

# Scotland's **GARDENS** Scheme OPEN FOR CHARITY

## **Tours Information**

### Organisers sharing "How to" Advice

*Another great idea is to offer garden tours for your garden owners, volunteers, and supporters. below in this information sheet are tips from other organisers about their experience organising (and receiving) garden tours.*

## **Arranging Tours for your Garden Owners, Team & Supporters**

Fay Smith, Area Organiser from Fife

In 2008 Scotland's Gardens Scheme in Fife procured a date to visit Highgrove and that is how it all began. It's a long way to go to visit just one garden (albeit a special garden), so we arranged a three-day trip, choosing gardens recommended or that we knew about.

I had never been on any kind of coach trip and it was a very steep learning curve, but the trip was a huge success and when we got home everyone was asking when the next one would be! Since then we have been on several day trips, a two-day trip to Dumfries, two three-day trips to the Borders and Northumberland and this year to Wigtownshire. We are off to the Borders again on 19 August for the day. These trips are very full on, by popular demand, and we cram a lot into a day, arriving home each time with a coach resembling a mobile nursery.

The main problems are finding suitable hotel accommodation for 30 people (from experience I have found that this is really the maximum any garden can comfortably deal with) at a reasonable price, working the schedule round the driver's legal driving times and deciding where and when to go. For instance, the date for the trip we are going on in August was decided by Portmore (a garden we really wanted to visit) only being able to give us two dates, and I couldn't go on one of them. Our visit to Wigtownshire fitted in with someone going to a wedding there!

Our main sources are the Yellow Book, Ken Cox's 'Scotland for Gardeners' (an excellent source for unbiased judgements on gardens, nurseries, and garden centres with good coffee shops), District Organisers, and garden owners themselves who are always interested to hear where else we are planning to go and offering suggestions. Discover Scottish Gardens is also a valuable new source.

You have to be flexible. I have several times planned an entire tour in my head and then had to re-jig the whole thing because someone has told me of somewhere else we should visit when in the area, which is how we came to visit Crinan near Creetown in May. It is also good to try and include gardens that are not generally open to the public.

Comfort stops, coffee stops (these have to be fitted in if a garden doesn't supply refreshments and/or you are travelling a considerable distance) and interesting places for lunch (especially ones selling plants) have all got to be scheduled in and all add to the enjoyment of the day and need researching – again garden owners are often good sources of such information.

Timings are crucial and Google maps and Google Earth are invaluable sources of information. I always send a reasonably detailed summary of what I am thinking of doing to the coach company before I finally settle on anything. However, I have also learned that not all coach drivers use sat nav, not all have done much research into the route (which can of course be a little daunting as not all gardens are just off a motorway or main road), so I research the whole route myself and take a very detailed crib sheet with me.

If you are travelling by coach it is really important to ask garden owners if they have access for a coach, where should it stop, park etc. and also how far people may have to walk before they even get to the garden, as you may have people unable to walk far. (That is something I try to find out at time of people booking.)

I could go on and on; every time we go anywhere I find something new to include in the mix, and I know I have possibly made the organisation sound like a monumental ordeal, but I really enjoy putting a tour together. It is challenging, but interesting, and definitely worthwhile. We always have a ball and our contact group is ever expanding. The catalyst is often someone mentioning a garden they would really like to visit.

I am now also considering organising outings to Scotland's Gardens specific openings, particularly village garden openings which would just require organising transport and leaving people to fend for themselves for an afternoon. Also, just getting together two or three drivers and filling cars to visit gardens open by arrangement, which are often neglected through people feeling intimidated phoning up to arrange a visit.

One final tip – don't do it all on your own! A) it's more fun working with someone else and B) the whole trip is not dependent on you being able to go.

**Rosemary Leckie, Area Organiser from Stirling**

This is the third year I have organised day trips for Stirlingshire.

For the first one, in 2014, we went to Portrack in the morning and then Cowhill for lunch and a garden tour in the afternoon. This was made easier for me as the owner of Cowhill is a friend and she made the contact with Portrack. I also organised a bus for a visit to Birkhall and learned a lot as the bus driver got lost around the estate!

In 2015 we went to Paxton House in the Borders. We did this jointly with the local branch of the Art Fund. The journey was long, I would not want to organise a day trip with a journey longer than 1 ½ hours. We had lunch in the cafe there, saw the gardens in the morning and then the house in the afternoon. It turned out to be very successful doing a joint trip and we split the proceeds pro rata.

In 2016, we went to The Herbalist's Garden (in Angus) in the morning, followed by lunch at a local restaurant, and then a visit to Pitmuies in the afternoon. I found that July is not a good month to organise a tour as so many of our members were on holiday, were busy in their own gardens, or had family staying. Thus our numbers were not especially good. I think June or September is more popular.

