

Cumbria Organic Gardeners and Farmers



Keeping in Touch – April 2025



Trillium, also known as Wake Robin

From the Editor

The Trillium above appeared in our garden two years ago, with pale green leaves, unmistakable as Trillium, with its three mottled leaves. I have had *Trillium kurabayashii* var. 'ruby realm' for some years now in a part of the garden well away from where the paler plant arrived, in a wooded area. It has never done well and after twelve years I still get just one flower on it, which is dark red. It has dark green leaves. This year the one above has flowered. It has a much paler flower, as well as leaves, than the original, so I am truly wondering where it came from. If it is a cross, what did it cross with? I am delighted of course!

Let's go to Ryton!

Ryton Organic Garden is our parent body, and surely it's time for a visit. It's many years since we had a group trip and a lot has changed. The research goes on, the trialling and the Heritage Seed Library have become huge and more scientifically organised. There is a lot to see.

For those unfamiliar with Ryton, it is the headquarters of Garden Organic, formerly known as the Henry Doubleday Research Association (HDRA), and is a UK organic growing charity dedicated to researching and promoting organic gardening, farming and food.

We hope to go on Wednesday August 20th and will be able to have a guided tour of everything, which is likely to take up to 3 hours, so let's take umbrellas, but hope for good weather.

A list of what is on offer:

Inspiring demonstration gardens

- *Fruit gardens and orchard*
- *Exotic garden*
- *Paradise garden, in memory of the late Geoff Hamilton*
- *Bee garden with all the plants bees love*
- *Sensory garden*

The idea is to go by train, which can be done in a day. This saves the cost of overnight and the hassle of organising a coach. We would go from Carlisle or Penrith to Coventry, with no change. From Coventry we would take shared taxis to Ryton.

The cost is likely to be about £40-50 for the train, less if you have a railcard, and around £5 for the taxi, depending on numbers.

There is no café at Ryton but we are invited to eat our picnics under cover or we could have an early lunch in Coventry.

What a super trip this could be. Who will come? Members need to make an expression of interest soon.

We do hope you will join us!



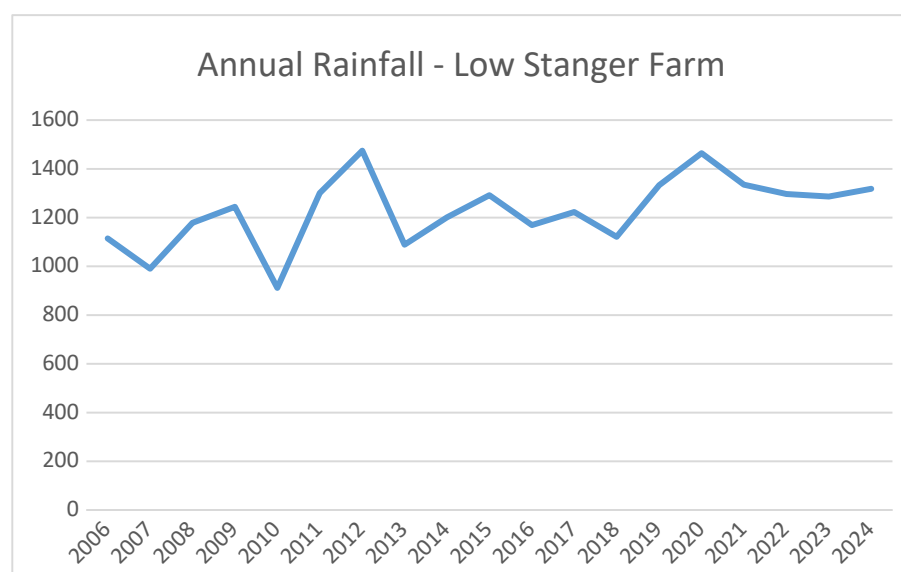
West Cumbrian Weather and Observations by Peter Kerr

I have been keeping weekly weather records for about twenty years. These readings are very simple ones – rainfall, max/min temperature and soil temperature. All of these things are very important to the gardener, especially perhaps to the market gardener, and are useful too, to the general farmer as knowledge of patterns of weather can help when deciding when major seasonal tasks should be planned. For much of the time, I have also been able to record solar energy, from our solar thermal heating system, and this has yielded useful data. Unfortunately, the equipment that records this energy has been out of action since last summer.

