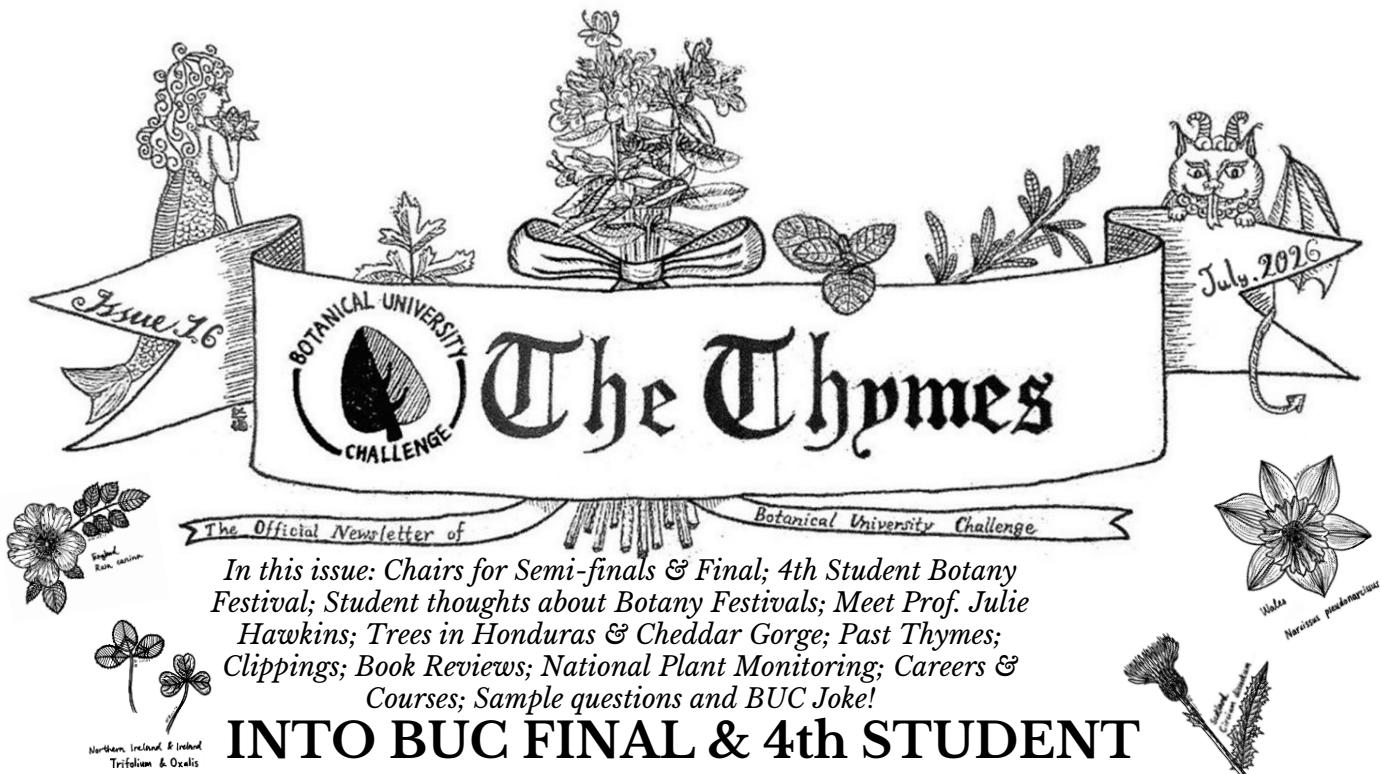




In this issue: Chairs for Semi-finals & Final; 4th Student Botany Festival; Student thoughts about Botany Festivals; Meet Prof. Julie Hawkins; Trees in Honduras & Cheddar Gorge; Past Thymes; Clippings; Book Reviews; National Plant Monitoring; Careers & Courses; Sample questions and BUC Joke!

INTO BUC FINAL & 4th STUDENT BOTANY FESTIVAL

So what is Botanical University Challenge?

BUC is an annual competition between teams of university students embracing the many and varied 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 and the top 4 teams were University of Aberdeen, University of Edinburgh, University of Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin University. These teams will compete in the semi-finals and finals at University of Reading on 19 August. This competition forms part of the University of Reading Centenary celebrations and family and friends will be welcome to attend, check BUC socials for joining details. The event will also be live-streamed on YouTube. The 4th Student Botany Festival follows on 20-21 August (p.6).

