



THE
ROYAL
PARKS

HORTICULTURE VISION 2026-31

CONTENTS

Welcome	2
Foreword: Alan Titchmarsh	3
Foreword: Arit Anderson	4
Introduction	5
Horticulture Vision	7
Horticulture Vision objectives	8
Objective 1: Everyday wonder	9
Objective 2: Creating iconic horticulture	15
Objective 3: Diverse planting	19
Objective 4: Respecting heritage	23
Objective 5: A sustainable future	26
Looking ahead	30
Making the change happen	31
Recommendations	33

Cover photo: Drought-resilient planting in Queen Mary's Gardens, The Regent's Park, designed by Anne Tuomisto, Head Gardener.

WELCOME

I am thrilled to introduce The Royal Parks' *Horticulture Vision 2026-2031*, our first ever strategy focused on horticulture across the parks.

Horticulture has the power to shape how people experience, remember and connect with the parks. This vision sets out an ambitious direction for the future of horticulture across London's Royal Parks, building on their rich heritage while responding to the opportunities and challenges of a changing climate.

At its heart, this vision seeks to create moments of everyday wonder through beautiful, inspiring and distinctive planting that celebrates the unique character of each park. We will embrace greater planting diversity, designing resilient landscapes that enhance biodiversity and respond confidently to evolving extremes caused by climate change.

By understanding and respecting the historic foundations of our parks, we can evolve our horticultural approach to ensure it remains relevant, exciting and sustainable for future generations.



*Dr Linda Yueh CBE
Chair, The Royal Parks*

FOREWORD: ALAN TITCHMARSH

Green spaces, like those cared for and cultivated by The Royal Parks, have a vital role to play in our modern world.

They offer spiritual sustenance and hope to thousands of families whose own domestic situation makes it difficult for them to contribute as individuals. Those who live in areas where greenery is thin on the ground, or in high-rise dwellings where even a flowerpot is a longed-for ambition, find access to places where grass grows, flowers bloom and trees offer shelter to humans and wildlife alike, a positive connection with reality.

But it never ceases to astonish me just how underrated our green spaces are, especially when it comes to the health and wellbeing of the nation. It is inarguable that the three priorities of national and local government must be health, education and law and order. But our gardens, our parks and our

open spaces contribute immeasurably to those three vital requirements of life, and we underestimate their value at our peril.

After all, think of the joy and beauty that abounds in our urban parks and gardens – and especially our Royal Parks. Fresh air improves our health. Open spaces give us a sense of freedom – they allow us to let off steam and reduce feelings of frustration. And watching nature at work – getting a feel for things that grow – connects us directly to the earth and allows us to better understand the pattern of the seasons and our responsibility to wildlife and landscape.

Young people today are rightly concerned about two huge issues: global warming and climate change. But unless we show them – by direct contact with nature and things that grow – how they can make a positive difference, they will feel powerless to effect any kind of change.

Connecting ourselves with gardens and gardening, growing and nurturing, and improving the nature of the patch of earth we occupy is not only good for the soul, but vital to ensure the continued health of the land that surrounds us.

The Royal Parks play a crucial role in all of this. They bring people together with nature and plants; they provide a space where people can just be. Our parks excite and inspire with trees, plants, historical features and so much more. Most importantly perhaps, the Royal Parks wrap their proverbial arms around those who use them at times of happiness, sadness or stress. That continuum and consistency is something we must never take for granted.



*Alan Titchmarsh CBE
DL VMH HonFSE
Gardener, author
and broadcaster*

FOREWORD: ARIT ANDERSON

London is one of the world's greenest cities, with around 3,000 parks. Eight of them are not only jewels in the gardening crown, they are also Royal Parks.

With sites across the city, these spaces are open, accessible and beautiful, and have invited people to adore and explore them for hundreds of years.

The future of our parks is not just to survive but to thrive and be part of the ecosystem that breathes health and wellness for humans and wildlife alike. This *Horticulture Vision* is part of that movement, ensuring parks are part of an uplifting and liveable urban future.

Approximately 55% of the world's population live in urban areas, and by 2050 this will rise to 68%. That means that two out of every three

people will be living in a city centre, putting immense pressure on land, infrastructure and the environment. The increasing heat island effect, noise and air pollution, and the retraction of wildlife will all occur.

But this is where modern parklands can be part of the antidote for high-pressured modern living. Parks can support huge trees, larger than those in gardens; when they reach maturity, trees offer so many benefits for people and wildlife alike. Literally the lungs of cities, they can help improve air quality while filtering pollution; their canopy provides welcome shade in times of extreme temperature; and they act as home to many birds and insects.

Our parks have the potential to be nature hubs, part of a wider network of green corridors that carry a myriad of living things

across cities and suburbs, all the while improving our chances of having a 30-minute daily dose of 'Vitamin G' (vitamin green). The science tells us that being in a natural environment helps to reduce stress, lowers our blood pressure, and improves our mood. Getting outdoors and walking through a park can significantly reduce cortisol levels, the stress hormone. Healthier people put less strain on our healthcare systems.

If our parks are welcoming and packed full of wild areas, and borders looked after by skilled gardeners who understand how to care for a high diversity of climate-resilient plants, they will attract a rich biodiversity for all to enjoy.



*Arit Anderson
CMLI VMM
Garden designer, writer
and broadcaster*

INTRODUCTION

OUR VISION

The Royal Parks' vision is to provide free access to beautiful, natural and historic parks, which improve our quality of life, health and wellbeing – this is particularly important in a city environment.

OUR PURPOSE

The Royal Parks is the charity which manages, protects and improves the parks in an exemplary and sustainable manner so that everyone, now and in the future, has the opportunity to enjoy their natural and historic environments.

OUR VALUES

We are: Responsible, Excellent, Inclusive, Open, and Respectful.

CHARITABLE OBJECTS

Our charitable objects set out the main purpose of the charity, and what we aim to achieve. These are:

- To protect, conserve, maintain and care for the Royal Parks, including their natural and designed landscapes and built environment.
- To promote the use and enjoyment of the Royal Parks for public recreation, health and wellbeing.
- To maintain and develop the biodiversity of the Royal Parks.
- To support the advancement of education by promoting public understanding of the history, culture, heritage, and natural environment of the Royal Parks.
- To promote national heritage including by hosting and facilitating ceremonies of state.

The Royal Parks charity is the custodian of the most famous collection of urban parks in the world. The eight Royal Parks that make up this celebrated group of green spaces are: Bushy Park, The Green Park, Greenwich Park, Hyde Park, Kensington Gardens, The Regent's Park and Primrose Hill, Richmond Park and St. James's Park.

Other maintained important spaces include Brompton Cemetery and Victoria Tower Gardens.

Collectively, these designed landscapes comprise some 5,000 acres. This enables free access for tens of millions of visitors every year, to nature, horticulture, sport, wildlife, trees, water and so much more. Many are also highly valuable places: for example, two of the parks are designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest and one is a World Heritage Site.

