

## BUC in need! - check our new crowd funding - page 7

### So what is Botanical University Challenge then?

BUC is an annual competition between teams of university students, undergraduates & postgraduates. It embraces the many aspects of botany: plant ID, plant pathology, people and plants in history and culture, amongst others. All the competitions are live streamed on YouTube, and recorded for later viewing and botanical posterity. The Student Botany Festival follows the finals, with all students who entered the competition invited to attend free of charge.

The online rounds, of multiple-choice questions, took place on 11, 18 and 25 February. This identified the BUC 2026 semi-finalists: University of Aberdeen, University of Edinburgh, University of Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin University. The semi-finals and finals, of free-answer questions, will be held at University of Reading on 19 August. This forms part of the University Centenary celebrations and as this is a special occasion family and friends will be welcome to attend, watch the BUC socials for ticket details. The event will also be live-streamed on YouTube. The 4th Student Botany Festival follows on 20-21 August (page 6).

### Dates

19 August: Semi-final and final  
20 - 21 August: Fourth Student Botany Festival,  
University of Reading

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Threads [@botanicalunichallenge](https://www.threads.net/@botanicalunichallenge)

Read more about BUC on our website  
<https://botanicaluniversitychallenge.co.uk/>  
Watch past contests on [BUC YouTube channel](#)

### How can teams enter BUC for 2027?

One team of 4 BSc, MSc or PhD students (with one reserve) can enter the competition from each institution. Where there is a lot of interest (and why wouldn't there be?!) we suggest holding an internal contest to select team members and the reserve. The electronic sign-up form will be available Autumn 2026.

Any questions, email [j.mitchley@reading.ac.uk](mailto:j.mitchley@reading.ac.uk)



# THRILLING END TO THE ONLINE ROUNDS

By Meriel Jones, The BUC team

The first rounds could not have had a more exciting finish. But to begin at the beginning, there were a record-breaking 32 teams in the competition this year including four teams new to BUC, two from Wales (Bangor and Cardiff) and two from England (Essex and University College London). Among the other teams was one from Liverpool that had been absent for a few years as well as many returning again.



The Pennywort Lane team from Liverpool (Rafaela Stagiopoulou, Alison Copeland, Owen Place, Nazree Zainurin). Image credit The BUC Team

Day 1 kicked off on 11 February and saw the teams answer 50 multiple-choice questions on topics ranging across plant identification, genetics, crops and ethnobotany. [Dr Martin Barker](#), Senior Lecturer in the School of Biological Sciences at University of Aberdeen asked the questions and he and John Warren provided a commentary on the teams' answers. Finally, only a few points separated the top 11 teams, including newcomers Bangor and UCL, previous winners Aberdeen, Oxford & Cambridge and other favourites like York, Eden Project and Plymouth. However, the 8 teams with the lowest scores left the competition: Durham, Essex, Liverpool, Nottingham, Oxford Brookes, Royal Holloway and Sheffield. Our commiserations!

Very close scores were also a feature of the second day, 18<sup>th</sup> February with questions asked by [Professor Yoselin Benitez-Alfonso](#), Professor of Plant Sciences and UKRI Future Leaders Fellow at the University of Leeds.



The 15 top teams competed in the final on-line round on 25th February and [Dr Karen Bacon](#), Lecturer in Botany and Plant Sciences at the University of Galway asked the questions. By the last round, teams from Universities of Aberdeen, Cambridge and Edinburgh were ahead, but with five more contesting for the final place in the semi-finals: Universities of Anglia Ruskin, Bangor, York and UCL as well as from RBG Edinburgh.

So there had to be tie-breaker rounds! These were truly nail-biting and after the first tie-break round of 5 questions all teams had 3 correct answers! So a second round of tie-breakers was inevitable and the stress on the teams was palpable! But this time the team from Anglia Ruskin University got all 5 tie-breaker questions correct, just ahead of the others, and won the final place in the semi-finals! Congratulations and thanks for the extra botanical drama!

We look forward to more excitement and drama in the semi-finals and finals on 19 August. with teams demonstrating their awesome knowledge across the full spectrum of botany!

After 2 tie-break rounds, teams in semifinal in August are: **Aberdeen, Cambridge, Edinburgh and Anglia Ruskin!**



Professor Karen Bacon, Professor John Warren and Dr Jonathan Mitchley with the four semi-final teams. I kissed a burl and I liked it from Anglia Ruskin, Taxon, Taxoff from Aberdeen, Paradise Palmhouse from Edinburgh and Glumey Sundays from Cambridge. Image credit The BUC Team

**BUC 2026 Round 2 Plant Pot Luck** Email Results to Students Export Results

Wednesday, February 11, 2026 at 2:51 PM

[Back to Results Table](#) 6 of 11

6. In the Death Note anime, what human world fruit does Light Yagami's Shinigami love the most? 1 POINT

Hide Results 32/32 Students Answered

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A	Apples	84%
<input type="checkbox"/> B	Durians	13%
<input type="checkbox"/> C	Strawberries	0%
<input type="checkbox"/> D	Banana	0%
<input type="checkbox"/> E	Mangos	3%

Botany includes plants in literature – including anime!  
Image credit The BUC Team

# FIRST TIME BUC-ers!

University of Essex

Our experience competing in BUC 2026

Cardiff University



By Susannah Eiden and the Phyte for Knowledge Team

As a university where there are only limited modules on plant science, none of our team had a very strong plant background, but when the call came to sign up for the Botanical University Challenge, we jumped at the chance! Every team that takes part is invited to the Annual Botany Festival, so whether we got through the first round or not, that felt like a win.

The sign-up process was easy; all that was required of us was a slide with our pictures on and a short paragraph about what kind of plant science modules/degrees were offered by our university. Three of us were in our final year and had taken a plant module each year previously and one had just recently got into plants after a lifelong enthusiasm for fungi! Armed with knowledge of a plant life cycle and the different between sporophytes and bryophytes, we went into the first round of the competition not knowing what the expect. It began with a round on plant identification and we felt a bit in at the deep end, but enjoyed seeing the different species of plants even if we were just choosing the Latin name that sounded the best!

General knowledge followed in rounds 2 and 3 and we slowly started picking up more points. The final two rounds were neck and neck and we were desperately hoping to make it into the next round, but in the end we just missed making it. But we learnt so much and cannot wait to go to the BUC Festival in Reading in August; what a great experience!



By Isobel Zaltzman and all the Greenhouse Gang

As a team who've only just started exploring the world of plant sciences, BUC has been an amazing opportunity to get to know more planty people and have some fun at the same time. It's been great to test ourselves and the friendliness of everyone involved has made it very approachable.

Some of the quiz questions particularly in the plant potluck were surprising and more difficult than expected, but they forced us to work as a team and trust the judgement of each team-mate. The pressure has forged a brilliant friendship. We have loved the experience of the online rounds and can't wait to see what questions will be in the final! The opportunity to go to Reading in the summer will be amazing. We can't wait to meet all the other teams and get to see Reading.