Dates



19 August: Semi-final and final
20 - 21 August: Fourth Student Botany Festival, all held at The University of Reading.

Follow us on social media:

TikTok [buc.botany](https://www.tiktok.com/@buc.botany)

X @BUCBotany

Instagram @botanicalunichallenge

Bluesky @bucbotany.bsky.social

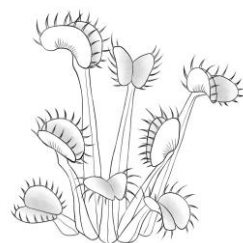
Threads @botanicalunichallenge

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?

Looking ahead, any university or related institution can enter a team of 4 BSc, MSc or PhD students (with one reserve) to the competition. 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



INTRODUCING THE SEMI-FINAL AND FINAL CHAIRS FOR BUC 2026

To mark the celebrations of 100 years since University of Reading was granted its Royal Charter as an independent university, our Chairs are both Reading based!

Professor Julie Hawkins

Julie is Professor of Plant Systematics and Evolution at Reading. Her research explores plant taxonomy, evolution, and ethnobotany, with a particular focus on medicinal plants, wildlife conservation, and the use of DNA to understand plant diversity and identify traded species. Julie's work has taken her from the forests of Central America to the Cape Floristic Region of South Africa, combining field research with cutting-edge evolutionary science.

Check the BUC interview with Julie on p.6 for more information and [her webpage](#).



Professor Simon Mortimer

Simon is Professor of Environmental Land Management and Head of the School of Agriculture, Policy and Development at Reading. His research focuses on the relationship between land management, biodiversity, and ecosystem services, with particular expertise in sustainable agriculture, plant community ecology, and habitat restoration.



Simon has over 25 years of experience working with researchers, policymakers, and farmers to develop practical solutions that support both food production and nature conservation.

You can read more on [his webpage](#).



THE 4TH STUDENT BOTANY FESTIVAL: CELEBRATING THE UNIQUELY GREEN

By Jonathan Mitchley, University of Reading

The 4th Student Botany Festival at Reading promises to be the most vibrant yet, unfolding across three days of workshops, talks, field sessions and celebrations that showcase the full breadth of plant science today. The festival invites students to “*explore the green heart of our campus – from the Harris Garden to the Walled Garden, from Bryophytes to Poaceae, from Ethnobotany to Botanical Illustration*”. It forms a centrepiece of Reading’s centenary year, marking more than 100 years of botanical teaching on a campus recognised as one of the greenest in the UK.

Students will move between flash talks, identification challenges, keynote lectures, careers events and hands-on workshops and social events including the return of Professor John Warren's legendary **Vegetable Orchestra!**

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This year also introduces two new features designed to send students home with living (and literary) botanical treasures. First, the **Festival Plant Table**: a cheerful spread of propagated plants grown specially for students to adopt and take into their post-BUC lives. Second, the debut of the **Dr M Giving Table** - a one-off moment in BUC history. As Dr M retires in December 2026, students will be invited to browse and take home books, curiosities and classic Dr M-emorabilia. Modest donations will support future BUC events, ensuring the legacy continues to grow.

OUR BOTANICAL UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE SUPPORTERS

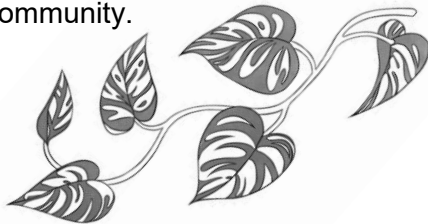


By Jonathan Mitchley, University of Reading

Botanical University Challenge continues to attract a diverse and growing community of supporters. From its earliest days, many within the botanical community have freely given their time, energy and enthusiasm to make it happen.

However, it also needs some real cash, especially for the Student Botany Festivals. So far this year, **30 supporters** have contributed to our fundraising programme, reflecting the wide reach and collaborative spirit of botanical education across the UK and Ireland.

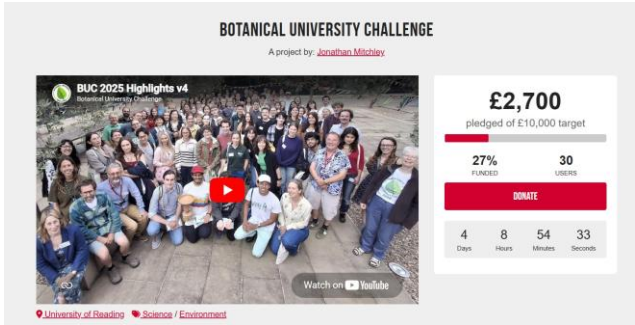
In addition, our new **crowdfunding platform** has already proved a remarkable success, attracting donations from another **30 individual supporters**. This wave of grassroots generosity demonstrates the enthusiasm, goodwill, and shared belief in BUC's mission across the wider plant-loving community.



