was undertaken in 5 counties of the UK – Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, and Worcestershire, where 251 public and private gardens were opened in 2012 (NGS, 2012). Gardens and the owners ( $n = 40$ ) were selected randomly from the NGS Yellow Book based on the gardens' accessibility by public transport. It was important that the garden is privately own, part of the house and not designed as a public attraction. According to the book information they varied in size from small gardens of terraced houses to large gardens of detached houses or small farm gardens in the villages.

The empirical data was being obtained from May to July 2012 by examining how people talk about their gardens and the connection to them, their families and the NGS. A face-

to-face semi-structured interview was considered the most appropriate research technique, providing the highest response rates (Neuman, 2011). The face-to-face interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes, using a mix of closed and open-ended questions. In the interviews garden owners were asked about their gardens and gardening to explore the reason why and when they decided to open gardens for the NGS and to explore the existing relationship with the garden. The obtained data were subjected to the process of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of garden owners, a code was assigned to each participant (e.g. GO50-59 = garden owner in the age group 50–59). The obtained data were qualitative and all information, also from interviews, was placed in thematic categories according to the responses and field observation.

### Six reasons to open a garden to the public

In terms of demographic, 64.2% of garden owners were above the age of 60, and 20% were between 50 and 59. 61.8% of garden owners were retired and the rest of them were employed. This age ratio could be explained as a period of independent, full and active life that encourages people in the gardening activity (Bhatti, 2006), however the survey showed that most of the owners started gardening when they were in their 40s. Gardens



**Figure 1** Example of composition of a semi-detached garden limited by space and shape



were open from few hours to the whole year long and the length they have been listed by the NGS varying from fifty years to a few days.

The question about the socio-economic status of the owners was not asked, but based on the observation of the gardens, the status of the owners was the middle class. Interviewed garden owners were men and women (ratio 1 : 1) living as couples (54%) and the garden was presented as a 'husband's hobby and pride'. Two couples that represent 10% claimed that the garden is passion of the wives and 4 couples (21%) declared that they manage gardens together. Twelve of 34 gardens are owned just by divorced women or widows who take care of it with help of their fathers, men friends or professional gardeners.

Most of the visited gardens could be classed as semi-detached (Figure 1) and cottage gardens (Figure 2). The differences in aesthetics were apparent and gardens varied in their design, but as Hoyles (1991) noted, despite the differing traditions in English gardening, most gardens that we can see are typified by the contrast between Victorian formal gardens and vernacular cottage gardens. Even though the NGS (2012) states that: 'The size of the garden is not critical, and many are typical back gardens', gardens have to meet certain criteria and owners, aware of them, spend a considerable time in ensuring their gardens would meet the needs of the visitors. For instance GO50-59 stated: 'I visited gardens with my mum, and after about 20 years

I thought maybe my garden was good enough to share, this was in about 2006/2007.'

Charity support was in many cases the main motivation to open the garden. Respondents found the charities supported by the NGS trustworthy and helpful for people. One spoke for many when said: 'The Charities that the NGS support are great and not controversial' (GO50-59). In some cases charity supporting was influenced by personal experience and the garden opening was seen as a repayment for the help provided to their relatives or friends. GO40-49 explained: 'To open for the NGS was obvious for me because they support the Marie Currie Cancer Care, which helped my sister when she was ill'. Another owner, also GO50-59, described the motivation: 'I know several people who have had cancer and who have benefited from them. We are lucky to live where we do and be healthy and like to give something back.' A possibility to support other charities, local groups or organizations was repeated in a number of responses.

A request from the NGS local organizers or friends was mentioned in a number of responses. GO50-59 expressed 'I was invited and encouraged to do so (open the garden) by the NGS organizers'. The respondents were asked by the NGS local organizers in many ways to open their gardens, for many reasons. For instance, GO60+ was asked 'to do so by County Organizers to fill the August gap.' and GO30-39 'found an advertisement in local newspapers,' encouraging



**Figure 2** Cottage gardens use dense plantings, and a mixture of ornamental and edible plants

new owners in a town. These answers indicate that, in addition to charity support the NGS is trying to develop an all-year scheme covering most parts of England, but many of the owners were still reached because of their unusual gardens or by their friends' recommendations. GO18-29 described the similar experience: 'We were visited by a friend who was with the NGS and she said our opening was a must' and asked the county organizer to visit.' In addition to this, village reputation or neighbours play an inevitable role in spreading the word as well. GO60+ admitted 'people may even buy houses in certain villages in order to open their gardens'.

