

Cumbria Organic Gardeners and Farmers



Keeping in Touch – February 2026



*Oak processionary moth, *Thaumetopea processionea* Photograph courtesy of Forest Research – see page 4 for more information*

From the Editor

We have three very interesting items in this edition, two of them looking at gardening history – always a motivational subject. See a member's musings (below) and an interesting book review on p.4.

The third item, on Biosecurity, came from David Fletcher, who gave a talk on the subject at Brampton Cafe Scientifique, which meets once a month and has some interesting talks. Not always linked to gardening/farming, but interesting nevertheless. For more information, see <http://cafescientifique.org/brampton>. It's a very interesting subject that David outlines in his specially written piece for COGF. Thank you to David.

Musings on how Gardening Changes

When were the first gardens? You could say that as soon as mankind started to cultivate crops and plant herbs we were gardening. The simple practice of planting, cropping for a while then moving on is still practiced in some parts of the world. Planting was about getting rid of the wild, cleaning up spaces and allowing only the intended plants to grow. Cultivars of basic grains and roots led slowly to better crops; a huge step forward from hunter-gathering, but slow.

In sharp contrast now, as wild plants are lost in the countryside, we want to preserve them by bringing them into our gardens. We have learned the significance of genetic diversity, and also the value to our mental health of being in close contact with the earth. A huge about turn in our attitude to “weeds”.

We have records of permanent, protected systems that could be called gardens from early Egypt, the Euphrates and Indus valleys and China. Dwellings had gardens for medicine and pleasure as well as food in their courtyards, and special growing areas were walled or fenced. So early gardens were eminently practical, feeding our bodies, healing our minds and pleasing our senses (which we now recognise as another form of healing).

I don't think we know if the pre Roman tribes of these Isles had gardens, but certainly the Romans did, importing plants and domesticated animals, (with some, like rabbits, escaping to become both food and pest). If you've been to Roman sites in Italy or elsewhere, you'll have seen their pleasure garden spaces in the courtyards of their homes.

In mediaeval times we know there were gardens in the castle grounds, where ladies took their leisure. Also there were apothecaries' gardens, the forerunners of our herb gardens. In Tudor times we imported ideas from Europe where great lords, merchants and churchmen had very grand and carefully designed gardens of pleasure. Newly imported tulips and other plants from the east caught the attention. Vegetable gardening was naturally considerable, but separate as it was less pleasing to the eye.

Where had these ideas for grand recreational gardens come from? The crusaders had seen much to give them ideas, crossing the Eastern Holy Roman Empire where imported ideas from advanced cultures in the east could be seen. Styles of garden derived from what was perceived as desirable and safe; inward looking and surrounded by walls for buildings in hot, dry countries, or outward looking where distant views could give the illusion of more space. Water, essential for life, was always involved one way or another, and trees.

In this country in the 17th and 18th centuries our town gardens flourished, country folk had their cottage gardens, and the great estates their walled vegetable gardens. With the industrial revolution market gardens appeared on the edges of the new towns specifically to provide vegetables. In the 18th and 19th centuries, collecting plants from across the globe became all the rage, and these plants were shown off in their own spaces, in the main garden or specially built houses.

Our attitude to gardens and gardening has changed a lot over the centuries, from purely practical, to artistic and enjoyable, but always taming nature, controlling it and making it work for us. Now, instead of each plant being separate from its neighbours and fully in view, we are reversing that and welcoming nature into our gardens. As wild plants are lost in the countryside, we have woken up to their beauty and want to preserve them. Modern gardens have a very different look. We plant mixed swathes where no bare soil is seen, as in nature. We know species plants each hold genetic variations that are essential for the wellbeing of ourselves, insects and animals, and our planet.

We are doing a lot of looking back, perhaps making a solid foundation for jumping off into the invisible future. I'm sure we are at the beginning of a huge change, as great for mankind as when fire was first utilised, then later when plants were cultivated, and again when metals were first worked. It takes courage to face and accept the future, but gardening soothes and inspires.

Biosecurity and Plant Health

In the last few years the UK has faced an increasing number of threats from harmful pests and diseases from overseas. There are a number of factors at play including climate change and the global trade of trees and plants. Increases in insect infestations, as well as fungal, bacterial and viral diseases are of great concern to all those concerned with the environment.

I am often asked why is this happening now? As mentioned earlier climate change is a factor enabling invasive organisms to thrive in locations where previously they couldn't, and increasing volumes of plants imported from across the globe increase the risk of highly invasive and damaging pests entering the UK. In addition, climate change has been shown to have an impact on beneficial insects.