The roots of these parks stem from the need for outdoor leisure time; in their earliest incarnation, as hunting grounds, and more recently in the Victorian era (1837–1901), when promenading residents and visitors would meet and walk in splendid, designed landscapes. They were places for bringing together culture, business and gossip. Set within the naturalistic landscapes of remnant deer parks, parkland trees, mown grass and meadows, semi-natural woodlands, wetlands and ponds, there were also horticultural highlights: flower walks, avenues, ornamental lakes and bold bedding were sights to inspire and enhance London life.

HORTICULTURE IN THE CHARITY'S WIDER CONTEXT

All the work delivered across parks, gardens and maintained outdoor spaces sits within The Royal Parks' *Corporate Strategy 2022-27*. Not only is the focus 'to provide free access to beautiful, natural and historic parks' but the three core objectives directly link with the specifics laid out in this *Horticulture Vision*.

- **Objective 1 – Welcome everyone:**
Making the visitor a key focus of our work and delighting them with plants.
- **Objective 2 – Conserve and enhance:**
Protecting our landscapes while adapting to climate change.
- **Objective 3 – Build a secure future:**
Ensuring that horticulture can support the charity's resilience and sustainability objectives.

Horticulture is the art and practice of growing plants and undertaking garden cultivation. Its broad approach includes choosing and selecting plants for specific locations; understanding health, disease and pest management; ongoing care and husbandry; creativity and skill in the visual appeal of plants; balancing plant choice for biodiversity and climate resilience and more.

Plants are the heartbeat of horticulture. It is perhaps sometimes the most visible work that visitors relate to in a park or historic landscape – the drama of the flowers or the impact of a curated scheme. The Royal Parks' horticulture pedigree is longstanding and includes the bedding displays in front of Buckingham Palace; John Nash's innovative horticultural approach in St. James's Park and William Nesfield's Avenue Gardens in The Regent's Park.

Horticultural fashions and trends change over time, and much of the work of The Royal Parks has been to identify key eras of planting styles and garden design. As we look forward, the work of the Horticulture and Landscape Team faces many opportunities, from the needs of the tens of millions of visitors a year, to dealing with climate resilience, and providing beauty and splendour at the right time and in the right place.

In 2022, The Royal Parks appointed Head Gardeners across the parks to help deliver objective 2 of the Corporate Strategy, which will 'protect the parks for future generations' while maintaining 'world class horticultural excellence'. This gives a clear and unambiguous sense of direction for Head Gardeners, Park Managers and other key contributors.

This *Horticulture Vision* is therefore an important link between the corporate objectives and the individual parks; it brings together all the considerations needed to put The Royal Parks' horticulture and landscapes onto a firm footing. Specific projects for each park are outlined in park management plans.

We have a fine and exciting horticultural legacy from our ancestors and contemporary custodians. The challenge set out in this *Horticulture Vision* is how we continue the very best of the past, but with the visitor needs, biodiversity requirements and climatic uncertainty which challenge us now.

HORTICULTURE VISION

This *Horticulture Vision 2026-31* seeks to deliver an exciting, new direction for the Royal Parks of London. By creating awe-inspiring planting for our visitors' enjoyment, improving our treatment of the planet, and responding to the climate emergency, we can bring a new era to London's Royal Parks.

1. EVERYDAY WONDER

The parks have the power to bring awe, wonder and wellbeing to visitors every time they visit, through creative horticulture and sense of place.

2. CREATING ICONIC HORTICULTURE

Taking inspiration from heritage, character and local conditions, we will create iconic and beautiful horticultural moments across our parks.

3. DIVERSE PLANTING

We can broaden the range of plants across the parks, planting with confidence in a breadth of styles for our changing climate and the biodiversity crisis.

4. RESPECTING HERITAGE

To plan for a successful future, we must understand our parks' past heritage to identify planting styles that are still successful and those which need to evolve.

5. A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

A strengthened approach of working with nature and the environment will underpin all the horticultural work we do.

Photo: Victorian-inspired summer bedding with palms and conifers in The Avenue Gardens, The Regent's Park.



HORTICULTURE VISION OBJECTIVES



OBJECTIVE 1: EVERYDAY WONDER

The parks have the power to bring awe, wonder and wellbeing to visitors every time they visit, through creative horticulture and sense of place. Our responsibility is to deliver that to as many people as we can, in the appropriate settings, and with a clear line of sight to the individual park's character.

The Royal Parks' vision is bold and all-encompassing: 'To provide free access to beautiful, natural and historic parks, which improve our quality of life, health and wellbeing – this is particularly important in a city environment.'

This *Horticulture Vision* sets out the current challenges and exciting opportunities that face our work in the coming years.

Photo previous page:
A view of the Greenwich
Park Rose Garden,
designed by Thomas
Brown, Head Gardener.

WHAT DOES THIS VISION DELIVER FOR THE PARK VISITOR?

The Royal Parks offer a sensational opportunity to showcase different styles of horticulture and plant groups to a primarily urban audience. This community – who may not have access to private gardens or greenery, nor the financial or physical means of visiting gardens outside London – are at the heart of what we must deliver. Lessons from the Covid pandemic showed the genuine value placed by people on being outdoors and among plants, as do the myriad scientific studies proving nature's link with mental wellbeing.

These connections may not be new, but perhaps often overlooked or forgotten. Founder of modern nursing, Florence Nightingale, was ahead of her time not just understanding the connection between people and nature, but the impact of the diversity of flowering plants on people: 'Little as we know about the way in which we are affected by form, by colour, by light, we do know this, that they have an actual physical effect. Variety of form and brilliance of colour in the objects presented to patients are actual means of recovery.'

More recently, as psychiatrist Sue Stuart-Smith explains, flowering plants and garden settings have been found to alter the human brain's electrical activity through increasing levels of alpha waves (alpha rhythm is a form of neurological nourishment, lifting mood through the release of serotonin).

Horticulture can inspire joy, awe and create memories. These lasting impressions may, at their simplest, encourage people to stop and pause during their daily commute through a park, or it may light a spark of creativity for their own balcony or garden. For those even more invested, that same horticultural moment may motivate the visitor to research a particular plant or gardening style. Whether it's the beauty of flower colour, the deliciousness of scent, or the sound of water, these simple but powerful impacts on human senses broaden the accessibility of horticulture to the park visitor. We must never underestimate the power in this and as humans, being part of the biodiversity ecosystem, this sense of awe has genuine legitimacy and value – it runs deeper than just a pretty aesthetic.

The Royal Parks manages hundreds of acres through central London alone, holding the ability to inspire millions of residents, commuters and tourists through horticulture.

In fact, gardens and garden visiting are crucial for the UK economy: the Oxford Economics report in 2023 stated that garden visiting contributed Gross Value Added of £6.6 billion to the economy. According to the Office for National Statistics International Passenger Survey, a third of all inbound tourists to the UK included a visit to a park or public garden.