We're so proud to be the first Cardiff team to compete and hope to see many more.



# TOP OF THE LEADER BOARDS

## Round 1 - Triumph for the Sedge Hill Team



*By Kieran Heggs (EHU Team Captain)*

In this year's competition we were proud to finish 9th in the Quarter finals. Despite this not seeming like a triumph to some teams, for Sedge Hill this was an institutional best. The team has never made it to the quarter finals before and we were even more proud to finish middle of the pack, and only 3 points from making it through to the live semi-finals!

This is a big win for plant science in our department after the closure of our Plant Science degree in 2025. We've loved the challenge and fun of BUC this year, especially the quiet rivalry between our team and the teams with Sedge Hill alumni (RBGE and Liverpool). We'll see everyone in Reading this summer!

A few facts about our team:

- We're named Sedge Hill referring to Professor Paul Ashton who studies *Carex* sedges at EHU (and is one of the original founders of BUC)
- We're one of only two teams that have taken part in every single BUC competition since its founding in 2016
- Our team is solely undergraduate students making our triumph even more impressive! (This year we had two 1<sup>st</sup> year students and three 3<sup>rd</sup> year students)

[Yes, a great achievement, Ed]



# IT'S NOT ALL GLUMHEY SUNDAYS FOR THE CAMBRIDGE TEAM!



*By Nat Holmes, Jean Watelet, Grace Ropceanu, Molly Williams and Rowan Hector-Turnbull*

It's fair to say that gathering Cambridge's team for this year's competition was a pretty tumultuous process. Our most experienced team member, Nat (a BUC veteran who has competed for 3 Universities now!) is based in the Department of Zoology and was isolated from fellow plant fans, struggling to recruit. Luckily, we were all brought together with some help from Raffy Hull and last year's BUC team.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this initial difficulty, our team draws from a diverse mix of backgrounds: Jean, our captain, is based in Plant Sciences, working on flower development; Grace, from Geography, is looking forward to beginning a project on Romanian ethno-mycology; Nat works with ant-plants, Rowan's a NatSci undergrad and Molly works on the depiction of greenhouses and plants in 19th century novels! This happy accident not only allowed us to bring complementary skills to the quiz, but also allowed our paths to cross, which might never have occurred without BUC's botanical joy! For first time BUCers Jean and Molly, arriving from overseas, hearing about BUC was an exciting surprise. BUC is truly unique and provides a brilliant way to connect with other young plant enthusiasts from across two countries, especially if you're away from home.

Going into the competition itself, we weren't expecting perfection but were happily enjoying the quizzing experience, finding that we all worked well together. A little bit of preparation, each focusing on areas we enjoy most, helped us perform solidly in the first two rounds. We certainly weren't in first place, but we were quite consistent (26/50 both times!). For the final round, all the stars aligned, and we were each able to play to our strengths. We weren't (except Jean) expecting to make it to the finals, but now we can't wait!

# BUC 2026 TEAM-NAME SHOWDOWN

## 32 TEAMS, 131 VOTES, AND A 4-WAY FIGHT FOR BOTANICAL PUNNING GLORY!

By Jonathan Mitchley, The BUC Team

This year's Botanical University Challenge team-name competition has been one of our most exuberant yet. All 32 universities brought their A-game - and their best plant puns - to the arena. From Nottingham's "Xylem? Hardly know 'em!" to Eden's "Back to the Fuchsia", from York's "Long Thyme No See" to Cardiff's "The Greenhouse Gang", the creativity was in full bloom.

Over February our online audience had the chance to vote for their top three favourite names resulting in 131 entries, each one helping to shape the botanical zeitgeist of 2026.

So what now? Well, we have a dramatic four-way tie at the top of the leaderboard.

The suspense is real. The bragging rights are enormous. The puns are... unstoppable.

The final result - along with prizes for the winning teams - will be revealed live at the BUC 2026 Finals on 19<sup>th</sup> August, hosted at the University of Reading and live-streamed on our YouTube channel for the whole botanical world to enjoy.

Whether your heart belongs to "The Know-It-Oaks", "Taxon, Taxoff", "Cactus if you can!", or "You betula believe it", one thing is certain: this year's competition proves, once again, that botanists really know how to have fun.

Join us in August for the grand reveal - and may the best pun win.

Will your favourite have won? Here's a reminder of all the 32 names.

#	Institution	Team name
1	Nottingham	Xylem? Hardly know 'em!
2	Southampton	The Not-So-Hot Potatoes



3	Plymouth	Plymophytes
4	Galway	Rage against the Rhododendron
5	Edge Hill	Sedge Hill
6	York	Long Thyme, No See
7	The Botanics	Fern-tastic Fronds
8	Oxford	Live and Let Thymes
9	Eden Project	Back to the Fuchsia
10	Reading	Spurge of the Moment
11	Anglia Ruskin	I Kissed A Burl, And I Liked It
12	Durham	Durham Dendrons
13	Bristol	Top of the Poplars
14	Essex	The Phyte for Knowledge
15	Aberystwyth	Cactus if you can!



16	Liverpool	Pennywort Lane
17	Royal Holloway	You Betula believe it
18	Bangor	The Giggly Gourds
19	Cardiff	The Greenhouse Gang
20	Leeds	Stomata hardly know her
21	UCL	The Bloomsbury Botanists



22	Aberdeen	Taxon, Taxoff
23	UC Dublin	The UCD Yarrows
24	Edinburgh	Paradise Palmhouse
25	Sheffield	The Shef-field forget-me-nots
26	Queen's Belfast	Bats out of hell-eborine
27	Dundee	Dundee Daffodils
28	Queen Mary	<i>Trivialis kewtensis</i>
29	Oxford Brookes	Oxford Ragworts
30	Portsmouth	Haven't Got a Clusia
31	Harper Adams	The Plant-hoppers
32	Cambridge	Glumey Sundays

## LOOKING FORWARD TO THE 4th STUDENT BOTANY FESTIVAL, READING 2026

By Jonathan Mitchley, University of Reading

Planning for the 4th Student Botany Festival is well underway, and the programme is shaping up to be ambitious, activity-rich and community-centred. Running from 19–21 August 2026, the event builds on the success of previous years while introducing new features, expanded workshops, and a strong focus on careers, creativity and hands-on botanical experience.

The festival opens immediately after BUC 2026 finals on Wednesday 19 August, with the official *Welcome to the 4th Student Botany Festival* and a drinks reception in the lovely Meadow Suite and the “*Big Botany Buffet Dinner*”, funded through the University of Reading centenary grant. This will be followed by a relaxed social night featuring impromptu games and quizzing, quiet spaces, chit chat, and, by popular demand, the return of Professor John Warren’s legendary vegetable orchestra!