I thought it might be interesting to share these readings with COGF members, although I am aware that weather is very place-specific – the weather at Low Stanger will not be the same as the weather on the coast at Workington, or on the other side of the fells. However, there may be some general trends that are comparable, and we can also look at how climate change is affecting weather at a local level.

Rainfall

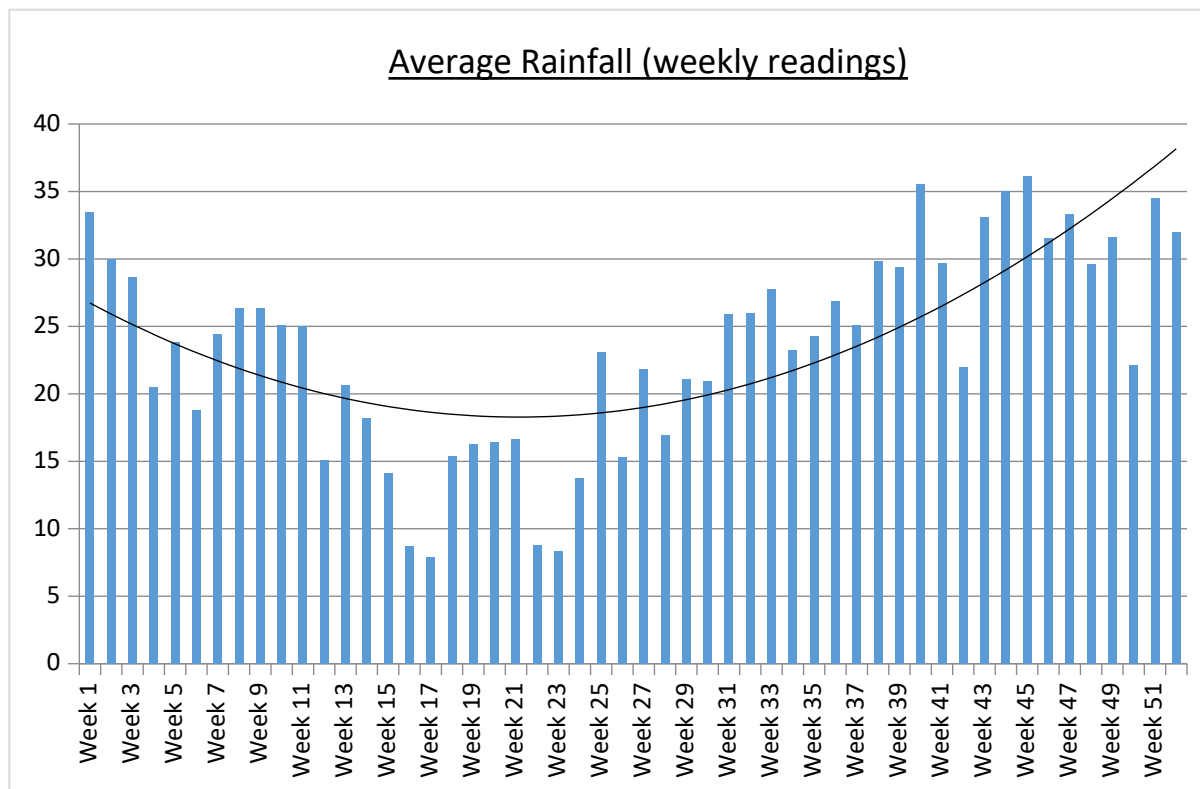
Rainfall, wind, sunshine hours and air temperatures are the main climatic components that affect how crops will grow. Cumbria is an unusually wet county (as you are all very aware of), the combination of the jet stream, the proximity of the Atlantic ocean and prevailing winds, and the Cumbrian mountains all come together to create a regular and mostly reliable source of rain. The measurements I have taken show a steady increase in annual rainfall, from around 1100mm in 2006, to around 1300mm in 2024. The increase in rainfall has been gradual and steady, and possibly less dramatic than lived experience would suggest. The basic measuring system that I use doesn't allow me to record intensity of rainfall, just a weekly total.