None of this happens by default though – modern society is busy, frenetic and too often distracted by phones or media. The opportunity we have is to make people (residents and tourists) slow down, to stop and take in their surroundings – a tall ask perhaps but if anyone can do it, the Royal Parks can.

While those with an appreciation of plants, gardening and nature will have a level of appreciation and connection with the parks, many may not. Horticulture that offers the so-called ‘wow factor’ can initiate this turning point, a first step to combat the concept of ‘plant blindness’. In 2004, E. Schussler and J. Wandersee stated that ‘plant blindness refers to the inability to see or notice the plants in one’s own environment’.

Before people can engage with plants, the first step is to notice them. And this is where the skill of a gardener comes in. Creating a visually beautiful and nature-friendly garden can offer people the opportunity of stepping through a portal into another world or the feeling of being transported overseas. The ‘feel good factor’ and visual awe inspired by planted landscapes underline the success of tourism hits such as cherry blossom in Japan, autumnal colours of New England, or the flower bulbs of Keukenhof in The Netherlands.

Different plants and different styles of horticulture stimulate different reactions to different tastes. Fortunately, the Royal Parks has the space to offer a range of planting styles and intentions, and these can be tailored to the park’s landscape character and design, microclimates, soil types, or history.

This horticultural hit of wellbeing can be delivered in all the parks, in different forms and styles, to complement the wider park landscapes – but always catering for the range of visitors we welcome.

Photo: Visitors congregate annually at Greenwich Park, a place known and celebrated for cherry blossom.



“No one will protect what they don’t care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced.”

– David Attenborough, 2020



WHAT DOES THE HORTICULTURE VISION DELIVER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?

In 2020, The Royal Parks declared a climate emergency and, we believe, horticulture can play a part in responding to that. Put simply, we know that growing plants, maintaining parks and caring for the environment go hand in hand. Evidence proves that soil health, air quality, visual stimulation and plant diversity benefit humans as much as they do the wildlife and environment we share the space with. The *RHS State of Gardening Report 2025* confirmed that the 959,800 gardens in the UK store an estimated 158m tonnes

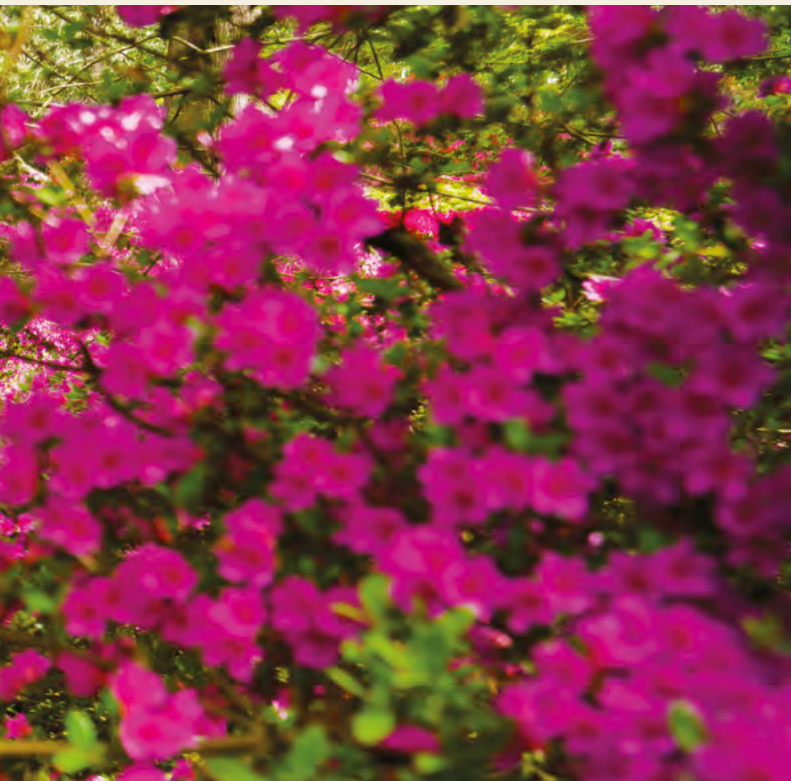
of carbon; plus gardens support around half of all UK birds, mammals, butterflies, reptiles and amphibians. Our gardens – and therefore parks – are must-haves in the fight against climate change and wildlife degradation.

Inspiring people to garden can be a hugely beneficial role for The Royal Parks. A new generation can only be inspired if their imagination is captured; children and grandchildren especially can have their attention seized by memorable plants. A diversity of plants will offer a positive experience for many park visitors, many of whom don't know about plants and gardening – nor the benefit they bring to the environment.

Plants can help cool the urban environment, absorb carbon, capture pollution, reduce noise, mitigate flooding, as well as beautifying and greening neighbourhoods – on a larger scale they can even increase house prices. There are myriad benefits for improving biodiversity too, for those living above and below ground. These 'ecosystem services' (the direct and indirect contributions of ecosystems to human wellbeing) are most efficiently delivered by the right planting choices.

Photo left: The Isabella Plantation within Richmond Park is known for its spring displays of *Rhododendron* which flower unapologetically in bold sweeps.

Photo right: Olives and other Mediterranean planting at the Italian Gardens, in Kensington Gardens, designed by Russell Stevens, Head Gardener.





Historically, some gardening practices had a negative effect on the environment. This *Horticulture Vision* (and supporting guidance documents) formalises a clearer approach and recommends which practices are best left in the past:

- Digging and overcultivation of ground is a primary concern. No-dig practices are best adopted, though it is acknowledged for changing planting, some soil disturbance is inevitable. Soil erosion through summer drought (dust) and winter run-off means we must adopt permanent planting styles in the majority of formal gardens – as opposed to those plantings which require frequent seasonal changes.
- A more relaxed approach to leaving leaf litter in appropriate places.
- A move away from synthetic fertilisers in all horticultural areas.
- Training and improved understanding of soil health and its role in assisting better carbon lockup, water absorption and plant health.
- An end to blanket spraying of synthetic chemicals; perennial weed treatment will be on a case-by-case basis and should be minimal and targeted.
- Responsible and sustainable use of water for the establishment of new planting schemes, and the protection of valuable plants or trees during drought periods (but not as a routine practice).
- Peat-free purchasing and the production of plant material at the Hyde Park Nursery.
- Careful management or outright removal of species considered invasive, or those with the ability to become a nuisance species.
- A reduction of bedding plant displays on a case-by-case basis, scrutinising historic value, current success rates and landscape impact.
- Greater plant diversity in horticultural areas for safeguarding against new pest and disease outbreaks, and climate resilience.

Photo: Lakeside meadow in St. James's Park is peppered with exotic plants, a nod to the warm micro-climate this park experiences.

LOOKING AFTER OUR LAND WITH THE ENVIRONMENT IN MIND

Healthy parks start with healthy soil. The importance of our soil health cannot be overstated for carbon capture, moisture absorption and plant health.

