

The Elders' Garden of Verse

Friday 23rd August – Meet Me on the Move – Workshop by Chelsea Physic Garden

The poems below are a mixture of writings inspired by some of the speech and conversation of participants at Meet Me, staff, volunteers and Shivani from the Chelsea Physic Garden. In some cases, long direct quotes have been used. Where this extensive, I've noted the name of the speaker, although I've edited all speech for clarity and to fit the line, although I've never changed the meaning, only elements of phrasing/ wording, and created titles to go with the poems.

As she said at the start of the session, Shivani truly brought Chelsea Physic Garden beyond its walls, sharing her knowledge and kindness. It was wonderful to hear the Meet Me members engage with the sensory objects from the Garden, and share their own wisdom about plants and life. We took brightness home after the session, and a communal understanding of the beauty of the green world.

Chelsea Physic Garden Facilitator – Shivani

Meet Me members: Joyce, Maureen, Pauline W, Pauline H, Ochuko, Rosemary, Jeanie, Janet, Weda

Volunteers: Christine, Rose and Fran Staff: Sophie and Roxanna

Poems written and/or shaped from the words of participants by Annie Hayter

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1. In Your Palm – Annie, inspired by conversation

Grow a garden in your palm.
Hold a seed, make it glow.
Watch it blossom in your eye.

Along the lines upon your hands,
A journey through a greening land,
Where roses smile with red mouths,
A stream's ribbon wanders through.

Would the birdsong fly all day?
Would lavender's scent fill the way?
And the trees wave in nightly sway?

Even if you must stay inside,
Waiting for the sun to shine,
Look to your hands, watch
As your fingertips bloom.

2. There is Heaven in The Wilderness (inspired by words from Shivani and Maureen)

Even if it's overgrown, vines a-tumbling,
Foxes making their home, nature loves it.
Insects, bats and critters find their heaven.

Even in the wrack and ruin of weeds and buds.
All bushes and trees contain tiny creatures
Best pleased by wilderness far and wide.

3. Weda's Words on the Wonders of Creation

"If you have faith like a mustard seed, you can move mountains". Weda's reading of Matthew 17:20

My name is Weda, as in 'weeds'. I'm Jamaican. I'm a country girl. I appreciate creation in flowers, the joy of flowers and herbs. I like to mess with trees and flowers, whatever is green. Certain flowers you can eat, you know. It's a beautiful earth we come from. I'm very spiritual person, I'm a Jehovah's witness, so I really appreciate creation from above. If it wasn't for our Father, we wouldn't have all what you got in your life, it beauty and delight. It's lovely that we all enjoy His beauty and delight in keeping it going. Even the squirrels and the foxes, they need to be nourished and fed. They have to eat, even the worms in the apples and the ants need food. It's a beautiful earth we live in. Where it comes from? Creation.

4. Reflections on Lavender – Words by Roxanna and Weda

Roxanna

Whenever I smell lavender,
I think of my grandmother.

She used to grow it in her garden
She had tons of it.

She used to put it
in all of her drawers.

You can smell it from here,
It's lovely.

If you smell inside,
It calms.

Weda

You know in the park they got lots of lavender
When they dry it, the gardeners go and collect them
And I say 'why are you collecting them?'
And they say 'to make lavender oil'.

5. The Gardening Age – Words by Weda

I'm glad I came. It takes a gardener to learn more.
Always learning, your brain is meant to learn and learn.
Never too old to appreciate beauty and creation.

As you get older you appreciate it more.
When you're little and young, you take it for granted
As you grow, you grow with the flowers.

6. Banksia, native to Australia – various speakers

What is it? I couldn't guess.
Hollow, wide open. Feel it,
It's got hair, and a lovely flower.

7. Rosemary's Garden is Like a Paradise – My words in italics and Rosemary's words below

*Rosemary tells us about her garden, which looks like a king's garden to me.
The sunflowers she grew from the seeds that Meet Me gave her have grown ever taller.*

I had a patch of garden, when I was six
And that was my patch to deal with.

In my garden now, we decided to grow
Carrots and parsnips which the foxes dug up.

Meet Me gave me four seeds, only two took.
A photo here, that's before it got as big as it did

Massive sunflower, eighteen flowers on it.
The fence behind is six feet, sitting on

A concrete plinth of six inches, which makes
The sunflower between eight and nine foot tall.

Part of our garden, quite a mixture here.
I do what I can. I can't get my fingers round the stem,

But weeks ago, I was under the sunflower
Stood underneath looking up at it.