One of the interesting aspects of the rainfall data is that patterns exist, and although these are not guaranteed to happen every year, there is a general trend for rainfall to peak in October, November and December, then fall away slowly reaching a low point in April and May, which are consistently the two driest months.

Knowing the likely pattern of rainfall is very useful when deciding on when to cultivate and plant, and when the best chance of getting fine weather for hay-timing and corn harvest is likely to be.

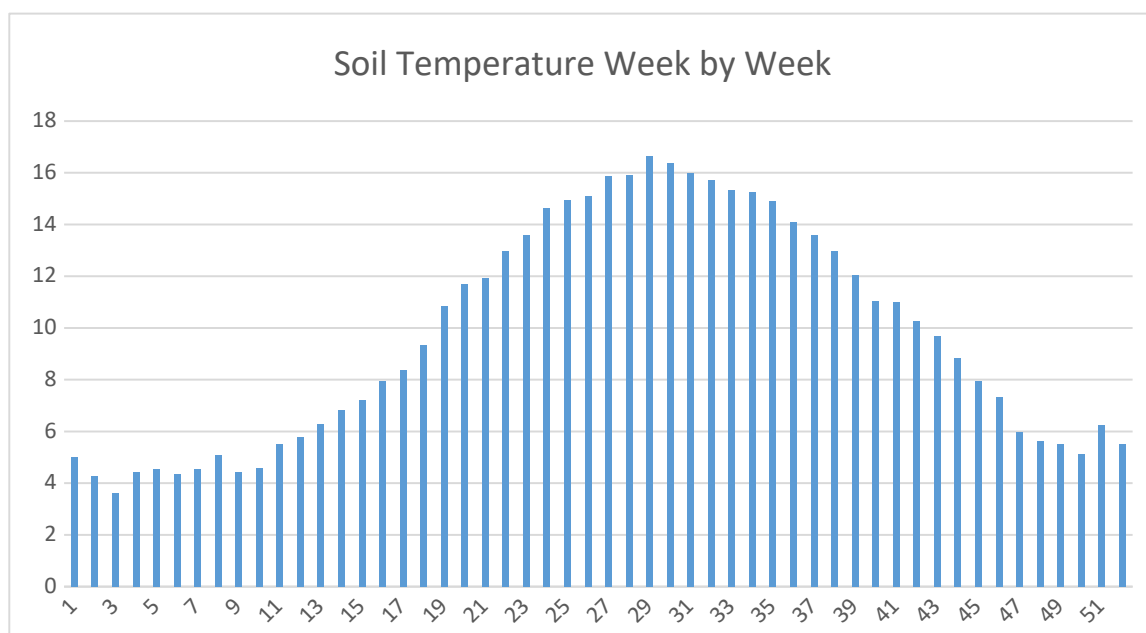
The next graph shows averaged values.



The weekly average readings show that after the driest months of April and May, the summer gets increasingly wet until a short relatively dry spell in September. We find that hay made in June is usually a success, but hay made in July and into August can be a gamble. The dry spell in September is vital for harvesting potatoes, onions and any corn crops still in the field – and we also have to try to get cultivations done for any winter corn and for cover crops. In most years, we fail to get all of this done before the rain starts again!

As mentioned earlier, the wettest months are usually October, November and December, and those are the months when flooding of the river Cocker (which runs through the farm) is most likely to happen. Of the six major floods we have had during our time at Low Stanger, five happened during those three months (and one was in June, to add variety!).