The Royal Parks' biodiversity enhancement initiatives are integral to the work of the charity, and as a result many important species of invertebrate, mammals and native plants flourish. But we must remember that our plants and parks do not exist in a silo, and there are many synergies between The Royal Parks' horticulture, landscape and biodiversity initiatives. Closer working

together of different departments not only helps the individual Royal Parks but the wider environment too.

We have the enviable position of having enough physical space to showcase a range of habitats and styles of management, even in the central parks, from formal to natural – including space for a relaxed, informal style of management, such as those seen in The Green Park. The challenge is perhaps visitor perception, and the fine line between 'light touch' management and appearing unmanaged (to those less tolerant of such principles). These perceptions can often be alleviated by visual 'cues to care' such as a mown strip of grass alongside a path which sits alongside a meadow, or deadwood stacked in an intentionally purposeful way as opposed to being

left strewn across an area. Delivering associated interpretation and educational information will also help give a deeper level of understanding to visitors, and explain the vital work we do.

The 'right plant in the right place' is a simple and perhaps underplayed approach, as healthy plants and trees deliver a wide range of ecosystem services for people and biodiversity. There has never been a better moment to reassess the gardening and landscape maintenance practices considered normal or routine, especially as our patron, His Majesty King Charles III, is a long-time advocate of gardening and organic gardening especially. So now is our time to act and bring all this together – for our visitors, for our environment and for our future.

Photo: Primroses herald
the arrival of spring in
Brompton Cemetery.



“For every 1% increase in soil organic matter, the first foot of soil is able to hold an additional 16,500 gallons of water per acre.”

– Sustainable Food Trust, 2018

OBJECTIVE 2: CREATING ICONIC HORTICULTURE

Taking inspiration from heritage, character and local conditions, we will create iconic and beautiful horticultural moments across our parks.

Endeavouring to showcase small snippets of planting styles for all tastes, in all seasons, at all parks, risks diminishing our impact and ultimately makes no impression on a park visitor.

In contrast, focused impactful planting has a clear season of interest, a defined aesthetic or theme, and delivers a visual impact to the visitor. 'Impactful planting' can be understood to be a curated scene, something that makes people stop and stare – and even take a photo.

By introducing a sharper, curated vision of the horticultural identities of different areas of the parks – and then celebrating them with confidence – The Royal Parks can deliver 'iconic horticulture'.

The concept of 'iconic horticulture' is a shorthand for understanding the identity and feel of that place. It uses plants, and the skill of the gardeners, to tell visitors 'you are here' and that by default, 'here' is a unique place. Plus, it shows a planting approach that may inspire at different times of the year rather than just in summer months.

Horticulture doesn't happen in isolation, it is an integral part of the designed landscape. Other elements which are integral include:

- Lakes and ponds including ornamental water features
- Children's playgrounds
- Bridges
- Railings
- Benches and furniture
- Signage
- Visual appearance of catering and commercial outlets
- Statues, sculptures, memorials and monuments
- Path/road surfaces and edge details
- Buildings, follies and other built structures

When the above landscape components are in fine order, the visitor experience is greatly enhanced. A functioning ornamental water fountain, for example, can create a soothing sound that masks the noises of city life – and allows a sense of escape from the rush of modern life.

Therefore, the challenge is to create iconic horticulture, recognising the landscape context that exists and that creates a setting for the horticultural elements. The parks all have different design and atmospheric distinctions, and horticulture should evolve to support and help define these identities.

By challenging ourselves to really work out the essence of that space, we can then impart that learning and passion to visitors. For example, the differing elements of the woodland gardens at Bushy Park require a stronger sense of identity to help them stand apart from, for example, The Isabella Plantation.

This *Horticulture Vision* proposes that a register of The Royal Parks' iconic horticulture be compiled, led by the Head of Horticulture and Landscape Strategy, informed by Head Gardeners, Park Managers and their wider teams. Together they can share recent, effective approaches, successful genera or plant groups, and locational suitability. These wishes must align with a suitable rationale, bringing together topics such as biodiversity, climate resilience, history and experimental credentials. Each park will exhibit a maximum of seven iconic identifiers, and a minimum of three.



Photo: A bold planting of *Rosa* 'Precious Amber' with *Cotinus* 'Young Lady' (smoke bush) in Queen Mary's Gardens, The Regent's Park, designed by Anna Rafal, Head Gardener.





Photo previous page, top:
The horticulture team tend
to The Queen Elizabeth II
Garden at The Regent's
Park, which opened in April
2026. © Sarah M. Lee

Photo previous page,
bottom left: Thousands
of seedlings are pricked
out by hand at the Hyde
Park Nursery each year.

Photo previous page,
bottom right: Fabiola
Alcaraz Perez, a volunteer
at the Hyde Park Nursery
checks the homegrown
crop of *Pelargonium*.

Photo above: Beth Handley,
Head Gardener for Hyde
Park lays out a new climate
resilient planting scheme
in front of The Old Police
House, Hyde Park.

CELEBRATING OUR PEOPLE

We are fortunate in having two incredibly valuable people-focused forces within The Royal Parks: our staff and our volunteers.

This *Horticulture Vision* recognises that the opportunities we have – and the challenges we face – can only be fully realised by an engaged, collegiate and focused workforce. Our individual and collective attitude is vital, and we have much positive traction to date. Cross-departmental working can be increased; sharing strategies from different teams (arboriculture, biodiversity, landscape architecture, etc.) can focus delivery; and we should support our individual team members to think big and aspire.

We are also incredibly lucky to have the dedication of the volunteers. Contributing approximately 22,000 hours a year, there are some 500 volunteers helping in the parks, exclusively on gardening and horticultural tasks. From potting plants in the Hyde Park Nursery to weeding, dead-heading and engaging with visitors, our volunteers bring the life and heritage of the Royal Parks to a visiting public. They also actively contribute to improving our climate resilience and increasing our biodiversity across our estate.

The role of volunteers will continue to be a defining achievement in what The Royal Parks can deliver on the ground, and the *Horticulture Vision* will focus on how we can engage, maximise and attract a wide range of volunteers.

CELEBRATING OUR HEAD GARDENERS

The appointment of Head Gardeners to all Royal Parks marks the start of an exciting new chapter where horticulture can have a distinct focus. These roles help support the need for creating iconic horticulture.

Some parks have extensive horticultural areas spread across vast areas (such as The Regent's Park and Richmond Park) and in these instances, multiple Head Gardeners could be appointed to one park, with specific remits.

It is essential that this team is brought together and feels a cohesion and support for cross-park working, sharing best practice while ensuring efforts are not duplicated.

Training, development and off-site learning for inspiration and keeping up-to-date with the industry is essential and this development will be led by the Head of Horticulture and Landscape Strategy. The deployment of skills and knowledge to apprentices and volunteers will always be strongest when the Head Gardener is skilled and confident in their own education and learning.