So, what can be done? Biosecurity is key both to our understanding of the problem and a concerted approach to stop the introduction and spread of harmful organisms. As land managers, farmers, horticulturists and gardeners, we all have a role to play. Anyone who uses the countryside, accesses parks and gardens and exercises their dog needs to be aware of the risks posed by invasive species, pests and diseases.

The UK has strong processes for checking the import of plants both at the border and inland, carrying out surveillance, certification, and setting and enforcing legal requirements through plant passports and phytosanitary certification. Nonetheless, without public and business awareness of the challenges posed by invasive pests and diseases, there is a serious risk that we will see further decline of valuable habitat and native species, as well as a threat to food production.

Usefully, there are many resources available. The RHS has put together '**Seven things gardeners can do to go biosecurity neutral**'. [RHS Plant Biosecurity: how we safeguard our gardens / RHS Gardening](#). The UK horticulture and forestry sectors have introduced the Plant Health Management Standard [Plant Health Management Standard - Plant Healthy](#) which has practical requirements for businesses i.e. commercial nurseries, plant retailers and public gardens to protect the plant supply chain. In addition, there is a voluntary scheme called Plant Healthy [Plant Healthy Certification Scheme - Plant Healthy](#) promoting plant health and biosecurity across growers, landscapers, garden retailers and arborists. Businesses and organisations are audited to demonstrate their compliance with the Plant Health Management Standard.

The UK Government provides many resources on biosecurity including '**How biosecurity can prevent the introduction and spread of tree pests and diseases**' [How biosecurity can prevent the introduction and spread of tree pests and diseases - GOV.UK](#) aimed at the public, industry professionals, landowners and managers. There are also free e-learning course links in the above document.

The message then is that we can all make a difference when it comes to stopping the spread of damaging pests and diseases.

David Fletcher MCIHort is an environmental writer, based in Cumbria.

Oak Processionary Moth, *Thaumetopea processionea*

One of the threats to biodiversity in the UK that David Fletcher (see page 3) highlighted, is this moth which is native to Europe but was first found in West London in 2005. It is now considered established in most of Greater London, but there is a protected zone in place for the rest of the UK, with eradication action being undertaken on findings outside of this area. In 2018 and 2019 some of these findings have been on recently imported oak trees.

The caterpillars feed on oak, causing defoliation. They also have urticating hairs which can cause a number of reactions, including allergic responses in both people and animals.

The pest overwinters as eggs with larvae emerging from late March to July. Adults are seen from mid-July to September. To minimise health risks, caterpillars and nests should not be touched or approached.

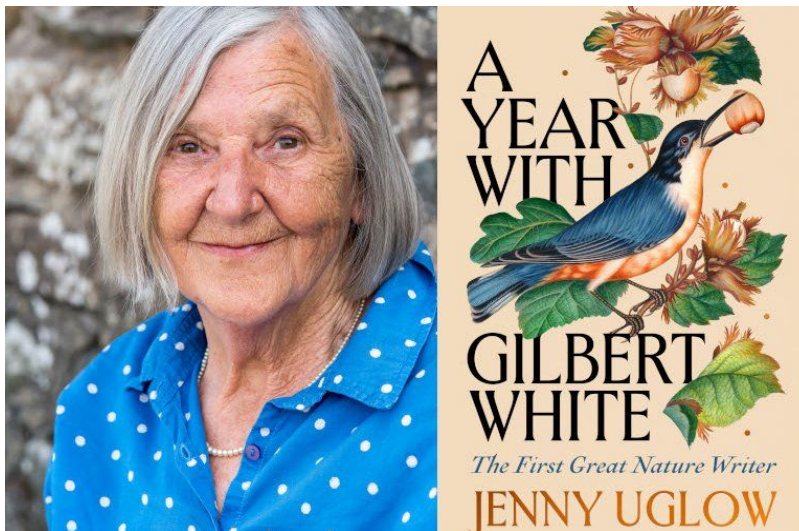
The most obvious sign of the pest is the caterpillars, which cause the problems. They move in nose-to-tail processions along the branches of the trees. Another sign is their nests, made from white silken webbing and usually built in early summer on the trunks and branches of oak trees.

Any findings on these or other non-indigenous plant pests should be reported using TreeAlert <https://treealert.forestresearch.gov.uk>

Thank you to Animal and Plant Health Agency for providing the information.