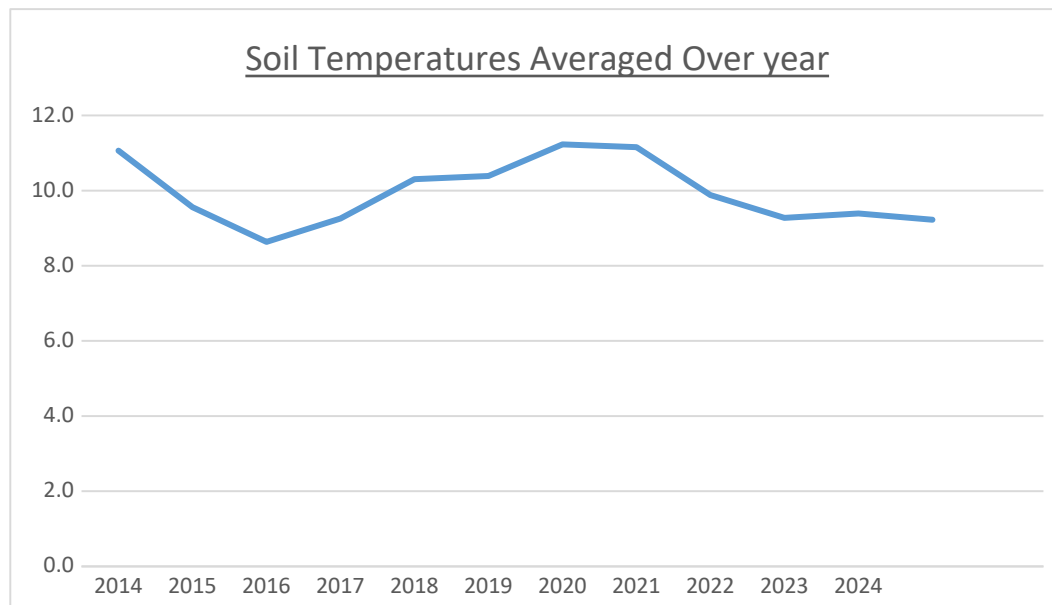
Temperature



Soil temperature in Celcius with week numbers on the X axis

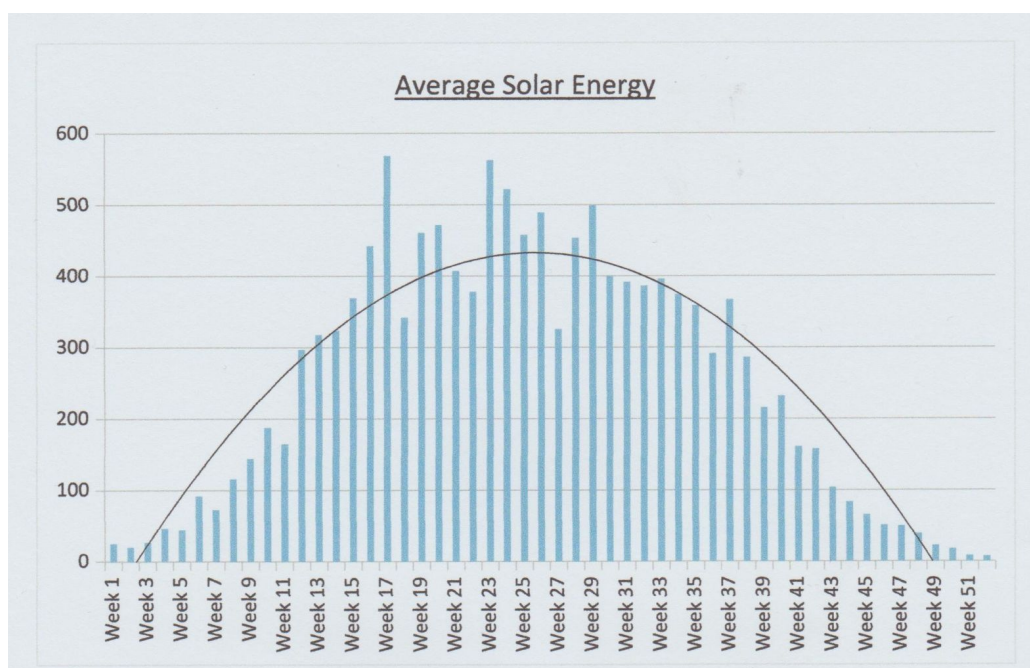
The soil temperature chart shows that the lowest point is reached around the middle of February, and the highest temperature around five months later in mid-July. The temperatures are taken in the shade of a garden wall, so they are somewhat lower than in the open field. However, they show the trend.

