

MGS Journal "Garden visitors"

"Would you like to open your garden to the public next spring?"

How does that question make you feel? Shocked... surprised ... flattered ... terrified ... all of these?

It is a rite of passage for a gardener. Opening your garden means exposing a part of your personality, your true self, as expressed through your garden. But it can be an enriching experience too, and an opportunity to share your passion with like-minded souls.

For me the anticipation of visitors to my garden is rather more stressful than sitting A levels and taking a driving test - simultaneously. The panic starts to set in the previous autumn: "Oh no, only six months and they will be HERE".

But as the last few stragglers disappear down the drive, I always feel uplifted from having shared the garden - for better or worse - with fellow gardeners. So here are some thoughts on making your Garden Opening less of a trauma.

I won't offer any advice on the garden itself: yours is bound to be perfect, I am sure. Even if it isn't then that in itself is a talking point. One of the most memorable visits I have made was where the owner confided in us that they had seen no rain for more than a year and had suffered an extremely hard frost at Easter which had destroyed many plants. We not only commiserated but shared our thoughts on survival tactics and suitable re-planting.

Now before you say "But my garden is too small / ordinary / weedy" and stop reading, do remember how much we all enjoy seeing gardens belonging to "real" people. Grand parks with scores of staff are nothing like so fascinating. Visits need not be a one-off: a group returning after three years pointed out to me how much the garden had developed and matured which I hadn't really noticed.

Phone a Friend

A visit cannot be managed single handed. Whilst you are guiding the group round the garden there will always be one person who wants to go to the loo / take an aspirin / sit down with their bad leg. Your Friend can handle all this. The Friend can also take photos of the group; hand round cake and act as sheep dog to round up the group when the time comes to leave.

The Friend needs to be able to answer basic questions like: When did you move here and from where; Do you have help; Who made the cake because it really is yummy?

The Friend will be invaluable in an emergency: once when a large bus couldn't make it to the house - even though I had warned them the lane was very narrow - it parked at bottom of the hill and then I and my Friend spent half an hour ferrying them up in our cars.

Seize the day

By far the safest option is to be the first appointment in the day: delays will build up as the day goes on and it can be really infuriating. One group was nearly 2 hours late arriving in the afternoon: one person got lost after lunch and a search party combed the small town. Meanwhile I - and the Friend - were stuck there waiting. I could have spent that time weeding, or having my hair done, or taking a power nap.

The Name of the Rose

You know the names of all your plants, don't you? Of course you do. Until someone asks you what that common-or-garden shrub in the hedge is called... It's worth drawing up a crib sheet. I have not gone as far as putting labels on the plants, but after I have repeated "Paul's Himalayan Musk" for the umpteenth time I start to think perhaps I should.

Walk the Talk

It is a good idea to walk the route that you will be taking the visitors round the garden - get the Friend to come with you - and at the same time check for trip hazards and any branches that might hit people in the face. People will not be looking where they are walking but rather gazing at the flowers.

Let them eat cake

No garden visit is complete without cake. Buy the cake, don't waste time making it; whether you own up to this is then a matter for your conscience. Stick to cold drinks only and don't bother with plates - paper napkins are fine. Do provide plenty of seating for people to rest their tired feet.

Open house too?

People seem to like to get to know the gardener inside out. This often means their house too: decide in advance how you want to deal with this. I am embarrassed to report that at a famous garden in Tuscany, the Marchioness found a swarm of visitors inspecting her bedroom. She dispatched them politely but firmly. Another gardener tells me she found all her visitors in the kitchen reading her cookery books. Bizarre.

The nitty gritty

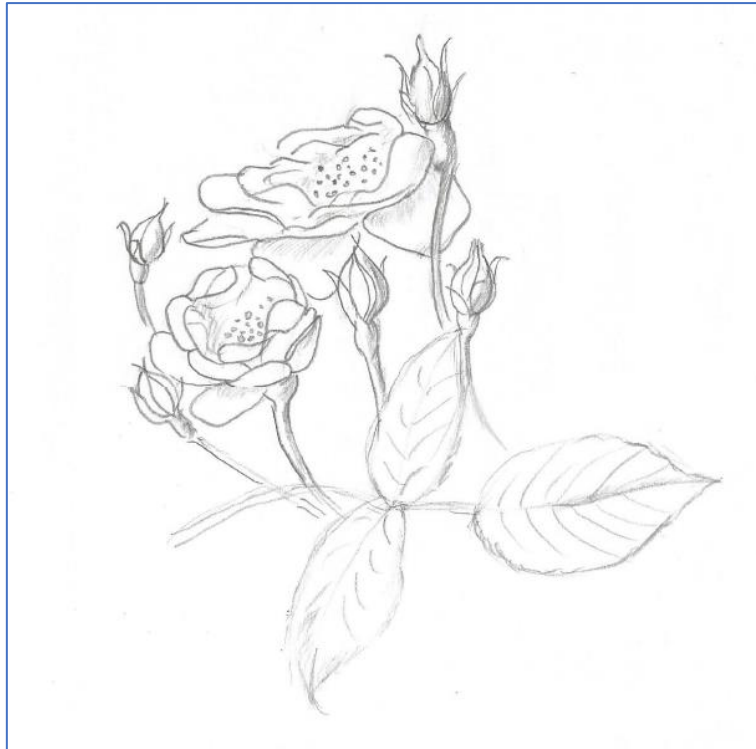
What is the biggest group you can manage? More than about 20 and it is difficult to talk to everyone at once.

Will you charge a fee? Only to cover out of pocket expenses - cakes - of course. I know that you will not do this for the money, but it does make a bargain between you and the visitors. This means that you feel obliged to carry on even if it's not convenient. One group who I agreed to host with no fee then failed to show up and their leader wouldn't even answer her phone. Grrr.

Nonna's seeds

The visitors start to trickle away, brimming with compliments and thanks. Have we rounded everyone up? Oh no, there is still one lady over there. She steps forward and presses a small parcel into my hands. It is some seeds from a rare plant that her grandmother grew and she wants me to have some. How touching. This thoughtful gesture makes it all worthwhile.

Come back soon - and I mean it.



Rosa Paul's Himalayan Musk

Yvonne Barton is a civil engineer who first came to Italy with her job and didn't want to leave, so she and her partner made their home in Umbria. Exasperated at her failed attempts to make a garden there, she joined the MGS and hasn't looked back since.