8. Pauline W on the fruits of her childhood

Have you ever seen a gold apple?
it's round and the shell hard,
but inside, it's delicious!

We used to have trees of coffee,
chocolate, oranges, grapefruit,
golden apple, really lovely.

All different varieties of mangoes:
black mangoes, long mangoes
I can't remember the names –
but I know the taste.

What colours! Some were green.
Black mangoes are always green,
a bit like this orange – but not as bright.

9. A Botanist's Daughter – Words by Janet

My confession is that most plants just *die* on me.
I do have three roses, which a former tenant planted,
And I managed to keep alive. I planted a Hebe and some pinks.
Something white which looks like it will take over the garden.
I also have six sort of bulbs which I was trying to leave till August.
It's a dreadful confession to make for the daughter of a botanist,
Who worked with David Bellamy. He took us every weekend
Along the River Wear in Durham, gave us the Latin names for plants.
We were supposed to remember them, and I never could!
I like gardening in theory, but in practise, I'm not a gardener.
I can't be accurate like my father would have. My love of flowers
Is mostly theoretical – I'm not the genuine article trying to grow them!

10. Cocoa de Mer, the sea coconut – Words by Shivani and Rosemary

Shivani:

The biggest seed in the world, harvests at different times,
Different shapes and textures. Strange artifact of the forest.
I'm glad that we haven't cracked it open. Rather hard to ignore!

Rosemary:

My husband's grandfather many years ago had one
But it was all black and shiny, he passed away.
I don't know what happened to it. But he treasured it.

11. EVEN IF YOU THINK IT'S JUST A POPPY, IT'S NOT (inspired by Shivani's words)

a poppy is not just a poppy. it is also a house with a hairdo.
a bulbous shape, with little windows

that open when they get ready to spread their black seeds,
which get thrown out the windows –

the French term for this action is called 'defenestrate'!
the poppies that we saw this year

have now gone to seed. look closely there, underneath
their hairdos, seeds flower.

12. How to Make a Posie – A Recipe for Smelling Home – Annie

Lay a small flat cloth down. Add orris,
Powdered root of the iris plant.
Lets the fragrance carry for a long time.

Drip essential oils: lemon, lavender
Or peppermint, if you're feeling bright.
Fold some herbs inside, eucalyptus, mint,

Whatever you like. Mix it round.
Let the cloth upturn itself. Bunch it
Like a bulb. Tie a ribbon round to seal.

13. The Elders' Alternative Guide to the Flowers, Herbs, Seeds and Forest Things – various speakers

Strelitzia – looks like a bird's head, or a hedgehog.

Cardamon Pods – you cook with it – make tea with it, masala chai, curry...

Lemon Verbena – Lemon, innit!

Orris Root – a fixative, holds the fragrance captive for weeks.

Feverfew – like a Daisy. Iconic for relieving headaches.

Vanilla – the black dots in Vanilla ice cream – the smallest seed in the world.

Chocolate – I don't know where I'd be without it.

Calendula – Pot Marigold, a good plant for dyeing.

Cacao Seed Pods –Theobroma Cacao, might be food of the Gods, but you can grow it in your garden!

14. This is the seedpod of Strelitzia, Bird of Paradise – various speakers

I can't see it very well, but I love the flowers.
Little red tiny berry looking seeds.
A whole life cycle in one arrangement.
Closed, and then it opens – small and bright.

15. Mysterious Objects and Their Answers – various speakers

Does it grow as a tree?

This is a seed head,
what the flower used to be,
an Australian wildflower

What do those do?

The nubbins on the outside?
Seed casings.

So, what's that thing there?

Enjoying all the guesses, it's something really strange...

*I wonder if the flower is pretty?
A crinkle in it, perhaps.*

16. Pauline's Back Garden – Words by Pauline H

I live right in the back of the woods,
In my garden, I've got exotic trees,
Bananas, figs, olives, a fern tree.
The squirrels and the birds come over,
They know where I hide things...

One squirrel, he's really naughty,
I left a cannister of nuts out.
He managed to open the lid, get in!
Every time, he took a nut, he run
to the window to see if I was watching.

I've got it on tape! Very clever.
They decided to move into my loft.
They're my friends, I see them all
The time – that's what's kept me going.
With the squirrels and birds around me.

One little robin nesting in the ivy,
I see her on the floor, hopping around
So, I thought she was hungry, went indoors
And got her a chocolate cake. She was
Overwhelmed with the size, but she enjoyed it.