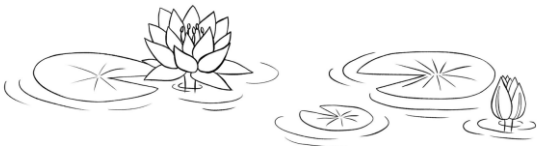
Support can be grouped into three broad categories:

- **Universities and related institutions** - *15 supporters* These include major universities, research institutes, and botanical gardens whose academic and scientific missions align closely with BUC's educational goals. Their backing highlights the strong commitment within higher education to nurturing the next generation of plant scientists.
- **Organisations and charitable bodies** - *12 supporters* From learned societies to horticultural trusts and conservation charities, these organisations recognise the value of BUC as a national platform for botanical literacy, outreach, and community building.
- **Private individuals** - *3 supporters* Personal contributions from respected figures in the botanical and related worlds underscore the passion and generosity that drive the wider plant-focused community.

Support is ongoing and we thank everyone who has contributed and will provide a full final list in our publicity for the BUC 2026 semi-finals and finals, as well as on our website, social media, and in our annual impact report.



The BUC Crowdfunder site



STUDENT THOUGHTS ON STUDENT BOTANY FESTIVALS

By Meriel Jones, The BUC team

This year sees the fourth Student Botany Festival. The first festival was launched in 2023 at the central campus of University of Nottingham, followed by 2024 at The Queen's College, Oxford & Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum and then 2025 at the Sainsbury Laboratory within Cambridge University Botanic Garden with Homerton College Cambridge.

So what do our students think of these events? Here are some words, but the pictures really tell the story of botanical togetherness and memories.



Happy Team Pain in the Grass outside the Sainsbury laboratory in 2025. Not the too candid picture! Image credit: Nathaniel Holmes.



"Botanising by night in Cambridge will always stick with me!" – Alfred. Image credit: Amy Beach; I took this one! An absolute highlight for sure!



"I have this memory of seeing a heron catch a fish in Oxford Botanic Garden during BUC 2024! Pretty awesome to witness and very memorable for me!" - James Ashford (who took the photo).

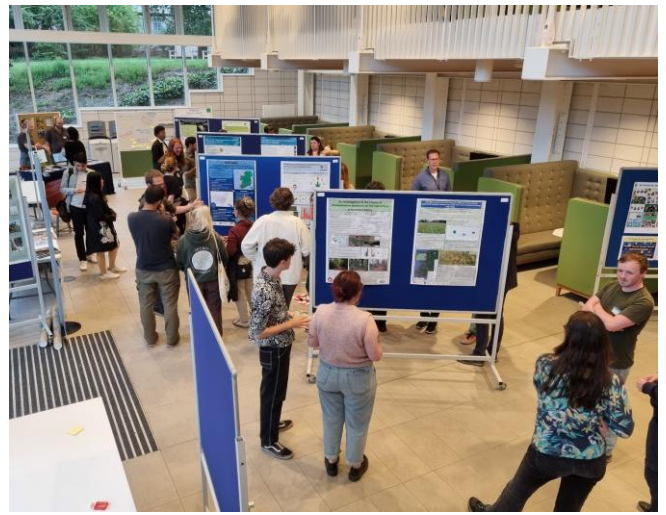


Happy, happy team members from winner Plantastic Five (University College Dublin) and runner-up Pain in the Grass (University of Portsmouth) in the team Name competition in 2025. Image credit: Laura L.





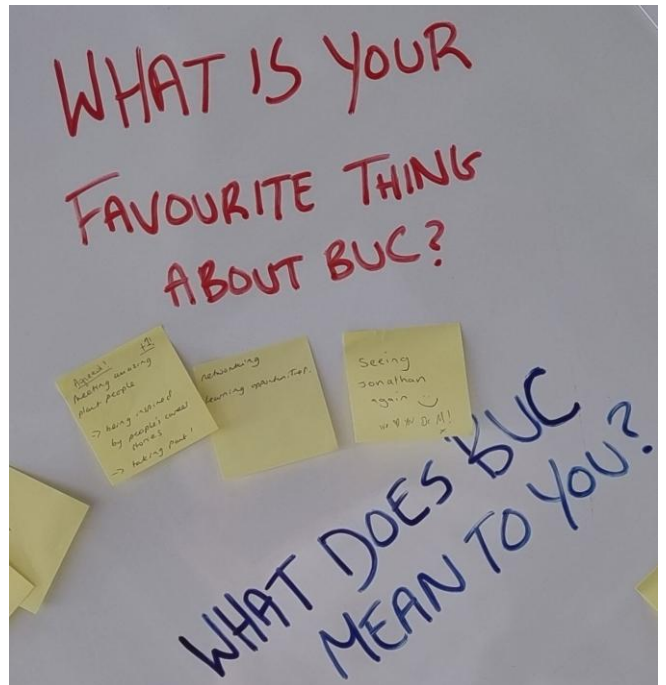
The vegetable orchestra! Everyone is #locked in.
Image credit: Amy Beach