Here are my general suggestions and/or lessons learned:

- Get your bus from a recommended company, and make sure the driver knows beforehand the route, post codes, timings etc. I always have the route planned out just in case the driver is in a new area. Busses are becoming expensive, so we might think about car sharing in future if numbers are low.
- When members book for an outing, take their phone number, mobile and email address in case they need to be contacted, also if a member turns out late for the bus.
- Lunch. I usually organise a small menu with the restaurant, then ask the members when they are in the bus to make their selection from two or three dishes, and call the restaurant from the bus to give menu numbers. This saves a lot of time when we get to the restaurant. I order a main course, plus tea, coffee & tray bake. They then buy their own drinks, wine etc. I have found that the lunch is an important part of the outing.
- Tea, coffee and biscuits are always very welcome on arrival at the first garden.
- It's important to do a recce to work out best route to gardens, timings, time for lunch, distance between gardens etc.
- At the gardens, the members enjoy a talk from the owner about the plants, history of the garden, family etc. Then walk around on their own but with owner there to answer questions.
- It's also helpful to check route for loo stops, especially if journey is a long one.

And finally, we like to start early .... 8.30 am and try to be home 5.30 - 6pm.

## Being on the Recipient End – When Tours Come to You

Margaret Gimblett, District Organiser from Perth

Here are a few tips about bus parties, gleaned from Madeleine Tinson who has been at the game for a long time and my own experience over the last two years, not necessarily in order of importance.

1. Make sure you have adequate toilet facilities, preferably labelled or signposted and with enough toilet paper and more than one hand towel. It goes without saying that the loos should be spotlessly clean. OK I know obvious but I did have one party who complained about one big house they went to where the loos left a lot to be desired.
2. Make sure the bus driver knows where to park or set down his party before going elsewhere to park his bus. If the garden is in a built up area, you may need a bollard to mark a space temporarily. Also it helps to have a big yellow Scotland's Garden sign so he knows where he is to go. Most bus drivers will want to stay with their bus but it goes down well to make sure the driver has something to eat and drink if he is going to

be stopping more than a short time.

3. Find out if any passengers need assistance to get to the garden if there is more than a 200m walk from the bus, or if there are steps or slopes, gravel, or anything else which might make it difficult for someone to access the garden. Remember it might not be a disabled person who needs some assistance, but someone else who has a temporary difficulty, like recovering from an operation, stroke, heart surgery or who is simply overweight, who might not like to be thought of as disabled but would appreciate help. We run a car shuttle service up our lane and hill for such people and it is much appreciated.
4. Know the nationality of your visitors and if possible find out a little about where their home is and if they are gardeners then what their climate is like. Germans love home baking, American gardeners are often very knowledgeable and ask questions. I always have my RHS books available to fill in gaps of my and their knowledge and hunt for details of particular plants.
5. Be friendly and remember they are coming to your garden to have a memorable time and may have paid quite a lot for their tour. Be prepared for a lot of personal questions if they come into your home about paintings, tapestries, etc. and about you and your garden. Americans particularly love coming into your home. It makes for a special visit. I usually start off their visit with a very short talk (5 mins max) on the history of the garden, climate and soil condition and during a tour point out any specialties of the garden.
6. Good china - not thick mugs or paper cups - are appreciated as is home baking. If you haven't got enough, the local charity or thrift shop usually has tea sets going for under a fiver. We have a splendid collection here. If giving tea or coffee a big teapot with two handles comes in handy as does a small urn.
7. If there is a tour leader, make sure he or she is well looked after. They can be an invaluable help, especially if you give a buffet lunch, in helping and rounding up stragglers. Find out the timetable so that you don't overrun the visit. He or she might have a tight time schedule. Also you want tour leaders to get a good impression because you never know when they might bring another tour - if you are up for it.
8. You should make sure your home insurance is OK. We have never had anything taken, including plants, but keep an eye open.
9. Try not to let any one or two members of the group monopolize your attention. I like to watch out for the shyer members, or anyone on their own. A little personal attention can make their day. You will get some groups, mostly older ladies out on a club outing, who just want a meander round the garden or to sit and look at the flowers, and then have a good afternoon tea. They are not interested in plants particularly. I call them the tea and pee-ers. They will definitely want to go to the loo at least once during the visit. Keep your initial welcoming chat short.

10. Enjoy the visit. They can be great fun but are quite hard work, and make sure you have an easy meal ready at the end of the day, especially if you are giving lunch, and a glass of wine or stiff gin goes a long way to help your recovery.

**Mary Nicholson, Garden Owner from Wigtonshire**

We do group visits here. I charge £5 per person which includes a welcome coffee/tea with cake and biccies, plus a guided tour of the garden lasting a full hour. Then the visitors have a half hour opportunity to buy plants. We can accommodate buses and of course some groups come in their own cars. I also, in the winter, give illustrated talks to groups in their areas, notably U3A's.

**Cilla Wills, District Organiser from Berwickshire**

We provide bus tours and visits, etc. I think these tours mainly come through the Yellow Book and word of mouth. I usually give people a cup of coffee and tour, some tours have lunch here in the Tent.