Day 2 (Thursday) launches with the opening of *Celebrating the Uniquely Green! 100 Years of Botany at Reading*, an exhibition forming part of the university’s centenary celebrations. Students then take centre stage with flash talks before heading outdoors for a series of guided tours - multiple small-group sessions - outreach in the Walled Garden, ethnobotany in the Harris Garden, BSBI mini-FISC and a bryophyte walk. Then back inside, alongside lunch and networking opportunities, will be a plant swap and Dr M’s “giving table” (you need to be there!).

The afternoon includes a wider campus nature walk, keynote talks from Kristel Schoonderwoerd and Paul Kenrick, and, new to BUC - an *Experts at the Table* session. The day ends with a second social evening, likely to include plants in games, sci-art activities, and a screening of the *Margaret Mee Moon Flower* documentary.

Day 3 (Friday) focuses on plant-related careers, beginning with a panel discussion and Q&A, followed by STEM Learning and a wider careers showcase and networking. Following this will be hands-on workshops including herbarium skills, vegetative ID skills, forensic botany, science communication and Dr M’s Poacea party! The festival concludes with a final keynote from an early career botanist and closing words and a special announcement (you have to be there!).

The planning team continues to refine details, but the structure is clear: a vibrant, inclusive celebration of botany, student community and plantastic opportunities!

# SUPPORT BUC’S FIRST CROWDFUNDING CAMPAIGN!

*By Lauren Daly, the BUC Team*

For many of us, Botanical University Challenge is more than a competition - it’s where confidence grows, friendships form, and plant science starts to feel like home.

Each year, we watch students arrive unsure of their place in the discipline, and leave with new knowledge, new networks, and a clearer sense of their future. In 2025, a record 155 students took part, with 98% reporting increased botanical knowledge and over 90% saying the experience strengthened their career aspirations.

BUC has always been built by its community - and kept accessible by a simple principle: it is completely free for students to attend. But, this year, for the first time, we are asking for your help:

Following the loss of a major sponsor, we have launched a crowdfunding campaign to ensure BUC 2026 can go ahead at full scale and remain open to all. Every donation, and every share, will help us protect what makes BUC so special.

If BUC has meant something to you - as a participant, supporter, or collaborator - we would be incredibly grateful for your support.

👉 <https://reading.hubbub.net/p/botanicaluniversitychallenge/>

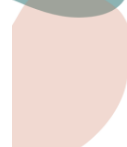
Help us grow the next generation of botanists!



**HELP SUPPORT THE NEXT GENERATION OF PLANT SCIENTISTS**



**DONATE OR SHARE**



# BUC: A STUDENT JOURNEY THROUGH A DECADE OF BOTANICAL MAGIC, 2016-2026

*Collated by Dr M from student voices in BUC feedback surveys*

## CATE: A Story of Botanical Collaboration

This year, Botanical University Challenge stepped into the realm of institutional prestige as the University of Reading's nomination for the Advance HE Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE). Preparing the submission prompted the planning team to sift through a decade of minutes, emails and memories. What emerged was astonishing: a scrap of a botanical idea that has somehow developed into a national living, breathing botanical megastructure.

## The BUC Origin Story

Legend holds that BUC began in 2015, when three botanists (Warren, Mitchley and Ashton) met in a pub to lament the decline of university botany teaching and the isolation felt by students who believed they were the only ones who could identify *Lagurus ovatus* without weeping. These three weren't trying to start a revolution - but they did. That spark of frustration, hope, and botanical mischief became Botanical University Challenge, now the UK and Ireland's largest collaborative botanical education initiative.



*Lagurus ovatus, Hare's-tail grass. Image credit: Wikimedia Commons, Tigerente.*

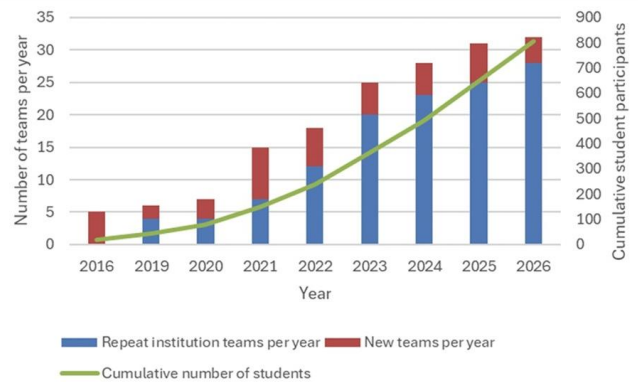
## 2016: The Year of Glorious Botanical Chaos

The first BUC, held at Kew in 2016, featured five teams, chair James Wong and an atmosphere held together by "goodwill, caffeine, and the botanical equivalent of duct tape." Questions were finalised the day before; nobody knew the rules, especially James, and nobody cared. It was chaotic, joyful, and for many students, the first moment they realised they were not alone in their plant-nerdery.

## 2019–2020: The Comeback Tour

After a brief hiatus - during which botanists wandered the land like confused Ents - BUC returned at Reading in 2019 with six teams, and at Ness Gardens in 2020 with seven. Students described these events as lifelines in institutions where plant science was marginalised. The planning team expanded, roles diversified, clipboards multiplied, and a national network began to form. The chaos and joy remained, now with better organisation.

Growth of BUC teams since 2016 and cumulative number of participating students.



*Wow! Look how the number of students and teams participating in BUC have grown! Image credit: The BUC Team*

## 2021–2022: The Great Leap Online

The pandemic could have ended BUC. Instead, it went full phoenix-rising-from-the-compost-heap. Guided by the legend that is Reading Archaeology student Jonathan Charmley, the competition was reinvented overnight as a live-streamed spectacle. Suddenly 15 teams were competing, and thousands were watching botany live on YouTube - voluntarily! Online participation opened doors for students from distant institutions and those with limited travel options. By 2022, 18 teams were competing, and online heats became a permanent, access-widening feature.



## 2023–2025: The Hybrid Era and the Festival of Botanical Dreams

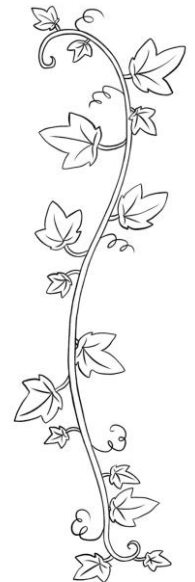
With in-person events returning, BUC adopted a hybrid model: online heats in February and live finals in summer. The question-writing team sharpened, new setters joined, and quality-control processes strengthened the competition into an all-round botanical tour de force.

The true “*goblin feast*” was the Student Botany Festival - two days of workshops, field trips, careers showcases, art competitions, quiet rooms, socials, and enough plant enthusiasm “*to photosynthesise a small village*”. Students have called the festival “*botanical euphoria*,” and they were right. Growing funding streams enabled free participation and richer programming than ever before.