First Student Botany Festival, Nottingham 2023 – meeting in person over posters for the first time.
Image credit: The BUC Team



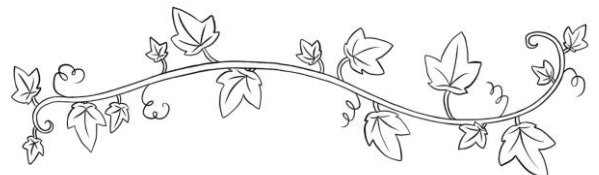
Meal at the Second Student Botany Festival 2024, The Queen's College, Oxford.
Image credit: The BUC Team



Student thoughts about First Student Botany Festival at University of Nottingham, 2023.



Students crowd round botanical artist Chris Thorogood in 2024. Image credit: The BUC Team



BOTANICAL UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE TALKS WITH PROFESSOR JULIE HAWKINS

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

The Thymes: Julie Hawkins, Professor of Plant Systematics and Evolution at the University of Reading, you are also going to ask the questions at the BUC Final in 2026! What first sparked your interest in plants, and how did that early curiosity shape your path into botany?



Professor Julie Hawkins. Image credit: JH

Julie Hawkins: I've always been fascinated by nature, even though I didn't grow up anywhere especially rural - just 15 minutes' walk from Gatwick Airport! My parents had a medium-sized garden, and I spent hours watching nasturtiums buzzing with pollinators, planting runner beans, and observing every insect and leaf. I was completely absorbed by what I now think of as the "drama" of plants and animals interacting.

My grandmother was a huge influence. She organised competitions for me and the neighbourhood kids - who could find the most grasses, who could spot the most wildflowers. She also told me stories about a cousin who became a professor of botany, saying, "*If your cousin Peter can be a professor of botany, then you certainly can.*"

I was given an old microscope when I was about eight and spent hours making my own slides - including "*Geranium pollen*" spelled with a J, which I now laugh about. All of this made me feel that looking closely at plants was something I could do forever.

A teacher later told me not to study botany - that I was "*too clever*" and would "*just end up counting leaves.*" So I initially took a detour into biophysics. I enjoyed it but by the end of I felt a real heartsickness: I really wanted to study plants and I hadn't. So I found my way back.

I did a Master's in Plant Genetic Resource Conservation and Utilisation at Birmingham University because I wanted to understand plants, but also how people interacted with them - domestication, cultivation and meeting human needs. That course was important. I met people like the Solanaceae taxonomists [Richard Lester](#) and [Jack Hawkes](#). Those encounters opened up whole worlds of taxonomy, crop diversity, and ethnobotany.



Childhood microscope slides. Image credit: JH



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Then I went to Oxford for a PhD in plant systematics. It was a very field-heavy period: five months in Mexico and Central America, driving thousands of miles, collecting leguminous trees, learning Spanish well enough to talk about both botany and Land Rover parts. It was classic, old-school field botany and it shaped me profoundly.

When I finished my PhD, I was awarded the Smuts Fellowship, based jointly at the University of Cape Town and Kirstenbosch Botanic Garden. It was just after the end of apartheid, when academic doors were opening again. I had extraordinary field experiences - climbing mountains, collecting plants, sleeping under the stars. Working with the systematic botanist [Peter Linder](#) and that community of botanists was an incredible grounding.

After the fellowship ended, I returned to the UK as lecturer at University of Reading, arriving with a strong background in plant systematics, taxonomy, and field botany. I continued my work on *Aspalathus*, the South African genus that includes rooibos. One of my first PhD students at Reading carried that work forward. Over time my work expanded into ethnobotany and medicinal plant research. That journey - from biophysics, back to plants, through fieldwork in Mexico and South Africa - is really the backbone of how I got to Reading.

The Thymes: Can you tell us about key figures who influenced your understanding of ethnobotany and crop diversity?

JH: One of the most memorable influences was meeting Jack Hawkes during my master's degree. He was already an Emeritus Professor, but he gave us lectures, and for someone interested in ethnobotany it was extraordinary. Jack had been a contemporary of [Nikolai Vavilov](#) and had actually gone to meetings with him.

