

Reflecting on My Time at Sir Harold Hillier Gardens

By David Jewell, Curator



After nearly 15 years at the Gardens, I will be retiring on Friday 26 September 2025.

I joined the Gardens as Head of Collections in January 2010, and recently my job title was changed to Curator.

Over the years, I've seen many changes, I have seen staff come and go and seen the completion of significant garden projects.

But at the heart of everything we do is one man: **Sir Harold Hillier**

Image 1: Curator admiring Pterocarya macroptera (Caucasian wing nut tree)

The contribution made by Sir Harold Hillier to horticulture and the environment was immense and he wanted his lifetimes work to continually support conservation, education and recreation for all who visited here.

The Sir Harold Hillier Gardens are grade 2 listed and the overall plant collection remains one of the best to be found anywhere in the temperate world. Each year the Gardens' team continually strives to add a broad range of new, interesting and exciting plants to continue his important legacy.



One of the most memorable projects was the **Centenary Border**, redesigned and replanted in 2013. Not without controversy, there was a degree of trepidation about substantial changes being made to a much-loved part of the garden. I was proud to help manage the project alongside our dedicated garden team and volunteers.

The border now offers an abundance of perennials to enjoy from May to September and was officially opened by HRH Queen Camilla, who expressed her hope to return.

We do hope so, as Her Royal Highness is President of the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and, despite a busy schedule continues to keep in touch.

Image 2: The Centenary Border

Another highlight was the expansion of our **Winter Garden** in 2014. Following the removal of declining pine trees, we created space for new ornamental plantings. The result was a vibrant and diverse winter landscape now over 4 acres, praised by BBC Gardeners' World as one of the best in the UK. I'm grateful to Andy McBean and the Winter Garden team for their hard work in bringing this vision to life.

Lord Heseltine who originally opened the Winter Garden, and he very kindly returned to celebrate the 25th anniversary celebration in 2023.



Do visit from November onwards and enjoy an abundance of stem colour, colourful tree barks, snowdrops, Witch Hazels and scent from the mixed shrubby plantings - you won't be disappointed.

Image 3: The Winter Garden



Smaller projects have included the **Wisteria Border**, which displays among the top 20 best cultivars and demonstrates the technique of growing such a vigorous climber within a limited space. Towards the end of May, they can be admired draped with a multitude of long racemes of white, pink, blue or mauve pea-flowers - there is no climber more beautiful.

Image 4: Wisteria floribunda 'Alba'

Immediately opposite, a bed of **Paeonia** display a timeline of historical cultivars starting at one end, through to the modern bred hybrids at the other, with their gorgeous colour range, larger flowers, and in some cases, scent. At the back of the bed, the broad foliage of Magnolia 'Sir Harold Hillier' stands proud, bearing large, white, beautifully formed, goblet-shaped flowers up to 30cm across - a delight in mid-spring.



Image 5: Paeonia lactiflora 'Bowl of Beauty'



In 2022, I helped to secure a substantial donation that enabled several improvements, including an automated irrigation system, deer fencing, accessible pathways, and a new outdoor play feature in the education garden. These enhancements quietly support the Gardens' continued growth and accessibility.

Image 6: The automated sprinkler system on the Centenary Border

Occasionally, I quietly reflect on the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the Gardens were completely closed for several weeks. Weeds and long grass could be seen wherever you looked, and the silence felt strange due to the absence of overhead aircraft.



Image 7: Long grass everywhere and the Gardens had returned to nature



Image 8: The pond area with a social distancing sign in place

When the Gardens re-opened, members eagerly returned, as we were deemed a ‘safe’ venue to visit with our large open spaces and wide pathways. I’ll never forget standing at the entrance with our Director, Clare Goddard, as visitors thanked us for being open—it was a powerful reminder of the Gardens’ importance to the community.

This is your garden, a place for local residents, people across Hampshire and beyond. It faces challenging times, not least due to the recent hot summer, which saw depleted visitor numbers. Your ongoing support via membership, donations, tree adoptions, legacies or similar remains paramount and is hugely appreciated.

As I step away from my role, I’m pleased to say I won’t be going far. I’ll continue to live locally and plan to return as a volunteer, focusing on the Mahonia trial area, which contains rare plants. I also look forward to visiting the Gardens simply as a guest—something I’ve rarely had the chance to do!

Stay safe, keep well and I wish this remarkable garden every ongoing success moving forwards.

All best wishes, David Jewell, Curator, Sir Harold Hillier Gardens.