- **BUC 2023** - 25 teams including BUC’s first Irish team and the first student botany festival in Nottingham, giving students their first chance to network, engage and be inspired through hands-on activities including botanising together in the wild. As one student said: “*Community building by finding other people who are interested and passionate about plants – helps me feel less alone in my interest!*”
- **BUC 2024** - 28 teams and the 2<sup>nd</sup> festival held in Oxford, academically diverse and including a keynote from Kew’s Director of Science, creating what students described as “*amazing, unforgettable, worthwhile, and exhilarating.*”
- **BUC 2025** - 31 teams and the 3<sup>rd</sup> festival in Cambridge, welcoming 94 students to the Sainsbury Laboratory, including an inspiring keynote from the UK’s Special Representative for Nature and a programme so energising that one attendee said it left them “*absolutely inspired and motivated to continue towards a career with plants*”.
- **BUC 2026** – 32 teams and the 4<sup>th</sup> festival will be held in Reading in August and planning is well underway. This event is part of the University of Reading’s centennial celebrations and is shaping up to be the most exuberant botanical festivity yet.



*BUC teams in order of entry, with location, demonstrating longitudinal engagement with new teams entering over time. So many and diverse institutions participate in BUC. Image credit: The BUC Team*



## Coda: A Self-Renewing Community

Today, BUC is a thriving, self-renewing ecosystem involving, over its decade lifespan, 44 institutions, more than 800 students, and over 60 partner organisations. Alumni return as question writers, festival organisers, *The Thymes* newsletter editors, and “*agents of botanical mischief.*” Digital communities buzz year-round across Instagram, Twitter, Bluesky, TikTok, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and iNaturalist.

BUC is no longer just a competition. It is a habitat. A lifestyle. “*A botanical cult, but in all the best possible ways.*”

A decade on from that first pub conversation, BUC stands as a joyful, well-organised, ever-growing movement powered by students, alumni, partners, and volunteers who believe that plants - and plant-aware students - deserve celebration. Whatever happens with the CATE Award, the greatest achievement is the community itself: resilient, generous, creative, and ever-growing.

You are welcome!

# INTERVIEW: MEET BUC ALUMNUS ROCKET SCIENTIST TOM LANG

By Tom Lang with The Thymes Team



Tom Lang in 2025. Image credit: © CN Seeds Ltd. with permission.

Tom studied B.Sc. (Hons) Biological Science at the University of Liverpool. While there, he was co-founder and president of the Plant Science Society. In 2019 he was a member of the first Liverpool team to take part in Botanical University Challenge. It was held at Reading and involved an early morning minibus trip to arrive by mid-day. The team knew the questions would be like the TV programme *University Challenge* but didn't really know what that meant! Despite that, they came second, only losing after a second tiebreaker question. Afterwards all 6 teams managed to socialise in the University bar.

By this time, Tom was deep into his final year project *Marker assisted selection (MAS) of a Brassica oleracea var. italica hybrid population using a cleaved amplified polymorphic sequence (CAPS) assay*, supervised by Dr Peter Glen Walley. He followed this with a research project about wild rocket (*Diplotaxis tenuifolia*) that involved collaboration with a seed breeding company, CN Seeds Ltd. Yes, he did call himself a rocket scientist!

Rocket is native to the Mediterranean where it has been used for millennia as food, medicine and traditionally as an aphrodisiac, and can be found in Imperial Roman recipes from first century CE.

One of the challenges with growing wild rocket under polytunnels is the increased humidity which promotes downy mildew infections leading to crop losses. The objective of his doctoral research project was to find novel sources of disease resistance in crop wild relatives found in gene banks around the world and incorporate this into unique breeding material to create new disease-tolerant varieties of wild rocket. This was achieved by genotyping an inbred population of wild rocket to discover single nucleotide polymorphisms and performing genome wide association studies to discover the genetic variation associated with disease resistance and other morphological traits.

This work allowed him to write a thesis and he was awarded a doctorate in 2024. After several part-time jobs, including leading tourists on cycle tours around Liverpool, Tom is now in the early stages of his first post-doctoral position as an Innovate UK Knowledge Transfer Partnership Associate between the Crop Genetic Improvement Group at Liverpool and CN Seeds Ltd. where he is following-up, and building upon his PhD research.



Team LiverpoolLambBanana – Runner-up in BUC2019. Tom Lang (back row). Image credit: The BUC Team

**The Thymes:** How did you get into plant molecular genetics? Why plants and why genetics?



**Tom Lang:** I've always had a fascination with the enormous variation in plant species and a desire to understand how these differences, in colour, shape, and metabolite production, all come from DNA and its associated molecular machinery. During the first year of my undergraduate degree, I was fascinated to learn how research into these molecules can be used to manipulate plants into better performing crops for increasing food security which is when I decided to pursue a career in plant genetic research.

**The Thymes:** What can you remember about the Botanical University Challenge contest in 2019?

**Tom Lang:** The curriculum at the University of Liverpool was limited in plant sciences and so I was looking for any opportunity to get involved in more events related to this area of research. At BUC 2019 I remember learning a huge amount of interesting botanical knowledge, particularly the historical and cultural links, which gave me a much deeper appreciation for the field of ethnobotany beyond my experience of plants from a molecular biology and agricultural perspective. It was great to meet many other students and researchers who are as enthusiastic and passionate about plants as I am.

**The Thymes:** Why do molecular genetics with wild rocket?

**Tom Lang:** My research involves building molecular breeding pipelines which can be adapted to other crop species for genetic improvement. The BBSRC CASE PhD at The University of Liverpool was part of an ongoing collaboration with CN Seeds Ltd., a company which specialises in herbs, baby leaf salads and microgreens. Wild rocket was chosen as a suitable subject for this project as it is a growing market and the secondary metabolites, isothiocyanates and glucosinolates, present in its leaves are known to contain powerful antioxidants that persist throughout the human intestines providing potent anti-cancer and anti-inflammatory effects.

**The Thymes:** You are now a Knowledge Transfer Partnership Associate; what is that?

**Tom Lang:** Knowledge Transfers Partnerships are a programme by Innovate UK (part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)), a non-departmental public body sponsored by the UK government's Department for Science, Innovation and Technology) which bring technical expertise from academic institutions and apply it to business requirements. The objectives of this project are to build upon my earlier research which discovered variants associated with traits in wild rockets, to design genetic markers linked to these traits and develop genomic prediction and selection capabilities.

**The Thymes:** What are your future plans for your career?

**Tom Lang:** Towards the end of the KTP project I will be applying for research fellowships so that I can establish a molecular breeding lab, either at a university or within a seed company, to advance research in plant genetics for improved food security and more resilient crop systems.



