

St Andrews Botanic Garden Trust

What activity did you run?

The setting of St Andrews Botanic Garden provided the ideal platform for an event which brought together people to explore a relevant, local, living example of how positive steps can be taken to address climate change.

Our Signs of Spring walk was tied together by the theme of change. Changes in nature at this time of year, changes in the garden to tackle the climate crisis and changes in nature as a result of climate change. Visitors were able to see and enjoy new areas of the garden which are focused on addressing the climate crisis. We shared how these areas can be used as experimental models for threatened ecosystems in Fife, addressing questions which will be key to conservation in Fife in the future. We also discussed the effect of climate change and other human impacts on bird nesting and breeding behaviour, linking to research currently taking place in the Garden by Dr Sophie Edwards.

Our Plants & Climate and Wildlife & Climate activities encouraged young families to engage in biodiversity and climate-themed activities together. This led to discussion while enjoying the activities, but also (we hope) as a family at home. Wildlife and Climate activities included pond dipping, minibeast hunts and footprint surveys. The activities encouraged young people to think about biodiversity and climate in a positive way,

Plants & Climate activities explored simple actions that young people could take at home, with themes of recycling (making newspaper plant pots), increasing biodiversity (sowing wildflowers with seed bombs) and supporting native wildlife (planting sunflowers that birds and insects can enjoy).

Director Dr Harry Watkins ran a guided walk around the garden, highlighting projects that the team are working on to manage the garden more sustainably. Key themes included (a) the strategic transition being made by the Trust to become a leader in sustainability and evidence-led conservation, (b) the Tangled Bank project, which exemplifies the garden's strategic plans and shows how conservation and evolution studies can be used for engagement and inspiration and (c) discussed career opportunities in conservation and horticulture.

Who were your main audience?

This event was designed to be free of charge to remove financial barriers for participation. Through targeted community engagement, we invited in audiences who may not have typically chosen to engage with climate action activities. We used the activities and beautiful tranquil setting of the garden as a hook.

Invites were sent out through our community contacts and local community 'gatekeepers' into audiences including education workers, local charities and support services who have pre-existing relationships with groups. A total of 336 people took part in this event, consisting of 78 children, 39 students and 219 adults.

We also invited families who we built relationships with through a separate holiday club project for low-income families and families who were struggling with their mental health and wellbeing. It provided an accessibility opportunity with no admission fees for them to enjoy time together and engage in the activities and tours in a familiar setting.

The event also included a collaboration with Scotland's Garden Scheme, this element of the event attracted an audience with an interest in gardening and horticulture and enabled us to actively engage with people around decisions they make with regards to their own gardens and how they can play an active role at a local level.

What did you learn?

Community engagement and building relationships with audiences is key! The value of being a 'trusted resource' where people feel comfortable and connected plays such an important stage in meaningfully engaging with people. Removing financial barriers is important but trust needs to be there before people will start to meaningfully engage, actively participate, feel confident in asking questions about climate change.

We found that engaging with audiences in advance of this event through activities and projects builds the foundations for relationships and enables people to feel comfortable taking part and asking questions. There is a real sense that St Andrews Botanic Garden is viewed as a trusted resource for accessing information relating to climate and sustainability.

Positivity is key! Provide messages of hope and showcase examples of the practical steps people can take in their everyday lives to help combat the feelings of 'helplessness' and climate anxiety.

Has delivering your project increased capacity to tackle the climate emergency in your community?

Participants taking part in the planting activities felt inspired to tackle the climate emergency within their own gardens and increased their knowledge of how they could create wildlife gardens in their communities.

Visitors were particularly interested to hear about the effects of increasingly extreme storms on the garden, and to compare this to woodland in their local areas. This led to an interesting and productive discussion about how best to address the issue of replanting areas affected by storms in a way which is future proof and protects species diversity.

Through the delivery of this project, we have formed new relationships with local groups in the area who would like to get involved in the wider range of projects and initiatives delivered in St Andrews Botanic Garden. This includes our volunteer programmes, where local action is taken on site, as well as volunteers playing a role in research projects on sites across Fife.

Participants discussed career options, leaving with a new sense of excitement around the opportunities for changing careers and exploring the different ways in which skill sets can be re-deployed in conservation roles.

Find out more

www.standrewsbotanic.org