In addition to charity support, social reasons appear important in the decision to open gardens to the public. Most owners stated that they like to socialize with others. For instance, for GO 50-59, garden opening means, 'meeting people with different backgrounds'. In addition to this, GO 50-59 noted: 'We can spend a day with our friends, neighbours and other gardeners'. Benches and chairs help to keep visitors longer, to talk and to share advice and experience. GO18-29 stated: 'To share the garden with others means, to invite other, plantspeople' to see the garden and get advice.' There are also strong social reasons within a family. Almost all of the gardens surveyed were maintained by at least two members of family and garden opening is therefore, in many cases, also a family event, when a family can meet and spend a nice afternoon together. GO60+ described the day, when every family member involved and has certain role during the garden opening: 'My 93 year old mum cuts edges of the lawn, my daughter mans the gate, a granddaughter helps with the tea and my husband pays the bills and gives the orders'.

In some cases, social reasons were specified, when garden opening is seen also as a local event that helps to get a community together and to improve a social connection within the village. GO60+ described this: 'It gets (garden opening) local people together, sharing a common interest and an interest in making their area attractive'. As GO60 + stated: 'All (the) village is incorporated in this process' The community feeling to help attract the tourist to the village was expressed by one of the owners, GOF60 + : 'Open gardens bring people into village, and they use the shops and pubs and may come back to spend more time in this area'. In many villages, small gardens are partnered by some neighbours to create a group opening event and to fill one of the NGS conditions – the provision of 45 minutes of interest for visitors. Group garden opening affects entire villages, where mainly the older people participate by serving cakes and teas in refreshment areas and help to orient people on site.

Memories and emotional ties are connected with a garden creation (Bhatti and Church, 2001; Francis and Hester, 1990). According to Stenner et al. (2007) in this mode, it is not just that we occupy the garden, but that the garden occupies us. A few of the owners highlighted the importance of garden opening, after their spouse passed away. The idea to open the garden to a wider public thus originates in very personal reasons that highlight the importance of a garden or gardening. The garden then became a powerful symbol of memory and loss, a 'living reminder of the partner' (Hockey et al., 2001; Hallam and Hockey, 2001). One GO60+

explained his reason to open the garden as a wish of his wife: 'My wife (she died) she always wanted to open the garden, so I decided to make her dream come true by opening the garden'. After the spouse was lost the garden could be seen as a new start that opens new possibilities to live and re-create the surrounding environment. GO60+ described how she has been dealing with her partner's death with garden opening: 'It brought me into a new circle of friends, but I also try to find a way of living after a 56 year marriage, being free to do what I want'.

The physical changes as people get older can encourage them into physical activity that can help to take advantage of each day (Bhatti, 2006). Many elderly owners stated that gardening became a form of physical exercise, opening new possibilities to resist the image of inactive and senile body. This reason was evident in the GO50-59 motivation, when there was explained: 'After serious illness I wanted to 'Seize the day' a bit more.' Ageing may also reduce the possibility of socializing and garden opening can be seen as a social day, when the older one can meet with new people. GO60+ stated: '(Garden opening) brings new people into my retired life.' On the other hand, age could be also a limitation. For a few, usually elderly householders, gardens can also exacerbate some of the problems associated with poor health when householders are unable to care for their gardens and owners may think about closing the garden, GO60+ explained, 'I feel too old to keep my garden in a good shape'.