*Variation in leaf shape within wild rocket. Image credit: © CN Seeds Ltd. with permission.*



*Wild rocket growing under cover. Image credit: © CN Seeds Ltd. with permission.*



# FROM STUDENTS TO SCIENTISTS: BUC NETWORK HITS 244 MEMBERS AND GROWING

By Alastair Culham, University of Reading

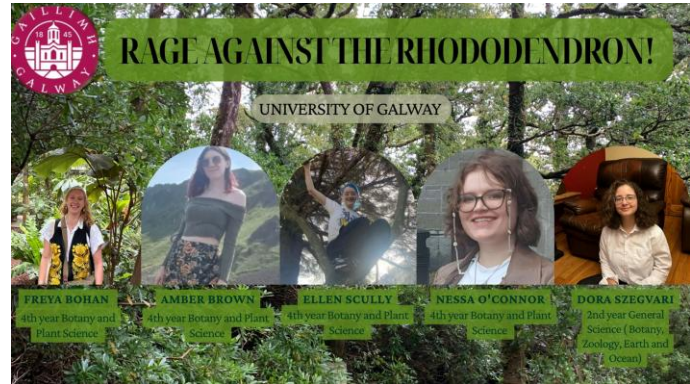
The BUC LinkedIn Group now has 244 members spread across three years of BUC activity so is gaining that critical mass to allow vertical communication from year to year. Since BUC 2025 we have posted a range of jobs and PhD studentships on the group, advertised an essay prize and lobbied University of Nottingham to keep their plant science teaching going by sending an open letter written by Lauren Baker.

There's a lovely report of the talk given by Jonathan and Lauren at the BSBI meeting at Edgehill and some updates on the online knockout competition. Over the next few months there will be a steady flow of information on the August BUC Festival.

If you haven't yet joined the LinkedIn group, or have joined as a silent lurker, do start some dialogue - let us know your favourite plants, best (and worst) bits of education and anything else that might interest this wonderful botanical crowd.

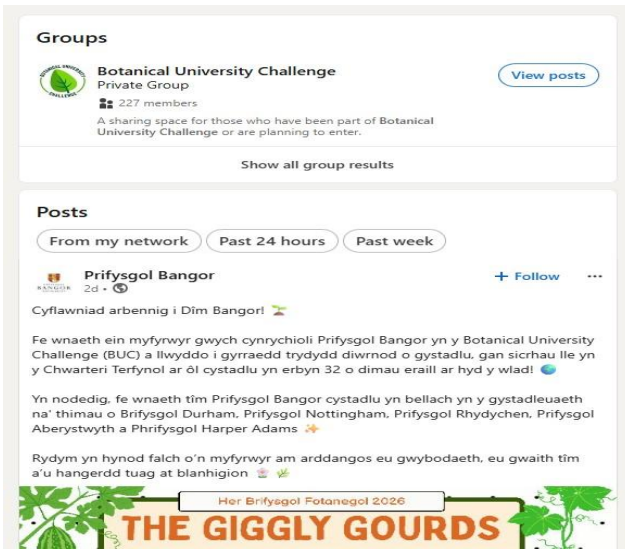
# GALWAY'S PLANT POWER BLOOMS AGAIN FOR BUC 2026

By Freya Bohan and the whole Rage against the Rhododendron team



Dia duit ó Ollscoil na Gaillimhe! A huge hello from the University of Galway's Rage Against the Rhododendron! We are absolutely delighted for this opportunity to declare our true love for the BUC community. This year our core team was made up of 4 out of the 6 final year botany undergraduates, Freya, Amber, Nessa & Ellen, each with their own botanical niches and passions. We also had our fantastic sub, Dora, who's only a wee second year in General Science but don't let that fool you, she ain't no ordinary novice.

For the majority of our team, this was their first ever BUC, cherries popped, except for Freya who has been itching for her final BUC extravaganza. This year, UoG's Botany Society hunted far and wide for young plant fanatics to determine if they had what it takes to make the team. And they absolutely did! Amber, an exceptionally talented plant molecular scientist with a true love for all things herbalism, led the team through germination and ethnobotanical rounds. Ellen, our tree climbing, wood whittling, plant ecologist smashed it out of the park with all taxonomy/identification and those tricky "which wood is this?" questions.



Prifysgol Bangor University announcing that, after entering BUC for the first time, their team had reached the Quarterfinal.

For Freya the botany promoting, folklore validating, plant physiologist, any phytochemical or agricultural questions were sent her way and finally Nessa our theatrical palaeobotanist dug straight into all the fossilised and plant history questions. All in all, our team's diversity of interests allowed us to reach the Quarter Finals and, most importantly, to fully geek out in the best plant nerd environment!

We would all like to express our deepest gratitude to the wonderful organisers, guest chairs and sponsors of BUC for enabling this extremely valuable experience. BUC truly fosters one of the strongest botanical communities we are a part of, and we are so incredibly excited to meet everyone in Reading this August!

The talk highlighted BUC's current hybrid model, its expanding alumni network, and the transformative power of joyful learning. A live BUC-style quiz added energy and laughter, giving attendees a taste of the excitement that defines the competition and the Student Botany Festival.



Screenshot of Dr M's talk to Plantlife

The audience response, as judged from the busy online chat, was immediate, warm and animated. Participants joined from across the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands, filling the chat with greetings, humour and shared enthusiasm for plants. Many described the talk as "brilliant", "fascinating", "fun", and "inspiring", with several noting how refreshing it was to see botany presented with such creativity and joy. The quiz became a highlight, sparking friendly competition, self-deprecating humour and a genuine sense of community - exactly the atmosphere BUC is known for.

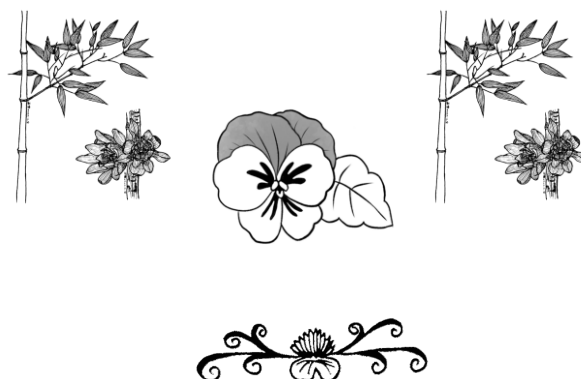
## BOTANICAL JOY GOES VIRAL: BUC TALK DRAWS HUNDREDS ONLINE

By: Jonathan Mitchley (Dr M), Associate Professor of Field Botany, University of Reading



Screenshot of Dr M's talk to Plantlife.

Dr M's Plantlife Members' Talk (Thursday 22 January, online webinar) brought the full force of botanical joy to a packed online audience (376 sign-ups), blending humour, storytelling and plant-nerdery in classic BUC style. From the Poaceae song to the origins of BUC in a pub, the session traced the competition's evolution into a national movement that champions belonging, confidence and botanical identity.



What stood out most was how deeply the themes of the talk resonated. Attendees shared their own pathways into botany - childhood books, inspiring teachers, urban plant hunts, community groups - echoing the message that people fall in love with plants through experience and connection. The chat overflowed with links to training courses, societies and local initiatives, showing a strong appetite for continued learning. Several participants expressed interest in partnerships with gardens, schools and community projects, signalling real potential for future outreach.