To sit in a room with someone like Jack, who had travelled the world collecting potatoes, talking to farmers, documenting landraces - it was astonishing.

Through Jack, I felt very close to Vavilov who's work on centres of origin and conserving farmer-bred varieties shaped so much of modern plant science. His story is also deeply moving, from his imprisonment under Stalin to the extraordinary fact that during the siege of Leningrad, scientists starved rather than eat the wheat collections he had assembled because they were considered priceless.

Meeting Jack Hawkes connected me to the science of crop diversity and the people, politics, and human stories behind it. It left a lasting impression on how I think about ethnobotany today.

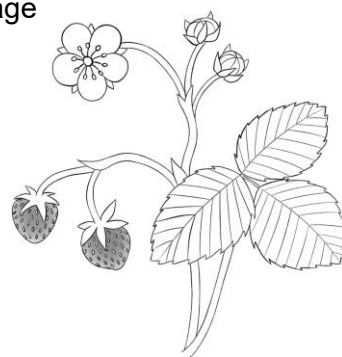
The Thymes: When did medicinal plants come into focus for you?

JH: For the first ten years at Reading, I was firmly in plant systematics and evolution. Then I became a mother, and long field trips were no longer practical. At the same time, students kept coming to me saying, "*I'm really interested in medicinal plants - can I do a project with you?*"

That pushed me to start reading the literature, [Daniel Moerman's](#) work was a revelation. I realised I could bring my background in phylogenetics to questions about medicinal plant diversity. Around the same time, I met [Liz Williamson](#) in the School of Pharmacy, and that opened new possibilities.

The final piece in the puzzle was a PhD funding call on medicinal plants. I thought: this is it - I can bring all these threads together. That was the beginning really... it was brilliant because they were my methods. The work grew into collaborations and networks that shaped the next decade of my career.

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As I moved into ethnobotany, I became fascinated by the conflicting narratives around medicinal plants. On one hand, people say these plants are “*tried and tested through many generations of use.*” On the other, there’s the idea that they’re chosen because of “*magico-symbolic belief*” rather than efficacy.

Very few medicinal plants have been studied phytochemically, so we can’t easily test these narratives. That intersection - belief, chemistry, culture, biodiversity - is where my curiosity lies. It’s a space full of unanswered questions.

The Thymes: What are the biggest challenges in ethnobotanical and medicinal plant research today?

JH: Interdisciplinarity is both essential and difficult. We talk a lot about how desirable it is, but where do you then belong if you work across fields. Universities aren’t always set up to support that.

But things are changing. Institutions like Kew now place biocultural diversity, traditional knowledge, and cultural context at the centre of their work. That shift makes it a much better time to be entering this space.

To students, I’d say: interdisciplinary work can feel challenging, but don’t be put off. The landscape is shifting, and there are more opportunities than ever to work at the intersection of plants, people, and culture.

The Thymes: Is there a fieldwork moment that captures what you love about your work?

JH: Most of my fieldwork has been taxonomic, and I often think about how focused you can become on one group. During my PhD in Mexico, I was obsessed with trees - so much so that the cacti were just obstacles. Their pads would break and be stuck to my legs as I tried to reach my trees.



Fast-forward a decade, and I was leading a major project on cacti. Suddenly the plants I’d been pulling off my legs were the ones I was studying. The teddy-bear cholla, beautiful but vicious, is unforgettable: Do not go near it!

The Thymes: What inspires you about teaching botany at Reading?

JH: I love teaching. I’m on a mission to help people who haven’t yet felt “*plant joy*” to really look and see how amazing plants are. Many students arrive with little botanical background, but a single practical, like floral dissection, can transform them. One student told me it was “*the best thing in the whole year,*” that means a lot.

Every plant has a story. You can meet a plant on the way to the car park and discover something extraordinary about it. And you don’t need a childhood full of microscopes and herbariums, you can start looking at any time.

The Thymes: As chair of the BUC Finals on 19 August, what are you looking forward to?

JH: It’s a huge honour. I’m most excited about meeting everyone and hearing their stories, the plants or the people or the ideas that have brought them to where they are. I love hearing people’s plant stories.

The Thymes: What can participants expect from your ethnobotany walk during the Fourth Student Botany Festival?

JH: We’ll walk, talk, and pause under trees. I’ll choose a few species and explore where they’ve come from, how they’ve travelled with us, and what folklore or cultural stories they carry. The challenge will be choosing! There’s a risk that you’ve got too much to say about too many things.