The survey also identified other reasons. For some respondents, garden maintenance was the main reason to participate in a garden opening. To keep the garden tidy or to be forced by an opening deadline was a main motivation and a benefit. Many garden owners agreed that they like showing their gardens and hearing compliments. For instance, GO60+ stated: 'I like to show people what I have done,' and GO50-59 added: 'I like to share my skills and to hear compliments.' Tidy and design garden also provides new possibilities into existing activities and business. For GO50-59 is garden opening, 'networking for (her) design business.' And GO50-59 has found promoting her business through the garden really helpful: 'We are in the middle of nowhere and have an art gallery and run art courses. We do not expect to sell anything at the garden openings, but the NGS increases the number of people who know about us. The NGS has a very positive reputation and it is good to be associated with that.' In one case the discounted membership provided by the National Trust was a motivation to open the garden. GO60+ admitted: 'Free National Trust membership and in those days half price seed was attractive'.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper provides the foundation for the developing knowledge of gardens participating in a garden opening, from a recent survey of garden owners. Using face-to-face semi-structural interviews, the paper explores the owners' perception of the garden and examines the role of gardens in their lives. Such an approach reveals that, in addition to raising money for charity, a garden opening is understood in a variety of ways and plays a different role for each owner.



By uncovering these phenomena the significance of the garden in community and the motivation of maintaining a garden and gardening could be explained and divided into six categories:

- **Charity support reasons.** This reason to open gardens corresponds to the motivation to help in raising money for charities and gardens are seen as tools to collect money from visitors and help good things. The NGS supports many well-known charities in the UK and every year there is a possibility to support a charity that is not on the list. The owners can also raise money for the charities they want to (not connected with the NGS).
- **Open garden to the public as a request from NGS organizers.** In this mode the owners were encouraged by local NGS organizers or their neighbours to open gardens for two main reasons – because a garden is unusual due to its design or location, or because by opening the garden, the continuity of opened gardens will be ensured during the season and the rising numbers of gardens in villages or neighbourhood can help to attract more visitors. This reason could be characterized also as a marketing motivation of NGS organizers. Local organizers come talk to the owners individually or they advertise a possibility to open a garden in a newspaper.
- **Social reasons.** Here its owner sees a garden as a social space, a tool that can help to stay in touch with the family, local people and a place for new connections. The area of a garden is often designed for the opening day as a park or as a place for a garden party to accommodate people and to keep them there longer.
- **Community reasons.** This motivation corresponds to social reasons that also uncover community feelings. A garden is seen as a place for community meetings and serves as a platform for joining people within a neighbourhood or a village. People are aware of the fact that as a community they can attract more visitors by joining the opening of more gardens in the village into one and by providing the refreshment areas usually in a community centre where they sell donated cakes or drinks.
- **Nostalgic motivation.** Here the garden is seen as a sacred place, environment of personal memories and reflections that could be presented to the public as a memento of the spouse death or satisfying his/her executor wish to have a garden open to public.
- **Age resisting motivation.** Gardening and the activities connected with a garden help the owners to stay fit, because without their work the garden would not look as good as it does. A garden is seen as a reason to take care of them, a reason to live. Besides the working activities, meeting people during the opening brings new impulses for them and help them to enjoy life after retirement. In this point, the age resisting motivation is connected with the social reasons to open a garden.

Charity support was identified as the main motivation to open a garden to the public and to keep it in a good condition. This could be explained as a desire of belonging or fitting to the local community or as a source of satisfaction and connection to the community (Nassauer, 1988) that participate in a garden opening scheme. Through our gardens, we reveal to ourselves and others ... our personality,

aesthetics, environmental values ...! It was found out that social reasons are vital in the garden opening. At the social level, gardens are seen as social space that help the owner to socialize (Bhatti and Church, 2001; Clayton, 2007), and by opening them, the socialization within the community can be accomplished. A shared interest in gardens makes this process easy and socialization during the opening was visible also by owners' communication with visitors and presence in the garden. In many cases benches and chairs were located in various places in gardens to provide places for visitors to rest and to keep them longer in the garden. Open gardens can facilitate social interactions among neighbours, and also within families when the members are incorporated in the process of garden maintaining or garden opening. For Crompton and McKay (1997), this is a festival or a special event similar to other leisure activities in that it offers an opportunity to escape from a daily routine; and an opportunity to indulge into something new and different. Meeting new people can help elderly people to socialize in gardens.

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