Above all, the talk strengthened public appreciation for BUC as a joyful, inclusive movement that nurtures the next generation of plant-aware people. The session didn't just inform - it created a moment of belonging, curiosity and shared botanical delight.

## A Life Rooted in Beauty: One Botanist's Love for Moss Champion

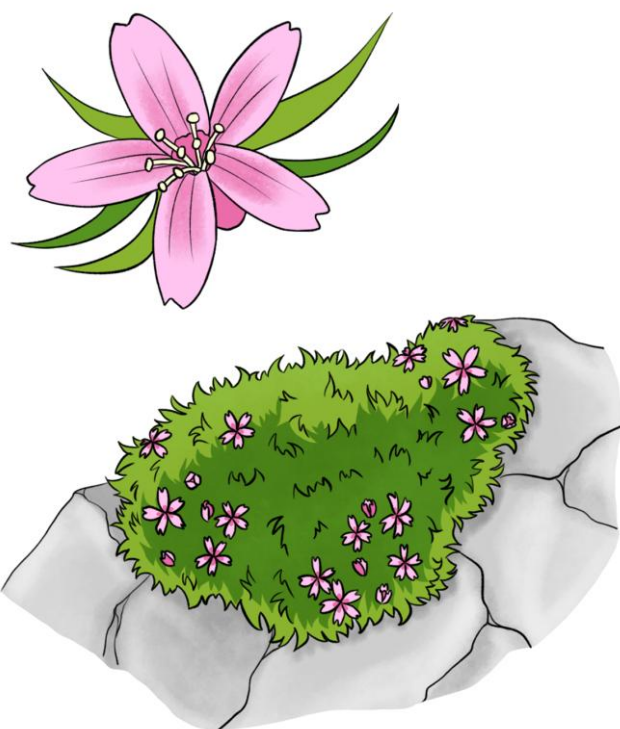
*By John Warren, one of the founders of Botanical University Challenge*

The Moss Champion (*Silene acaulis*) has to be my favourite plant, for a couple of reasons. Primarily because it is just so beautiful. It is a low-growing alpine, cushion-forming plant with stunning, bright pink flowers. The contrast between its bright lime-green leaves and pink flowers makes it easy to locate and identify.

My second reason for choosing Moss Champion, is that it always grows in spectacular locations, in the mountains.

When my time comes, I would like my ashes to be sprinkled near a Moss Champion plant. This is not for my benefit, because I will obviously be dead. But this is to ensure that my surviving family will be required to visit such a wonderful place. It is difficult to be melancholic in the mountains where Moss Champion grows.

When the British Flora was being DNA barcoded by the National Botanic Garden of Wales, I sponsored its barcoding in my wife's name.



*Moss champion (Silene acaulis) by Ansa Mitchell, University of Nottingham*



# Interview: From Kew to BUC: Colin Clubbe Reflects on a Decade of Botanical Growth

Watch the whole interview on our [YouTube channel](#).

**The Thymes:** So, Colin Clubbe, you're at Kew, recently retired as head of the Conservation Science Department, but continuing to support plant conservation, especially on islands and UK Overseas Territories. You have a really interesting position in the history of Botanical University Challenge because when it started in 2016, you were very much involved and introduced everything on the day. It's now the 10 year anniversary of BUC, and it would be great to get some of your memories.

**Colin Clubbe:** Yes, 10 years. That is amazing. But it's still a very vivid day in my memory. It was such a lovely day, the whole activity. I was Head of Conservation Science at Kew at the time and we hosted it in the Jodrell Laboratory and there was just such a lovely atmosphere. I gave a short welcome and the introduction.

We managed to get James Wong as the quiz master. We know him well at Kew. He was very amusing because he would say, *Well, I'm not sure I've ever seen this show, so I hope I do this all right*. And of course, he was absolutely wonderful. He encouraged the students. He really made the whole day run very, very well indeed.

And look how BUC has grown over the years! It was relatively small in 2016, only five teams, all very passionate about plants and with a nice audience.

I remember one of the things I said was that it was wonderful to see the BUC idea happening. And I hoped we could encourage more universities to take part. And lo and behold, now over 30 teams apply and the competition is so big it has to have preliminary rounds. It is just wonderful the way that BUC has developed.

Reading won the contest in 2016, with Southampton runner-up. Afterwards, we ended up in The Botanist, a lovely little pub on the corner of Kew Green. And it was big enough to hold us all. People celebrated (the designated drivers with soft drinks, of course) and then everyone had to disperse back to places like Edge Hill, Aberystwyth and Reading. And I think we were very privileged to host it. As a result, I thought that Kew ought to have a presence and a Kew team has been in BUC 6 times now. We've got our own teaching facilities with the Kew diploma, and we've now started our own MSc programme with Queen Mary College.

It's lovely the way BUC has expanded, has been so inclusive and provided a platform showcasing botany as a core science as well as a platform for all these wonderful students to come together.

**The Thymes:** You said that you started off in conservation biology, and that's an area that people are really interested in. How did you get into that?



**Colin Clubbe:** In a very circuitous route! I've always been interested in nature and the outdoors. As a child, there was nothing better than going off exploring somewhere in pre-screens, pre-internet days. I wanted to study nature, and I did a broad first degree in biology. After my PhD, I got into teaching, but had an opportunity to travel. I was teaching regular plant ecology and systematics but I was always interested in the fate of plants in the wild.

There were two transformative things for me. One, I got a sabbatical and went to work at an environmental centre in Naples in south-west Florida, on the edge of the Everglades. This was my first time in the subtropics, a two-season year, one wet, one dry. Development of towns in the area was a big issue, with lots of pressure on the land. Then, the second was that I got a lectureship at the University of the West Indies and went to Trinidad in the Caribbean. That was really formative because I was in the tropics, where all the biodiversity is, but also where all the pressures on it are as well. I experienced firsthand some of those challenges. As a result, I thought that this was something that I would like to try and shape my career within. And when I returned to the UK, I managed to do it.

Kew is a wonderful place to work. My initial role had a lot of flexibility and I was able to build a programme in conservation biology in the early 2000s, asking *What's happening to these plants in the wild, and how can we influence this?*

I had support from my colleagues in taxonomy, particularly in the herbarium and in the living collection. Conservation biology is now a recognised discipline. I still think the plant element is under-rated, although there are a couple of courses with good botanical focuses in them. And at Kew we enjoy hosting university students to give them an experience of plants and plant conservation.

**The Thymes:** Do you feel that developing conservation biology has had an impact on the wild?

**Colin Clubbe:** That's a very good question. One thing is the idea of shifting baselines where one generation think what they see is normal, not really knowing what happened before. You have to think, well, what might have happened without the conservation interventions that we've made. It feels like a holding game to me.