The coldest temperatures usually happen in late November to late January (no surprise), the warmest readings being in late July. The highest we have recorded was a modest 30 degrees C, and the coldest -12 degrees. We expect a frost, an air frost that is, any time after mid-September, but usually it happens in the first week of October. The earliest frost we have had was on September 17th, with a ground frost on the 31st of August one memorable year. But Stanger is something of a frost pocket, being close to the river. The last frost is, on average, in the first few days in May, and this is a very significant event as it decides the success or otherwise of our apple crop.



Soil temperature averaged over the year from 2014 until 2024 – surprisingly, no measurable increase is seen

Solar Energy



The solar energy chart is taken from a solar thermal system on the farmhouse roof, that records daily solar energy absorbed. The readings on the Y axis are kWh, with week numbers on the X axis. The graph clearly shows the dearth of solar energy in December and January, with a peak in late April/early May, and then another peak in July before it gradually falls away into the autumn. No great surprises, but the intensity of the sun's energy in April and into May is quite noticeable, and this coincides with the driest time of the year.

Conclusions

The weekly measurements taken over a period of just under twenty years show that we are getting more rain now than in 2006, around 15% more, but it is falling in roughly the same pattern as previously. The intensity of rainfall I cannot comment on, nor the number of wet days in a given week. Soil temperature, on average, has remained stable, as have the length of the frost-free period.

Much goes unrecorded – wind strength, frequency of storms, ambient air temperatures and so on. These measurements have been useful to us in planning the farming calendar, and I would encourage members to take their own, and so work out what they are likely to experience on their own plot, garden or farm. Climate change is happening, of course, and seems to be moving at a faster pace than we originally thought. Time will tell how this ultimately affects the weather we see from day to day.

Sooty Mould

Question in the COGF Whatsapp:

Can anyone help with advice on a sooty mould infestation on a well established Pieris tree?

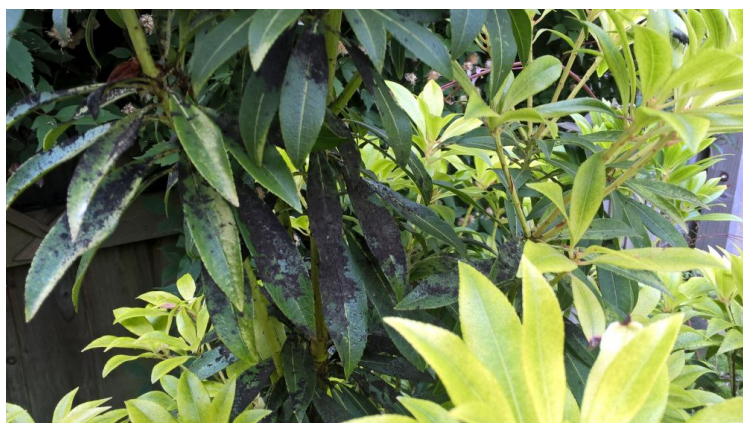
Answers from members:

It could have been a response to an aphid attack last year. Washing and cleaning the leaves with a mild soap solution can help.

Check for scale insects too, which are hard to spot, but can also be removed by wiping off firmly with a soapy cloth.

According to the RHS, sooty mould is fungi, growing on insect honeydew or plant exudates. The presence of sooty mould fungi usually indicates that a plant has become affected by a sap-sucking insect. Sooty moulds do not attack the plant directly, but their growth is unsightly and can reduce plant vigour by preventing photosynthesis.