Book Review

Jenny Uglow *A Year with Gilbert White The First Great Nature Writer 2025*



There can't be many readers or gardeners who haven't come across "The Natural History of Selborne". Published in 1789, it's an account of a rural parish in Hampshire written in the form of letters between the author, rural parson Gilbert White, and two naturalist friends. It is loving, local, particular and closely observed. It is based on the nature journals which Gilbert wrote daily throughout his life.

Jenny Uglow's book takes one year of these journals, 1781, midway in the ten years it took Gilbert to produce his book, and uses the entries as a basis for her book, writing round the entries with explanations, extensions and commentary.

It's a hybrid book. It's not biography, though touches closely on Gilbert's past, family and friendships. It's not history, though covers many things in the realms of social history, contemporary thought and science. There is very little political history, Gilbert seems to have been little moved by this, preferring village anecdote to Parliamentary outcomes.

It's also not natural history. I am no naturalist, but have a growing interest in natural history and found Jenny Uglow's writing around the insects, plants and birds (particularly the birds, Gilbert seems to have loved birds), informative and interesting. I don't think she is an instinctive naturalist, but certainly has an eye for and an understanding of nature. Whether this was as a result of writing the book or natural curiosity, is hard to say. She occasionally writes about her own garden and immediate environs of Borrowdale as an aside to Gilbert's writings, and what she writes implies that she is trying to think and feel like Gilbert, in close observation of what is at hand.

Gilbert's gardening is interesting. Everyone gardened organically in the eighteenth century. There was no alternative. He grows masses of cucumbers, they seem to be really important, and "spinadge" and other winter greens. He has hot beds which have been something of a novelty and a revelation for us on recent visits to COGF members' gardens. Just the observations throughout the year; the annual reappearance of favourites, the constant sowing and planting out and the excitement of a new plant or cutting from his family in South London are all completely relatable. The preoccupation with the weather is also the same; too hot and dry, too wet and muddy ...

The journal entries are also a reminder of the depredations that climate change has made and continues to make, in our natural environment. The timing of annual events like the first primrose and the return of migrating birds seem to be at variance with what we experience now.

What really struck me was the preponderance of garden pests, particularly wasps in fruit trees and what a menace they were. I think we forget how much we were plagued by them. I think I would rather have a plague of wasps and a properly regulated climate. We should learn and/or remember what it was like and ... maybe cherish the wasps ...?

Gilbert's daily record of the weather using thermometer, barometer, wind vane and precipitation levels was also interesting. We can daily consult a weather app. Gilbert does not share my personal obsession with the increase/decrease of light across the year, particularly around the winter solstice. Clocks and time telling were not of such importance in his time as they are now. Maybe dawn and dusk were perceived in a different way and being outside a lot anyway made the absence or presence of light of no great importance.

I really loved this book. I have recently been trying to write a nature journal and have found it leads to new understandings and ways of looking at things. This is quite different from keeping a garden notebook which I can never keep up, six months is about the longest I have managed, and it's monumentally dull to look back on. Maybe I'll find the journal as dull in five years' time.

I find nature has a way of being endlessly fascinating in a way that gardening doesn't. I find gardening becomes interesting when we understand the plants and where they fit into the natural world and greater scheme of things. This is as much about natural history as gardening. I think I will be reading this book often in the future, as a touchstone for the year as it rolls round, but more importantly as a measure of what we have lost and are losing through climate change and biodiversity loss.

Reminder - Future Event

An Introduction to Hedge laying, Sunday 15th March

Numbers for this event will be limited to ten.

You will look at why hedges need to be laid and at the various styles and techniques. You will look at hedges in different stages around the farm - un-managed, recently laid, and in-between layings. Then you will do some practical work (on an easy hedge). There will be a break around half-way through.

You will need to bring suitable clothing and gardening gloves. The tools will be provided.

Directions will be given after booking.

Future Event

Visit to Windermere Food Farm, Bowness and Holehird Gardens Sunday 12th April

An opportunity to hear about the innovative and promising organic garden project which is being led on a site within an organic farm near Bowness on Windermere – which aims to provide fresh, organic fruit and vegetables for Windermere Food Bank. The venue for the talk will be the excellent centre within Holehird Gardens.

Holehird Gardens themselves will be open to explore - a 10 acre fellside garden created and maintained by the Lakeland Horticultural Society. With stunning views across the Windermere valley and a great diversity of planting this lovely garden will be in all its spring colours for us to enjoy at the time of our visit.

If we are able to organise a brief trip to Tim's project in Bowness for those who wish. With a nearby bio-diverse pond, protective deer fencing and a small adjacent wooded area this drystone walled site offers a rich future for this Windermere Food Farm project.