I think things are better for being under the microscope of scientists, practitioners and policy makers who try to shine a light onto impacts in the environment. But through my career, we've rediscovered some plants which were thought extinct in the wild, we've found new species, and helped develop new botanic gardens so that they can take a role in the country of origin and help conserve local flora. So, I look forward with hope and optimism, thinking that actually it has made a difference. But there's still a long way to go.



**The Thymes:** So, to finish, do you have a favourite plant and why?

**Colin Clubbe:** I have several favourite plants. There are a handful that are close to my heart. One is a funny little sedge endemic to Saint Helena, an island in the South Atlantic about 2000 km off the coast of Angola and Namibia. It is *Bulbostylis neglecta*, discovered, then thought extinct, but we confirmed that it was still there, working with our Cyperaceae specialist at Kew and local counterparts in St. Helena.

And St. Helena was an amazing place to reach. I first went when there was no airport, so we got the Royal Mail ship from Walvis Bay in Namibia. That took three days, and as you saw the boat disappearing over the horizon, you thought, *Well, I hope it comes back in two weeks, because I'm now really stuck here.*



*Bulbostylis neglecta* (neglected tuft sedge). Image credit: Colin Clubbe

But that got me onto the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4. I was interviewed by John Humphrys and James Naughtie who were wonderful. It was in August, the so-called silly season where there's supposed to be no real politics going on. They had read about the story of the sedge, and the Kew press office contacted me about being interviewed. The BBC taxi arrived at 5:30 in the morning and ferried me to Broadcasting House.

I waited in a little room with coffee and tea and pastries because they were going to fit the story in around others. The original time slipped past as it was delayed because of a breaking political story.

And then the Chief Rabbi came in, who was doing *Thought for the Day*, and we had a wonderful chat. Finally, I went on and it was marvellous. They were just so warm in their questions and interest. It was all over by 9:00 and I was back at work in Kew. It made me realise the reach of the BBC because of the number of people that contacted me, having heard that *Today* programme. That was both a career high and a wonderful personal thing. And so *Bulbostylis neglecta* has always been a very special little plant for me.

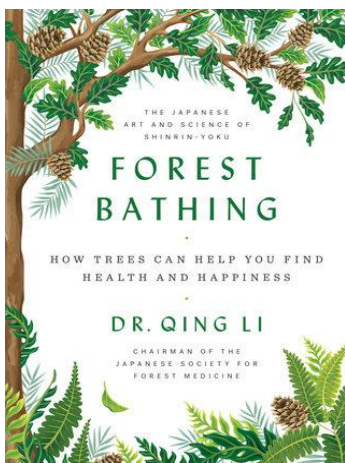


There are some big plants that I love, like the saguaro cactus, *Carnegiea gigantea*, from the Arizona desert. I'd always been in love with that from early cowboy movies and the first time I managed to get a holiday in May, we went camping in the national parks in Arizona. I love the desert. And the saguaro were in bloom. It is such an important keystone species, especially to the desert ecology. It grows very slowly, protected by other plants, and when it finally flowers, provides a niche for so many others, from the bats that pollinate it to the flickers, local woodpeckers, that excavate holes in it for nests. It's so tolerant to the drought conditions of the desert. I really admire that.

**The Thymes:** It's so nice to hear your stories about those plants that obviously mean so much to you. Thank you very much indeed.

## Book Reviews: Nature, Wellbeing and the Power of Plants

By: Catherine Martinez, University of Reading

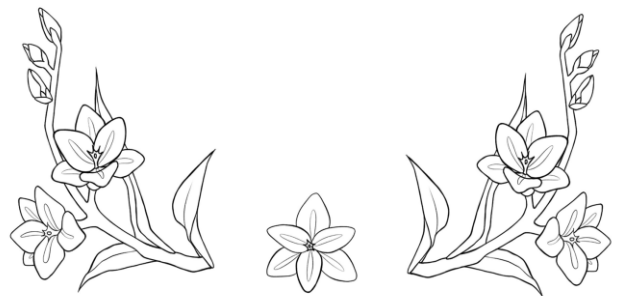


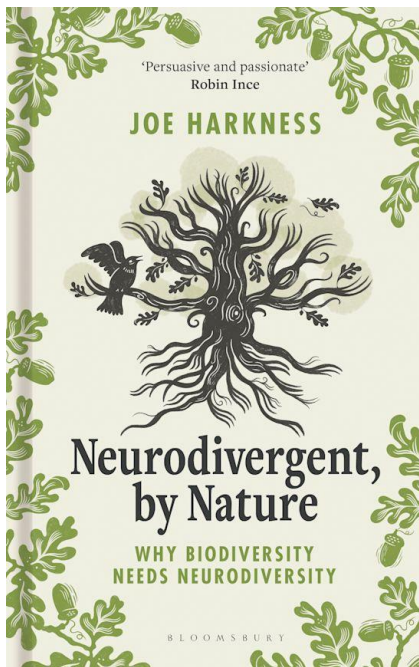
### Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness - Dr. Qing Li

In this guide and explanation of the traditional Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku*, otherwise known as “forest bathing”, Dr. Qing Li takes the reader on a journey to understand how the forest can heal us, both mentally and physically. *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness* is well-written and very informative without being overwhelming. I particularly enjoyed the examination of how forest bathing is integrated into Japanese street design and architecture.

Qing highlights the methods used to measure the effects of forest bathing and discusses the criteria for identifying a good location for forest bathing as well as how to best partake in the practice.

While the name “forest bathing” implies the need for a forest, Qing suggests urban greenspaces and gardening as alternatives with similar effects. This book is accessible and informative in its communication and provides a great jumping off point for learning more about forest bathing and the effect that greenspace has on humanity.





If you've ever wondered why ecology and conservation calls to neurodivergent people, this book is for you. Harkness explores how the experiences of neurodivergent people can provide the mental toolkit necessary for the work required to protect biodiversity.

This book also dives into how nature can support the wellbeing of neurodivergent people. I valued the even-handed approach this book took to highlighting the difficulties neurodiverse people face generally in the workplace and academia, as well as coping strategies and mitigations from case studies. I very much enjoyed this book. The mix of personal stories and academic exploration led to a well-balanced and engaging read without feeling too heavy or overwhelming.



## Where are plant jobs advertised?

*By Meriel Jones, the BUC Team*

It's always useful to ask advice from anyone you know who already works with plants. Academics will know where they advertise research projects or technical posts. Someone who has recently taken up a post or job knows how they searched and may have useful advice on the current jobs market.

Make sure you have updated your CV. Create a version with everything in it – all qualifications, personal statement, all employment, any volunteering or social roles, sports, other hobbies and social activities, examples of working with people, leading a team, problem solving, social media accounts, a sensible non-university email address, participation in events like Botanical University Challenge – anything and everything! You will then have all information ready to fill in on-line forms, tailored CVs and have some thoughts ready for interview questions.