Furthermore, connections with the wider horticultural industry will be sought, including media coverage of The Royal Parks' horticulture; involvement in RHS plant trials and committees (where relevant); and general networking opportunities with specialist nurseries and National Plant Collection Holders.

OBJECTIVE 3: DIVERSE PLANTING

We can broaden the range of plants across the parks, planting with confidence in a breadth of styles for our changing climate – and as a result, The Royal Parks can welcome some of the richest and most interesting planting in any capital city.

The long-established gardening culture in the UK has resulted in vast plant diversity in both gardens and nurseries. The RHS *Plant Finder* directory lists some 64,000 plant names in the 2026 edition, testament to the staggering range of plants available through UK nurseries.

Diversity of genera, species and cultivars enables resilience through the sheer breadth of variety. Pests, diseases and physiological damage from extreme weather will be more prevalent in monocultures, or on plants growing in unsuitable conditions. Using a diverse range of plants, and taking the time to source them from origins suited to the specific locations, will pay dividends.

RECOGNISING THE VALUE OF CULTIVATED PLANTS

The range of cultivar plants (cultivated varieties) has greatly increased since horticulture started to become normalised in the parks, as has the diversity of species and genera. Many of the cultivars in cultivation are of ‘garden origin’ and have been selected, typically for the following reasons:

- Improved garden performance (i.e. longer flowering periods)
- Better tolerance of pest and diseases
- Improved/desirable growth habit
- Sterile flower parts to avoid self-sowing
- Improved visual appearance

The horticultural areas across the parks offer the opportunity to showcase cultivar plant diversity to a much greater degree than currently practised. The longer flowering season of perennials, coupled with creative planting design, can now rival the flowering periods of many bedding plants.

With a longer growing season, and as autumn frosts arrive later than they did 50 years ago, repeat flowering perennials can also offer pollinators a much later, extended, food source, as well as pleasing park visitors with visual impact.

Photo: Planted in 2024 into mostly gravel and hardcore scalplings, a drought-tolerant scheme featuring *Yucca rostrata* flourishes outside The Old Police House, Hyde Park.





FUTURE PLANTS GROWN BY US

The Royal Parks is very fortunate to have a glasshouse growing facility in Hyde Park, with a dedicated team employed directly by the charity. Traditionally, this facility has had a focus on bedding plants, though as palettes of planting evolve across the parks, the Hyde Park Nursery needs to diversify the range of plants grown. It also needs to create more propagation facilities to enable this wider range of hardy plant stock.

Related to this change is the need to begin growing our own tree stock. The tree nursery market cannot always guarantee:

- A wide-ranging diversity of species and cultivars
- Quantity required for large projects such as avenue replanting
- A natural form (trees are often trained with a clear stem for urban use which doesn't always suit the required aesthetic)
- Stock grown from seed sourced in drier summer climes

In addition, this *Horticulture Vision* advises a change to favouring trees grown in air pots, which are not always commercially available.

To this end, a site will be identified at Bushy Park to begin the growing of new tree stock, to serve all the Royal Parks, given the fact that the Hyde Park Nursery does not have the footprint to start such a production.

Photo: The Hyde Park Nursery boasts a diverse collection of *Pelargonium* which are propagated and used for summer bedding schemes, coping well with the warmer summer temperatures London is experiencing.

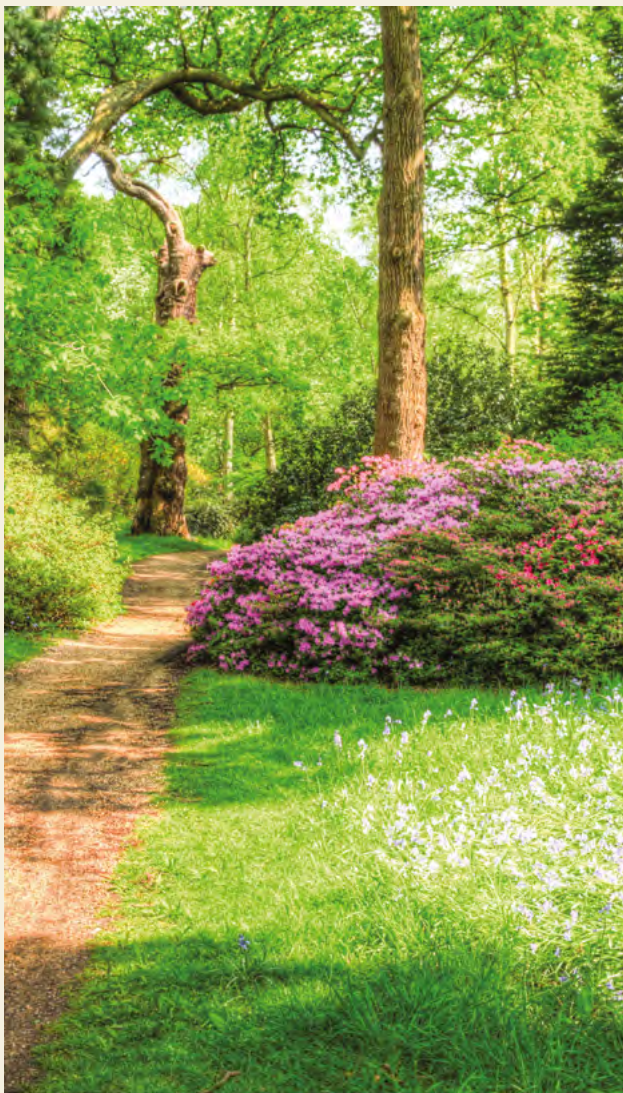


Photo: The fragile native oak canopy of the Isabella Plantation which is under pressure from pest, disease and the changing climate.

VALUING THE TREESCAPE

Trees are an essential component in the designed landscape and in horticultural areas, so it is to be welcomed that the tree strategy promotes complementary elements, most pertinently:

- Crown raising or other pruning for aesthetic value to manage views, vistas or simply show off the tree's form to its full advantage.
- Proactive management of overplanted areas to allow trees to reach their full potential.
- Adopting a diverse tree planting palette for horticultural situations and for climate resilience in wider park areas.
- New tree planting motivated by opportunity for meaningful new establishment, integration of species and biodiversity support, and recognition of ancient and veteran trees – not simply a target number.

Given the backbone of mature trees across the Royal Parks, and the threats presented by climate change, new pests and diseases and the urgent need to diversify tree planting, a new role has been created to focus on these areas. The Treescape Curator will have these challenges woven into their role, and will also focus on landscape aesthetic – a remit new to tree management at The Royal Parks.

PLANT COLLECTIONS AND LABELLING

Horticulture across the parks can showcase plant diversity, and through this diversity, both resilience and spectacle can be achieved. There is no requirement to compete with botanic or RHS Gardens, however plant collections will be expanded in line with the following rationale:

- To elaborate on the history, spirit or iconic horticultural identity of the park.
- For display and enjoyment of the park visitor.
- Climate resilience for both experimentation and innovation.