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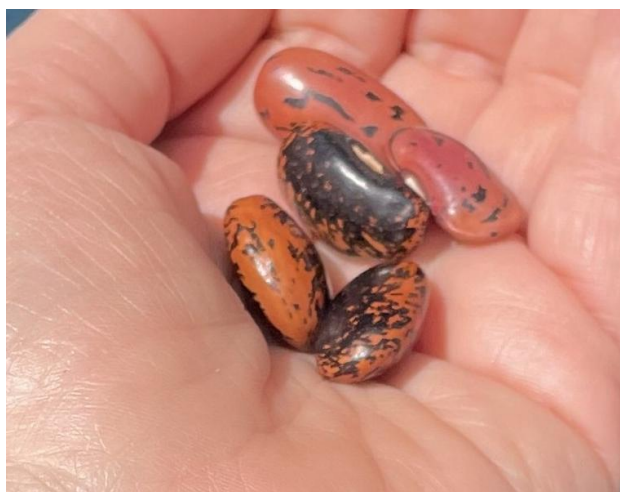


The Thymes: Do you have a favourite plant?

JH: It's an impossible question, but I often come back to runner beans. As a child, I would run out every day to see what they were doing. Over time I learned their many stories - domestication, global journeys, even the occasional poisoning mishap when they're not prepared properly.

I also have a vivid early memory of seeing broad beans inside their pod, this amazing sort of cloud-like fluffy nest of perfectness. I can still feel the wonder of that moment.

The Thymes: thank you so much for your botanical stories and insights, see you at BUC 2026!



Runner bean seeds. Image credit: JH



WHAT DO A MOUNTAIN RANGE IN HONDURAS AND CHEDDAR GORGE HAVE IN COMMON?

By Helena Brown, Professional tree lover working at BGCI for the Global Tree Assessment

It's strange to think what our world would be like without trees. They're keystone to so many ecosystems, define so many habitats, and are ecosystems in their own right too. With trees adapting to these habitats, they themselves have also diversified in form, resulting in numerous unique and beautiful species.

It's no wonder trees have inspired so many artists, like Shakespeare's [Birnam oak](#), [Monet's Poplars](#), [Oller's Ceiba tree](#). Trees carry an air of majesty and awe around them, different from other plant forms, like the delicate and enchanting nature of flowers. There are around [50,000 tree species on our planet](#), and these are just two that I want to highlight in this piece.

Hondurodendron urceolatum is a flowering tree found only in Parque Nacional El Cusuco, Honduras. Findings from a recent study list this species as the top ranked [EDGE](#) angiosperm species. EDGE stands for Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered, meaning this tree is top priority to conserve plant diversity, as it is unique yet very at risk of extinction. Other highly ranked tree species include the maidenhair tree, *Ginkgo biloba*, and Wollemi pine, *Wollemia nobilis*. EDGE species aren't closely related to other species, so once they go extinct we might lose unique chemical compounds that could have contributed to the next anti-cancer drug, for example. There are so many narrow endemic trees, which support incredible pockets of biodiversity right across the world, whilst also themselves being pockets of genetic and chemical diversity too.



Fruit of *Hondurodendron urceolatum* -
artwork by Ansa Mitchell

In the UK and Ireland we are home to a number of [endemic Sorbus trees](#) (whitebeams, rowans and service trees), resulting from hybridisation and polyploidy. They live across the country, from Devon to the Isle of Arran and including *S. hibernica* in Ireland. *Sorbus cheddarensis* (possibly one of the best specific epithet names ever) is one such species, only found in south west England.

There are nine species in the Avon Gorge, including two other regional endemic species, like *S. leighensis*. They have a reputation of being difficult to tell apart, with arguments for and against whether these hybrid species should be recognised as their own species or micro-species within larger concepts.

Stepping away from the scientific aspect, I find it inspiring to be able to observe plants so well, and be enough in tune with them to pick up their subtle and beautiful differences. No two tree individuals are the same, and these two tree species are extreme examples, yet you don't have to travel to Honduras or the Cheddar Gorge to see this.

Rare endemic species are fascinating and exciting, but common species can be more important in their ecosystems. It is important to recognise and appreciate these too.

I know a row of Ash trees along a country lane. Each has quite different architecture, resulting in different lichen distribution on the bark. I know which ones are favoured by Goldfinches over others. These are just a few visual differences I've picked up on. Although the same species, each tree is unique, and plays a slightly different role.

Next time you're out for a walk, try noticing the trees and their differences. Soon you'll be watching your favourite trees change through the seasons, for example, noticing which ones have more new growth in Spring. Who knows, maybe if you get really hooked, you might discover a new species too!