Some helpful resources for PGRs and jobseekers:

- [Countryside Jobs Service](#) - an extensive platform for the latest environmental jobs. Refine your search by geographical area, entry level, or sector.
- [EnvironmentJob](#) - refine your search by geographical area, key words, or entry level.
- [FindAPhD](#) and [FindAPostdoc](#) - many (but not all) projects at universities and research institutes are advertised here. You can sign up to the newsletters to stay informed of the latest opportunities.
- [EURAXESS](#) – is the portal for academic posts and PhDs funded by the EU. Most will be within the EU but some will be in the UK or other third countries. It also has information about working abroad.
- [LinkedIn](#) - Training and jobs are advertised, and LinkedIn has its own job search platform. Make and update a profile regularly to get noticed!
- Your institute/alumni careers service - Most universities and colleges have careers officers to assist with career development, CVs and training.



# Advent botany on BUC social media

*By Izzy Beresford & Jess Hutchinson, University of Reading*

With the aim of promoting Botanical University Challenge to a wider audience, and to bring some planty Christmas cheer to the masses - we created Advent Botany. This consisted of daily posts of a festive 'plant of the day', along with ID tips and some seasonal facts in December 2025.

We wanted to make this popular concept our own, so we added a twist where we focused on UK native species. With our team of three TikTokers we each had eight days to make. The list of species we used came together easily; we included holly, ivy, Scots pine, bog cranberry, hazelnuts and more! These included plants widely appreciated for their festive charm, and some with possibly more surprising links to Christmas. By including a range of familiar and more unknown plants (including rarities such as our native cotoneaster), we hoped to entertain and educate a wide audience, appealing to experienced botanists as well as the novices. We used a trend adopted by many accounts, nature-based or not, as we hoped to use TikTok's algorithm to reach new accounts, thereby spreading the message of Botanical University Challenge!

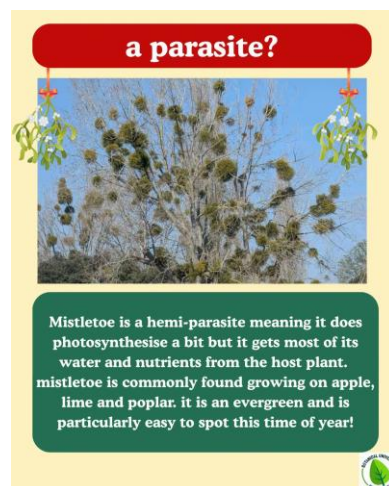
Another aim of our posts was to show that Christmas is on your doorstep and all you have to do is look for it. This project has a wider overarching theme and that is plant awareness disparity. While people may associate Christmas with chestnuts roasting on an open fire, few would be able to identify a chestnut tree. These posts aimed to provide people of all backgrounds with the passion and confidence to get outside and start identifying native plants.



We structured the posts as three pages: a title page with a Christmasy introduction to the species and its taxonomic information,



then a page with identification features and a final page with fun facts.



Although we kept up an engaging and consistent theme in the appearance of our posts across all platforms, we changed the type of post. This was because on Instagram there were more views, and significantly, more views by non-followers, when posted as short video rather than a carousel.

Over the 25 days, 6105 Instagram accounts watched our Advent Botany, and undoubtedly many were people returning to see what it was about each day. The viewers started mostly with accounts from the UK, but this changed during the month and the audience became more international with viewers from many different countries: Germany, Spain, India and USA. The posts had around 10 likes each.

Our post on Day 13 attracted some comments on Bluesky, with people curious to know more, as well as share their knowledge on chestnuts. All platforms had some better performing posts than others, which is to be expected with such a high concentration of posts in a short time. However, the engagement was great to see.

On TikTok, we posted them as photo slideshows with trending Christmas music, when possible related to the plant of focus. They regularly had over 700 views but only averaged around eight likes. Despite low engagement, it is clear our TikTok following has grown as we had around 50 followers before advent botany and we now have 130 followers! The questions now is: how do we keep the momentum?

The success of Advent Botany shows utilising trends is a great way to increase the reach of our social media to people from all backgrounds, in all parts of the world. The success of other nature-based accounts shows viewers like seeing pretty flowers and cool plants, and recent growing popularity of the outdoors shows people are keen to learn more about the world around them. TikTok is full of an endless stream of trends and so the question is how can we show that plants, more specifically UK native species, are trendy?

## Test Your Knowledge: Questions from BUC Semi-Finals and Finals

1. Heterosis is an important concept in plant genetics and breeding. What is another term for it?
2. Plant invertases are located in the vacuole, cell wall and apoplast. What reaction do they catalyse?
3. Who wrote *Finding the Mother Tree*?



4. Identify the species of plant



5. On what type of plant tissue do the larvae of the citrus longhorn beetle (*Anoplophora chinensis*) feed?



# JOKE THYME!

Wood yew like a tree joak?

Wych tree is the police's most poplar on holly-day?

The Copper Beech.

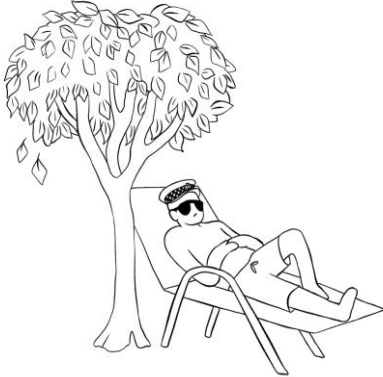


Illustration by Ansa Mitchell

Got a botanical joke or pun? Send it to us!

## ABOUT *The Thymes* TEAM

**Layout and Design:** Helena Brown (RBGE graduate) and Rabinoor Khurana (University of Dundee graduate)

**Graphics:** Ansa Mitchell (University of Nottingham) and Yi Zhao (University of Cambridge graduate)

**Editors:** Meriel Jones (University of Liverpool, retired), John Warren (Associate Tutor FSC), Jonathan Mitchley (University of Reading).

## MEET *The Thymes* TEAM

What do they do when not working on *The Thymes*?

**Helena Brown** is a Conservation Assistant Officer at Botanic Gardens Conservation International, working on IUCN Red List reassessments of tree species to help monitor populations and provide data for conservation use



## Contribute to *The Thymes*

Got a botanical story or other content to contribute? Are you interested in editing or design? We need your skills and enthusiasm!

Contact us via Dr M at: [j.mitchley@reading.ac.uk](mailto:j.mitchley@reading.ac.uk)

## WANTED: Join *The Thymes* Team

Do you have an eye for detail and are a whizz at formatting, design, and layout? We would love to hear from you!

Date of Next Issue: July 2026

Answers to the BUC Test Your Knowledge questions (N.B. All have featured in previous BUC contests):

1. Hybrid vigour
2. Hydrolytic cleavage of sucrose to fructose & glucose
3. Suzanne Simard
4. Fern *Asplenium ruta-muraria*, wall-rue
5. The vascular tissue of trees

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