Black or dark brown, superficial fungal growth on the aerial parts of plants, particularly the upper leaf surfaces.



Soil

The underground life within soil can offer an incredible insight into the health and function of the soils around us, which in turn influences the type of vegetation that these soils are able to support. Louise Rawling has been working with fellow farmers and commoners through the West Lakeland CIC (Community Interest Company), as well as PhD researchers, to assess the state of soils on Kinniside Common in West Cumbria. Her enthusiasm for the life that abounds within our soils is truly infectious.

‘Soil: Where I Stand’

A Report on the Talk by Climate Champion, Louise Rawling

Louise’s talk was inspired by her diligent citizen science experiments on the Kinniside Common where they have, until recently, grazed their sheep every year. With Natural England telling them to remove sheep flocks for fear that the pasture and, by extension, the soil, is being denuded and so the land isn’t able to sequester carbon in a way that would happen without this grazing pressure.

Louise was keen to know if they had in fact been hurting the land they depend on, as this was not their intention. Having done some training in the soil food web she was keen to see for herself. Her work with the Farm Carbon Toolkit has led her to take samples from five different areas of the land for chemical soil analysis via the University of Exeter at three different depths (0-10cm, 10-20cm and 20-30cm).

This form of soil analysis is by no means the complete picture, and takes weeks to process, foregoing the biological snapshot it also includes (as the micro-organisms would die/change in this time). It is this that Louise also tested under the microscope.

She also sent her findings off to a certified ‘soil lab technician’ who confirmed her findings. Areas on the other side of a drystone wall amidst the bracken had low organic matter and few microbes except for the odd root eating nematode, whereas the grazing pasture was quite high in organic matter and microbial life in the form of protozoa, bacteria and nematodes as well as plenty of fungal hyphae.

The fungal hyphae represent fast carbon sinks (relative to peat at least) so are a good indicator that carbon isn’t leaving the soil. The fact that no plough has ever turned over this land also means additional carbon hasn’t been released by interventions. Bracken is known to demark areas where ancient woodland used to stand, so the assumption might be that these areas still represent the subsurface of ecological strongholds.

These prima facie findings certainly raise the question why are there not more active biological soil sampling practices as standard? - with more people upskilling to do the lab work - so trends can be tracked over time.

Whether this common land would have soil that is even more vibrant with increased carbon sequestration abilities as well as an ability to produce higher quality food remains an open question. Louise’s passion for the land is clear, and I expect more people to start thinking from the soil up soon.

Dan Richards
Horticulture Conservation Officer
Cumbria Seed Bank

Ground Elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*)

At a recent seed swap event in Penrith, a Gardeners' Question Time was held. One member of the audience asked what could be done about Ground Elder, also known as Bishop's weed. The usual advice was duly given: digging it out, mulching to smother it, putting in a barrier to stop it spreading or even letting it grow to enjoy the flowers (see below).

Another member of the audience then offered her contribution. She said she had a lot of Ground Elder as well as Nettles, and that she found the best way to deal with them was to eat them. She said she chopped them young and used them in soups.

She then amused the audience by saying that she had actually eaten so much of the Ground Elder now that she had defeated the plants!

The RHS says:

Aegopodium podagraria, commonly called ground elder, is a species of flowering plant in the carrot family Apiaceae that grows in shady places.

Ground elder has a long history of medicinal and edible uses. Its leaves have a tangy flavour with a hint of parsley and are a favourite of foragers, with young unfurling leaves picked for salads and slightly older leaves picked for cooking as a leafy vegetable.



Ground Elder flowers

Cooking with Ground Elder: the leaves and stems can be used in soups or with pasta. As with nettles, use only the fresh, young tops.

The Woodland Trust says:

It's a very versatile plant with a similar flavour to parsley that goes well with fish. Eat the young leaves and shoots raw or add to salads and sandwiches.