Reminder - Future Event

Visit to Growing Well Tree Nursery, Tebay, 26th April

A half-day session with Growing Well Tree Nursery at Tebay Northbound, which will look at growing trees from seed to being ready to plant out. An opportunity to talk to the growers and try seed sowing, pricking out and potting on in the tree nursery.

Report

Seed Swap and Winter Social, Sunday February 8th

This year we changed the usual format and timing for the seed swap, of an afternoon meet up followed by a quiz and a shared tea. We tried serving soup at lunchtime, followed by two video clips to give rise to a discussion and it was good to have time for an exchange of thoughts.

The first video was a short, humorous clip giving advice on how to dry your hands using just one paper towel. The second was of George Monbiot making controversial claims about food security and how we could manufacture our future food in factories, from bacteria.

There was a variety of soups on offer. Thank you to those members who contributed. And a special thanks to those who came early and helped prepare the food and drinks.

One very tasty soup was interesting because it didn't use onions, which can be particularly useful for those people whose digestive systems find them difficult. Please see the following page for the recipe.



Members enjoying their soup

Onion-free Spicy Lentil and Tomato Soup

I don't often buy paneer but I'd bought some for a special occasion and had then made something else. That paneer was heading towards its use by date and although I could've frozen it for another time I thought I would try a new recipe from my favourite cookbook "Curry Easy Vegetarian" by Madhur Jaffrey.

We rarely buy fresh vegetables and when we do we try to stick to seasonal things grown in the UK. Consequently when a recipe calls for fresh ginger and chillies I substitute with powdered. The flavour may not be as good but I hope the environmental impact is less (please correct me if I am wrong).

The recipe I chose was "Fresh Indian Cheese in a Butter-tomato Sauce". As is my way I left out things I don't have and felt weren't necessary and replaced others with what I thought might be similar enough.

I had been wondering what soup to make for the get-together in February. Virtually everything I cook starts with frying an onion but I wanted to make something without, so that those who are onion intolerant could eat it. I felt like an adaptation of that dish might do for the soup.

I'm sorry that some of the ingredients are imprecise - I just added them without measuring. I'm sure next time I make the soup it will be different again.

Ingredients

2 tsp cumin seeds
Squash/pumpkin/other vegetable
Olive oil
Butter (or vegan substitute)
2 tins tomatoes (chopped or whole)
2 heaped tsp ground ginger
2 tsp garam masala
4 tsp lemon juice
1 tsp sugar
1 or 2 tsp salt
Chili powder
Black pepper
Red lentils



Put the cumin seeds in a heavy frying pan and set over a medium heat until they have darkened. They'll need a bit of a shake or stir while they're cooking. Then grind them (I use a pestle and mortar).

Fry the cubed vegetables in the olive oil/butter mix. In the original recipe this is paneer and they are fried until they are browned on 2 sides. The vegetables don't need to be cooked as that will happen next. I'm sure if you wanted to you could skip the frying of the vegetables and put everything into the pan all at once.

Add everything else, plus some water and cook until it's ready.

Blend into soup. Add more salt, pepper and chili if needed.

Hugh's joke:

Old gardeners never die.....
....they just spade away.



Cumbrian Farmers' Markets

- **Brampton** – last Saturday of the month
- **Brough** – 3rd Saturday of the month
- **Carlisle Cathedral Close** – 1st 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

Diary of COGF Events in 2026

Sunday 15th March, 1.30 – 5.00 pm

An Introduction to Hedge Laying

Sunday 12th April, 10.30 am - 3.30 pm

Windermere Food Farm and Holehird Gardens

Sunday 26th April, 10.00 am – 1.00 pm

Seeds to Saplings at Growing Well, Tebay

Sunday 10th May, 10.00 am – 4.00 pm

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

Sunday 7th June 11.00 am until 4.00 pm

COGF at Open Farm Sunday at Susan's Farm

Sunday 20th September, 10.00 am – 4.00 pm

COGF at Apple Day, Hutton in the Forest

Sunday 15th November Time TBA

COGF Annual General Meeting and Committee meeting



Treasurer and membership secretary

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FREE WEBINAR

FOOD WASTE ACTION WEEK

Tuesday 10th March 2026
12:30 - 1:30pm

Practical tips to waste less
and **COMPOST** your food
waste at home

REGISTER NOW
link in post 



Blackwall Kitchen Composter
Compost all your kitchen waste
for use in 1-2-3!

garden organic 

Proud to support
Food Waste Action Week
9-15 March 2026 