Thymes Past - the first 15 issues

By Jonathan Mitchley, University of Reading

Introduction

When *The Thymes* first appeared in late 2022, its purpose was simple: to record each year's Botanical University Challenge and to celebrate the enthusiasm, humour, and humanity of the botanists who make BUC what it is. What has unfolded across the first fifteen issues is something far richer. Built from the outset on collaboration between students and the academic BUC team, the newsletter has become a training ground, a creative space, and a growing community archive. Students shaped its name, its layout, and many of its recurring features - and several have continued contributing as they moved into post-doctoral careers. What began as a record has become a shared endeavour.

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Analysis of Trends

Across its first four years, *The Thymes* shows clear patterns of growth in scale, participation, and ambition.

Expanding format

The newsletter has grown from **6 pages in Issue 1** to **22 pages by Issue 15**, with a steady rise through the middle years as BUC itself expanded. Early issues sat in the 6-8 page range, but by 2024-2026 the newsletter regularly reached 10-20+ pages. This reflects both increased content and a shift toward a more magazine-like format.



Dr Jonathan Mitchley with copies of The Thymes at the BUC display at the BSBI Botanical Conference 2025 at Edge Hill University.

Image credit: The BUC Team

Richer, denser content

The number of standalone articles has **doubled**, rising from **10-12 articles** in the earliest issues to **18-22 articles** in the most recent ones. This growth mirrors the widening scope of the newsletter:

- Student teams writing about their BUC experience - whether victorious or knocked out early
- Personal pieces on botanical passions

- Regular interviews with botanists or former competitors now working in botany
- A student-led botanical book review column
- Careers advice from post-doctoral contributors

The resulting publication captures the diversity of botanical journeys emerging from BUC.

A growing collaborative ecosystem

Contributor numbers have risen from **14 in Issue 1** to nearly **40 by Issue 13**, demonstrating how *The Thymes* has become a genuinely collective project. Students not only write but also take responsibility for assembling the final format of each issue, gaining hands-on experience of academic publishing. Alumni, guest experts, and members of the BUC team add further depth, making the newsletter a meeting point for multiple generations of botanists.

Impact and reach

While hard evidence of wider impact is difficult to quantify, web-view statistics show clear spikes whenever a new issue appears. More importantly, the educational impact is unmistakable: contributors gain experience in writing, editing, interviewing, and production - skills rarely taught explicitly in botanical training. The newsletter has become a quiet but effective incubator of professional confidence.

Conclusion

Over its first fifteen issues, *The Thymes* has evolved from a simple event record into a vibrant botanical magazine shaped by students, sustained by collaboration, and enriched by the expanding BUC community. Its growth in pages, articles, and contributors reflects not only the success of the newsletter itself but also the flourishing of student botany across the UK and Ireland. As BUC continues to inspire new generations, *The Thymes* stands as both witness and participant - a living archive of botanical curiosity, creativity, and community.

Clippings...

From Vikki Rose, University of Reading

Webinar – Julia Trickey runs a [brilliant series of webinars](#) all about floral illustration, illustrators and techniques.

Instagram - @blackforager aka Alexis Nikole is one of my favourite accounts not least for her 'Is it poison or is it a snack?' feature which looks at superficially similar plants found in the US (bonus points for the catchphrase - happy snacking don't die)



Pinned post by @blackforager on Instagram - with her recent book.

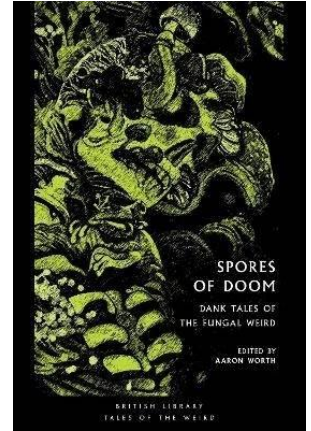
Substack – plants & people [plant / people | Jenny McCallum | Substack](#) ***full disclosure*** this is written by my friend Jenny, interviews and writing by different people around their relationship with plants.



Book Reviews: The Dank and Dangerous

By Catherine Martinez, University of Reading

Let's take a dive into the dank and dangerous with this issue's book reviews! Plants and fungi have often inspired writers to take a look at a beyond-human experience. I hope that from the two fiction and one non-fiction recommendations here, you find something that interests you.