You can cook the leaves in a similar way to spinach by steaming or softening in butter. Or add them to anything you're making like soups, stews, bubble and squeak and pasta dishes.

Ground Elder Soup Recipe from 'Scotland Grows' Magazine

What you need:

1 tbsp rapeseed oil or butter
1 medium leek
1 medium onion
1 bunch of young ground elder leaves
1 bunch of young nettle leaves, picked from the stem
2 medium potatoes, diced – or a tin of butter beans
2 cups (250 grms) of frozen peas
750 ml vegetable stock
crème fraiche, soya cream, or double cream to garnish

What to do:

Saute the leek and onion with oil or butter and a pinch of salt

Add the diced potato or butter beans along with the stock and simmer for 10 minutes

Add the frozen peas, nettles and ground elder and bring back to a gentle simmer until the potatoes are cooked

Blitz, using a hand blender, adding more stock if the soup is too thick

Serve with a swirl of crème fraiche, double cream or soya cream



Ground Elder soup

Editor's note: I made soup following this recipe. It was delicious, though I can't say it would have been a lot different without the addition of the Ground Elder and Nettle.

Future Events

Three Gardens on the Solway, Saturday 3rd May 10.00 am – 4.00 pm

Open Farm Sunday 8th June, 11.00 am – 4.00 pm

There are three member venues this year:

Low Stanger Farm, Cockermouth, CA13 9TS

Low Netherscales Farm, Embleton, Cockermouth, Cumbria CA139YP

Susan's Farm, The Croft, Houghton, near Carlisle CA3

COGF will have a stall at Susan's Farm with information boards, leaflets and advice. We may also be selling plants not sold in May.

There may be some differences in the timings at each farm. Please check the link for details:
<https://farmsunday.org/visit-a-farm/search?location=Cockermouth+®ion=&farmName=>

Future Event Reminder:

Threave Gardens, Sunday 6th July



Members need to let the visit organiser know by the end of May that they would like to come.

Cumbrian Farmers' Markets

- **Brampton** – last Saturday of the month
- **Brough** – 3rd Saturday of the month
- **Carlisle city centre** – 1st Saturday of the month
- **Carlisle Borderway** – 2nd Saturday of the month
- **Cockermouth** – 1st Saturday of the month
- **Egremont** – 1st Saturday & 3rd Friday of the month
- **Houghton** – 2nd Saturday of the month
- **Kendal** – last Friday of the month
- **Keswick** – 2nd Thursday of the month
- **Milnthorpe** – 2nd Friday of the month
- **Orton** – 2nd Saturday of the month
- **Penrith** – 3rd Tuesday of the month
- **Sedbergh** – every Wednesday
- **Ulverston** – 3rd Saturday of the month

Organic produce can also be ordered from the Open Food Network's website:
<https://openfoodnetwork.org.uk/cumbria-farmers/shop>

Gardening joke from Hugh:

A garden is a thing of beauty and a job for ever.

Diary of COGF Events in 2025

Saturday 3rd May, from 10.00 am until 4.00 pm

Visit to three gardens in the Solway

Sunday 11th May, from 10.00 am until 4.00 pm

COGF at The Plant and Food Fair, Hutton in the Forest

Sunday 8th June, from 11.00 am until 4.00 pm

COGF at Open Farm Sunday, at Susan's Farm, Houghton; Low Stanger and Low Netherscales near Cockermouth

Sunday 6th July

Visit to Threave Gardens

Wednesday 20th August

Visit to Ryton, Garden Organic HQ

Tuesday 9th September, 2.00 pm

Visit to HMP Haverigg

Sunday 28th September, 10.00 am until 4.00 pm

COGF at Apple Day, Hutton-in-the-Forest

Sunday 16th November, 2.00 pm

COGF AGM



Committee	Chairperson	Susan Aglionby	01228 523747	susan.aglionby01@gmail.com
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Membership Secretary	Frankie Kennett	07407 240799	cogfmembsec@gmail.com
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