Planting lists for new schemes and designs will be filed and stored by Head Gardeners, both for historical interest and to offer the ability to share with other parks and interested parties when requested.

A GIS capability planned for the parks further supports the collation and reference points of all planned improvements.

Care must be taken when editing and removing old planting schemes, if plant content is considered rare (i.e. no longer listed in the current RHS *Plant Finder*) or a cultivar is registered as 'Endangered' or 'Threatened' in cultivation by Plant Heritage. Should this situation arise, a case-by-case assessment will

be undertaken with the Head of Horticulture and Landscape Strategy, before removing the material. If the species or cultivars are no longer suited to the local climate, their removal will likely be supported, and material offered to a garden or collection with a more suited climate.

This *Horticulture Vision* promotes improved horticulture across the parks but does not suggest a move towards labelling all plants individually. Botanical plant labelling will only be committed to with a resource to support it, and the ongoing maintenance of labels, and updating of names (as plants are often reclassified) is no small undertaking. Labelling of rare plants can lead to plant theft, as found at many botanic gardens and large public gardens.

Labels can also fall victim to theft as souvenir pieces and be damaged by grey squirrels.

With the advancement of technology however, plants are now easily identified through photographic identification, and this technology is ever improving – helping both parks visitor and gardening staff.

However, where a history of detailed labelling has existed, such as the roses of Queen Mary's Gardens at The Regent's Park, this will continue, given the diversity of rose cultivars. All styling and nomenclatural accuracy must be followed in line with the RHS *Plant Finder*, displaying the genus name for horticultural integrity. It will be the responsibility of the Head Gardener to maintain these labels.

Other recommendations for labelling plants include where the similarities between cultivars are subtle, and the collection is significant – such as the Wilson 50 Kurume azaleas at The Isabella Plantation, in Richmond Park. Exemplary trees that are not easily identifiable due to foliage being out of physical reach, or outright rarity, may also be considered for case-by-case individual labelling. Labels should not be directly attached to the tree stem.

Photo left: Seedling vegetables being raised for the Queens Orchard kitchen garden at Greenwich Park.

Photo right: Anna Rafal, Head Gardener at The Regent's Park, re-labelled the rose collection in 2024.



OBJECTIVE 4: RESPECTING HERITAGE

To plan for a successful future, we must understand our parks' past heritage to identify planting styles that are still successful and those which need to evolve. By rigorously challenging ourselves about the balance between our heritage and the future, we will have a much clearer sense of direction.

The Royal Parks are steeped in heritage and have been influenced by significant names in garden history such as Nash, Bridgeman and Nesfield as well as countless royalty – Queen Caroline, The Prince Regent and Prince Albert.

However, the horticulture within these landscapes does not need to be preserved in sepia. Rather, the past can be acknowledged and – where historical themes are strongest – conserved and celebrated, even if the planting palettes are likely to evolve. The roses of Queen Mary's Gardens at The Regent's Park, or the Nash landscape of St. James's Park, are historic examples that can be celebrated but reimagined or renewed in the light of sustainable approaches.

It is, of course, still possible to maintain a historic sense of place, with the development of plant content, guided by a team of skilled Head Gardeners.

But planting decisions must now respond and evolve for these reasons:

- Climate resilience and biodiversity crisis (risk)
- Evolving pest and disease (risk)
- Improved breadth of plants available (opportunity)
- Improved sustainable maintenance practices (opportunity)

Photo: Designed and cared for by the St. James's Park Team, the iconic Victorian bedding displays on show at The Coronation Procession for King Charles III and Queen Camilla in 2023.





CONTINUING TO PLANT SPLENDOUR

The Victorian era brought much horticulture to the parks, most significantly formal bedding plant displays, peppered with exotics (plants from around the world). Perhaps fittingly, the borders around the Queen Victoria Memorial outside Buckingham Palace, cared for by the St. James's Park team, are a celebration of that period. Also of great design merit are the listed Italian Gardens of Kensington Gardens, said to be a present from Prince Albert to Queen Victoria, inspired by the Italianate designs of Osborne House. These are vignettes from a different era, many of which are lost (for a variety of reasons) from public parks across the UK.

West London was a hub for horticultural nurseries, and the areas around Kensington Gardens and Brompton Cemetery were a treasure trove of plant diversity. Perhaps one of the most significant was the Royal Exotic Nursery, which, under the guidance

of James Veitch junior, became the largest of its kind in Europe, covering some 100 acres. In its prime, it was supplying plants across the country, including to Brompton Cemetery, where he was later laid to rest. Thomas Moore and Robert Fortune are also buried in Brompton Cemetery, further cementing the 'garden cemetery' ethos, as significant horticultural nurserymen and plant hunters resting among the trees and meadows.

The fascination with plants considered to be 'exotic' was of great interest to the Victorians, and historic images of the Hyde Park Dell from the late 1800s show palm trees 'bedded out' by the waterfall.

With the inevitable advancement of climate change, many of these more unusual plants from around the world can now be grown outdoors year-round and considered 'hardy'. This is an opportunity the Victorians would have doubtlessly found fascinating and something we can embrace.



Photo top: *Howea* palms and *Strelitzia* bedded out in the Hyde Park Dell in 1896. © Antiqua Print Gallery / Alamy

Photo bottom: *Ensete* and other banana relatives jostle with *Howea* palms in St. James's Park in 2026.

HORTICULTURE'S PLACE IN THE PARKS

While the parks are designed landscapes, this vision acknowledges they are not all gardened, nor do they all have horticulture woven through them. The parks evolved from royal deer parks with 'naturalistic' yet designed landscapes, with meadows, parkland trees, woodlands, shrubberies and hedgerows as well as gardens. Areas such as the acid grasslands of Greenwich and Richmond Parks need a completely different management approach to that of the Isabella Plantation, for example.

It is therefore prudent to recognise that the designed horticultural zones are different from the wider or wilder landscapes. The gardened areas within the outer parks are often fenced against deer, and have a history of non-native plants and trees.

As a result, the Royal Parks are blessed. There is enough acreage to serve both interest areas – that of native species, prioritising biodiversity in open parkland, and those of non-native horticultural planting in designed spaces.

People can learn and be inspired from both approaches – the expertise of the horticultural team can lead in horticultural areas, and similarly, the biodiversity team in areas which are not 'gardened'. It is not a case of either or, but a case of identifying which areas require which primary set of skills from The Royal Parks teams. And in so doing, this approach recognises the role of these historic landscapes and the way they can be managed in the future.



Photo: The unspoilt and naturalistic landscapes of Bushy Park are home to spectacular herds of wild red and fallow deer.

Such landscapes are managed with animals and wider biodiversity in mind as opposed to cultivated horticulture.

OBJECTIVE 5: A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

A strengthened approach of working with nature and the environment will underpin all the horticultural work we do. Horticulture can be a positive force for good, for the planet and for increasing biodiversity – and ultimately that starts with the soil.