17. Pauline and her Apple Tree – Words by Pauline W

I have got a garden, and I love the garden.
I like to fiddle with plants and pull weeds off.

I've even got a little apple tree in my garden.
It's about forty-eight years old, and it bears
Apples, lovely Golden Delicious. I've got

Roses, dahlias. Herbs: rosemary, thyme, sage,
When I'm cooking I just break some off.

I've got a little green house as well,
Tomatoes and a pumpkin plant. I can't do
Bending because of my hip, somebody helps me.

18. My Dad Was a Gardener – Words by Christine

He had two allotments. When I was a child, we always had fresh veg.
I've been podding peas and broad beans. I feel connected to vegetables.

Over this year, I've actually grown tomatoes for the first time.
Though I come from a family of farmers and gardeners.

I'm not very good at growing. A lot of them died. When we had
All the rain, they got blight. I pulled them up this morning

They looked amazing....and then, they didn't.

19. Sophie Keeps The Green Inside – Words by Sophie

I don't have a green space.
Keeping a couple of plants
Alive in my flat is a challenge
In itself, but it's worth it.
Fresh herbs, basil and coriander.

20. Joyce Makes Even the Smallest Garden Beautiful – Words by Joyce

I absolutely love gardening.
I've a little area outside
My living room window,
I've paved it over with gravel
I've got pots with different flowers in.

Gives me pleasure to look at the window,
And see things growing. I used to have
A large garden, but now because of
Age and infirmity, I can only do small
Gardening projects. I'm thrilled to be here.

21. When you meet a sculptor, ask them about their hands – Annie, inspired by Maureen

Maureen tells me she is a sculptor,
And I see it in her tender hands,
The way she shapes the world
Brings wire birds to life in form.

Her garden is in a very high place,
All up steps, backing onto hills and fields.
Her husband grew some beautiful flowers.
Though she cannot always walk to it,

It's lovely to look out onto, all bushes and trees,
A pond with frogs. Her grandchild keeps it tidy.
I see her growing things with her hands,
The wires flowering beneath gentle fingers.

22. The Queen of Container Gardening – Words by Rose

I have got a garden at home,
but because of the weeds,
I plant everything in a pot,
And they are beautiful.

I love dahlias, geraniums,
I don't know what's wrong,
But the weeds just come up,
especially when we have the rain.

It's a big garden, but I can't plant
anything because of weeds and grass.
I've got 40 pots at the front and the back.

23. BANKSIA – Words by Shivani and Weda

Once the flower is finished this,
This is what it would look like.
The flowers are where the fruits grow,
Little nubbins on the side.

The way Australian wildflowers
Open up their seed heads is through heat.
During the wildfires that happen,
That the flowers get to spread their seed.

They need that heat. Without the fire,
They can't grow. *That's why we have the fire.*
A natural process in the earth, these flowers
Evolved to use the heat to disperse their seed.

But, due to global heating and human activity,
Wildfires happen too often and too long.
Which can be very dangerous.

24. On The Pestilences Affecting Even The Most Dedicated Gardeners Today – Words by Jeanie

I have a lot of roses trees
That have grown up
And spreading all out.

I love to admire my garden,
And I love my plants.
I grew up in the country.

We always had plants
And the fruit trees
I like the fresh herbs.

Chives, rosemary.
You just cut some
Put it in your meat.

Unfortunately, I have
wildlife in my garden.
For some reason or other,

I attract the foxes and squirrels.
In the front of the garden,
In the back of the garden.

Digging big holes,
All messing it up,
Sprawled on the grass!

Insects eating away
At my stuff,
Poor tomatoes and potatoes.

25. On Lemon Verbena, A Calming Alternative – Words by Shivani

Split the leaf open
and smell it,
if you feel so inclined,

in tea, refreshing
and lifting without
the buzz of coffee.

26. Poetic Soundbites from across the Session (placed together as if in dialogue)

Janet: They didn't have vanilla in the New Testament.

Joyce: Are you consulting Mr Google?

Janet: I think it's a poppy seed pod, seems to match the diagram, centre of the flower is there. Got the seeds in it. Says native to Australia. Presumably the English version is like it, but not so spectacular.

Pauline H: The ones with all the holes in them.

Joyce: Can I pinch one?

Roxanna: I borrowed a garden off somebody.

Fran: I spend lots of time with plants.

Ochuko: I love flowers but I have no garden to plant them in.

Shivani: I grow what I can.

Weda: They got worms, innit, cut out the worms –

Shivani: Ups and downs with gardening. Those pesky squirrels! Smell it from the lid, or it's a punch to the nose