The climate of the British Isles has warmed since the creation of The Royal Parks charity, with recent decades showing unprecedented warmth (Royal Meteorological Society, 2022). Long gone are the days of the Victorians thinking they should grow camellias in glasshouses. At the Chelsea Physic Garden for example, a fruiting grapefruit tree has flourished for well over a decade, surprising and delighting visitors.

The sheltered and built-up structure of London, as with many cities, creates a heat-island effect: this enables a unique microclimate which mirrors the conditions of many Mediterranean climates. Through design or by accident, one can now find

established examples of *Bougainvillea*, *Araucaria heterophylla* (Norfolk Island pine) and countless avocados across London. Just a few miles out of the capital, these plants cannot survive.

This *Horticulture Vision* encourages an opportunity for innovation and experimentation that does not exist at the moment – and we must seize it. Woven into mixed sustainable plantings, experimental hardiness plantings can offer great conversation, learning and (with recorded results) be of horticultural and scientific value. Not only does this give us horticultural awe and inspiration, it also affords potential collaboration with organisations such as the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) and their Plant Trials Team. The central parks offer conditions which none of the five RHS Gardens have, and half-hardy plants could be explored further through trialling in the parks. This will cement cross-industry learning, while also showing that our parks are not just horticultural destinations – they are places of endeavour and learning.

Photo: A mature *Acacia dealbata* (mimosa) fills the landscape with colour and scent on a January day in Queen Mary's Gardens, The Regent's Park.



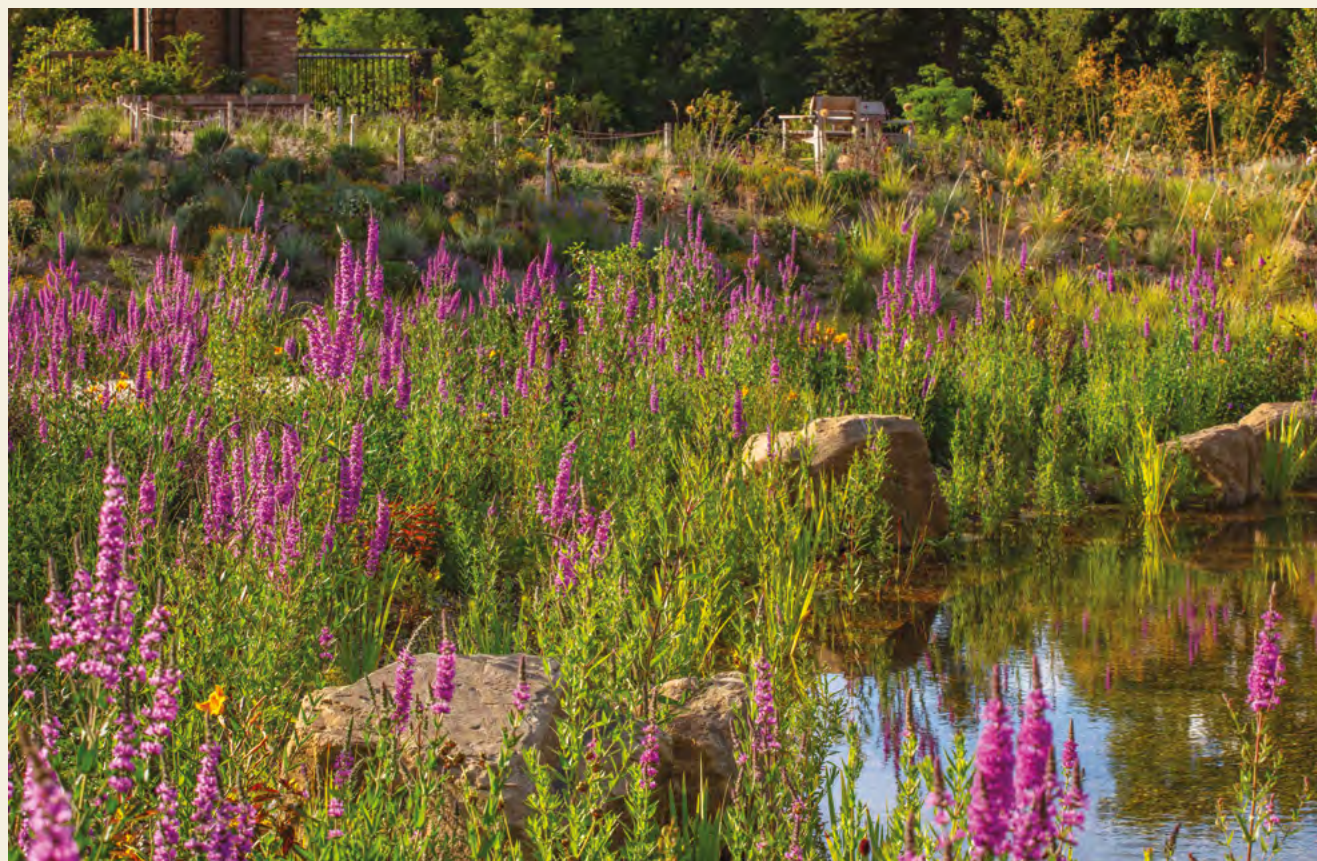
EMBRACING APPROACHES TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Climatic extremes are the only certainty in our uncertain environment. There isn't a silver bullet for horticulture to deal with it, but the following principles will future-proof The Royal Parks' horticultural areas:

- Understanding of microclimates and behaviours of local conditions i.e. areas prone to flooding, extreme drought or wind tunnels and adjusting planting accordingly.
- Evolving and changing planting to suit the needs of the situation, if climate events are dictating a change to growing conditions.
- Promoting plant health to improve resilience, achieved through improving soil health and applying a diversity of mulches.
- Planning for flooding and winter waterlogging by designing resilient planting, as opposed to diverting water into drainage systems.

- Identifying plants or collections vulnerable to climatic change and developing material sharing approaches to other public gardens in climatic zones considered more suitable.
- Through plant selection, reducing dependency on irrigation.
- Evolving maintenance techniques and timings to provide better habitat and resilience.

Photo: A swale with water loving plantings of *Lythrum* (purple loosestrife) are designed to cope with sudden high rainfall events.



THE POTENTIAL FOR EXCITING PLANTING

The parks already include a significant range of both winter and summer bedding, and substantial numbers of roses. But this is too limiting – visually, for engaging audiences, and mitigating climate change. There is an opportunity to strengthen (in some places begin) the following styles, which are manageable in a public park setting*:

- Flowering perennial meadows
- Mixed flowering plant matrixes
- Hardy cacti and succulents
- Jungle themed planting in a permanent style
- Autumn flower gardens
- Winter gardening
- Foliage themed plantings
- Mass flowering bulb displays of wider diversity
- Flowering climbers on trees, railings and other supports
- Ornamental grasses
- Clipped shrubbery and topiary
- Edible plants and fruit trees
- Flowering shrubberies
- Aquatic plants



While many of the above are already peppered in horticultural areas across the parks, they are seldom done with enough confidence. Planting numbers can be much more substantial to create visual impact, while being more in tune with the size of the beds and borders which are often generous given the scale of the parks. Planting should only be in 'domestic numbers' in very small spaces, such as St. John's Lodge Garden at The Regent's Park.

Photo above: A view across The Hyde Park Dell featuring young hardy palms and established *Acanthus mollis* (bear's breeches).

Photo next page, left: Species tulips and *Muscari* (grape hyacinth) growing in recycled crushed concrete in The Queen Elizabeth II Garden, The Regent's Park.

Photo next page, right: *Liriodendron* (tulip tree) mulched with homemade compost in Kensington Gardens.

*High maintenance styles of horticulture are deliberately omitted such as alpine plant collections, bonsai and other specialist plant groups.

GREEN ENERGY AND THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

As technology develops, the ability to switch to battery-powered mechanical tools – or switch fuel types away from fossil fuels – is becoming more apparent. This step-change is well advanced at The Royal Parks.

This *Horticulture Vision* recognises the ambition of sustaining a circular economy within The Royal Parks and that its

concept will be threaded through all management decisions:

- Keeping green waste within the space it was generated, or if impractical, in a local composting system.
- Re-using homemade compost, if not on beds and borders, spread across compacted areas of amenity grassland.
- Capturing and re-using rainwater.
- Providing opportunity for water to soak into the spaces in which it lands, by implementing SuDS as opposed to draining away into other systems.
- Embracing hardcore, rubble and other non-organic materials already present in soils and planting accordingly.
- Storing and reusing our own woodchip from tree pruning for soil health mulches.



LOOKING AHEAD



MAKING THE CHANGE HAPPEN

Improving internal and cross-departmental working, listening to the views of experts, and providing a suite of supporting documents will allow teams to deliver this *Horticulture Vision* effectively and quickly.

The *Horticulture Vision* cannot sit in isolation if it is to serve as a successful contributing factor to the landscapes and estates of the Royal Parks. If we are to truly put the park visitor at the heart of what we do, we need increased cross-departmental working and understanding.

This will not only improve respect across the teams, but also increase internal understanding of parks and gardens. In addition, this cross-department working is often where ideas flourish and excitement is generated.

Closely linked to this *Horticulture Vision* are park management plans which complement the scope of this report through common elements, such as:

- **Context:** laying out the setting of the parks through a historic, environmental, communal and aesthetic framework; identifying the management challenges and a variety of site-specific sensitivities.

- **Landscape character:** describing areas within the park, assessing their significance and their condition; identifying all opportunities and their priority; preserving designed and relevant landscape features and celebrating them.
- **Policies:** describing the park policies that inform management decisions; ensuring planting and design is suitable for the scale of the parks.
- **Implementation:** employment and use of landscape architects/garden designers as applicable to ensure park landscapes are not compromised.

In addition, 'guidance documents' will facilitate these changes happening. These short, focused reports will be used to support the decision-making process for the *Horticulture Vision*. Topics will include 'iconic horticulture', 'the role of bedding', 'leaving the leaves' and so on. That means that the teams delivering the works on the ground will have supportive documents to ensure we have a united and clear pathway.

Photo previous page:
The magnificent 'Still Pond' at the Isabella Plantation, Richmond Park, in full bloom with mature rhododendrons under a canopy of oak trees.



ESTABLISHING AN EXPERT HORTICULTURAL COUNCIL

This *Horticulture Vision* proposes the creation of an advisory board of expert volunteers, who can advise and critique on major horticultural and landscape challenges and opportunities. A twice annual meeting should take place at a park on rotation, covering live projects, opportunities and challenges. The advisory board should be seen as ‘critical friends’ to the internal teams.

Such a panel can add value in the following broad terms:

- A fresh pair of eyes, not connected to operational challenges, who can see the park as both an external expert and a visitor.
- Brings knowledge and contacts with their experience.
- Helps to raise the profile of The Royal Parks.
- Challenges internal decision making.
- Helps guide and steer the internal team on major decisions.
- Supports the Landscape Character Assessment process if required.

An Expert Horticultural Council will be made up of the following skill sets:

- Landscape design, of proven industry standard. i.e. awards for designed or historic landscapes.
- Knowledge expert on cultivated ornamental plants.
- Tree specialist.
- Historian on parks/garden/landscape history.
- Ecologist or wildlife gardening expert.
- Industry expert, with broad understanding of the media and wider industry.

The advice given should be received as such – advice, not instruction, and used for reflection and consideration.



Photo: The Victorian cascade in The Hyde Park Dell with *Cordyline australis* (cabbage palm).

RECOMMENDATIONS

This *Horticulture Vision* closely complements The Royal Parks' *Corporate Strategy 2022-2027*. All recommendations come back to the three driving objectives: welcoming everyone; conserving and enhancing; building a secure future.

But for horticulture, this means a step change in our approach, delivery and wider status. We want to bring awe to people's every day; to bring interest and intrigue to a passer-by; to share our passion for plants, colour or history; to learn and develop with other teams across The Royal Parks.

Ultimately though, we need to channel the vision and confidence of our ancestors who created these parks on such an impressive scale. We must make bold decisions now if our parks are to be relevant to an increasingly diverse society; if they are to keep up with the uncertain climatic challenges; and if we are to deliver in-person beauty and real-life experience.

Therefore the success of this strategy will be to deliver:

1. EVERYDAY WONDER

The parks have the power to bring awe, wonder and wellbeing to visitors every time they visit, through creative horticulture and sense of place.

2. CREATING ICONIC HORTICULTURE

Taking inspiration from heritage, character and local conditions, we will create iconic and beautiful horticultural moments across our parks.

3. DIVERSE PLANTING

We can broaden the range of plants across the parks, planting with confidence in a breadth of styles for our changing climate and the biodiversity crisis.

4. RESPECTING HERITAGE

To plan for a successful future, we must understand our parks' past heritage to identify planting styles that are still successful and those which need to evolve.

5. A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

A new approach of working with nature and the environment will underpin all the horticultural work we do.

This *Horticulture Vision* recognises that some parts of our work are superb, though other areas need to change. As a result, there are five step changes that need to happen urgently if we are to succeed:

- A more confident horticultural approach, refreshing existing areas or, in some cases, removing them.
- Supporting the reduction of bedding plants for a more sustainable approach, while embracing new plant groups and planting styles.
- Embracing more matrix and cross-department working to get the right results for the presentation of the parks for visitors.
- Galvanising and developing our Head Gardeners, bringing their passion and skills to the fore.
- Sharing and celebrating new horticulture as it develops and telling the world why it is special and important.

Now is not the time for a strategy of doing the same. We have a public to serve and a planet to respect – and through horticulture, we can do both.



Photo: The iconic view of
Horse Guards skyline across
St. James's Park Lake.

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