Blood Music - Greg Bear

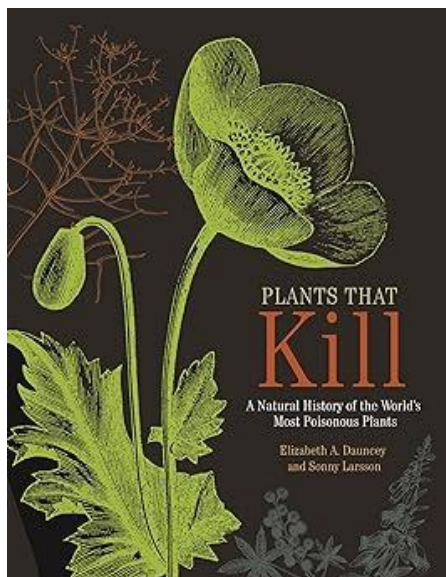
Blood Music is a slightly older science fiction story exploring the idea of a mysterious plague from one scientist's rash decisions. Not directly botanical in nature, the descriptions and method of spread are reminiscent of mycelium and fungi.

Multiple vivid perspectives and a slow-burn reveal of the true nature of the infection, make it uncomfortably engaging and a quick read. I recommend *Blood Music* if you enjoyed *The Last Of Us* or *The Girl With All The Gifts*.

Spores of Doom: Dank Tales of Fungal Horror - Aaron Worth

Spores of Doom is an anthology of several great short stories from classic authors such as Poe and Bradbury, all focussed on a mycological theme. This book is a great way to dip your toes into classic horror through some of the great writers of the genre.

The anthology also provides a short introduction to each story, providing context. It is an interesting journey through the classics of fungal horror and a great way to sample different classic writers.



Plants That Kill: A Natural History of the World's Most Poisonous Plants - Elizabeth A Dauncey

If after all the fictional botanical and fungal horror you are interested in learning about real plants with a dangerous side, you will enjoy *Plants That Kill*. This illustrated guide to poisonous plants is an excellent introduction with enough detail on their history, use, and biochemistry, to engage even an experienced ethnobotanist without being inaccessible. *Plants That Kill* is well described as a “natural history”, putting these plants into the context of human warfare, spirituality, medicine and history.

This book also explores the impact of these plants on other organisms and the co-evolution of poison and resistance. If you want case studies, beautiful illustrations, informative writing, and an enjoyable experience, I would recommend *Plants That Kill*.



Monitoring Change in UK Habitats through Citizen Science

By Rachel Murphy, Volunteering Manager, Plantlife

The National Plant Monitoring Scheme (NPMS) is a nationwide citizen science project that monitors diversity, abundance and changes in plant communities across habitats of the UK. Hundreds of dedicated volunteers, head out twice a year to conduct botanical surveys at their allocated sites, focussing on plant species that are good indicators of habitat health.



Marking out a survey square. Image credit: NPMS

NPMS volunteers, from beginners to experienced botanists record at their choice of 3 different survey levels depending on their experience and confidence in botanical ID. Everyone is welcome! It is important that the scheme is accessible and inclusive to all, while maintaining robust and standardised methodology and data standards.

Volunteers have full access to their own data, along with a raft of guidance and free training materials and opportunities to attend online or in-person training and events across the country.

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**National Plant
Monitoring Scheme**

NPMS Highlights in numbers:

- >269,000 species records submitted by ~1,000 volunteers nationwide
- >8,600 surveys conducted, across 1,300 1km² squares
- >1,700 species/species groups recorded.
- NPMS data contributes to the Defra/JNCC UK Biodiversity indicators. Specifically, data from four of the scheme's most surveyed broad habitats were used to create a new experimental indicator for category C7 "Plants of the wider countryside".
- NPMS data included in >650 studies and projects to date.

"The success of the scheme thus far, and the building of this valuable long-term dataset, is only possible thanks to the tremendous dedication and effort of the NPMS volunteers. We are excited and grateful to welcome new surveyors and desk-based volunteers to our friendly volunteer community every year, each bringing their own skills and enthusiasm."



Field training of NPMS volunteers. Image credit: NPMS

You can visit our '[Squares near me page](#)' to check your local area for available NPMS survey squares waiting to be adopted

If you'd like to find out more about joining our fab community of volunteers, you can find lots of information about the scheme, our library of training and development resources and how to get started here: www.NPMS.org.uk

The NPMS is a partnership project designed and coordinated by Plantlife, The UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (UKCEH), The Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) and funded by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC).

Plant identification courses

By Meriel Jones, the BUC Team

If you are planning to take your plant ID skills to the next level, what is out there to help you? You could go out in the field with people who have excellent plant ID knowledge, for example with [local BSBI groups](#) that cover most of the UK and Ireland, or your local botanical or wildlife society.

However, you might want a course to give you more structured knowledge, or to focus on a particular plant group. In addition, you might want to know more in depth about species such as life histories, anatomy and ecology. What more advanced plant courses are out there, either on-line or in person?

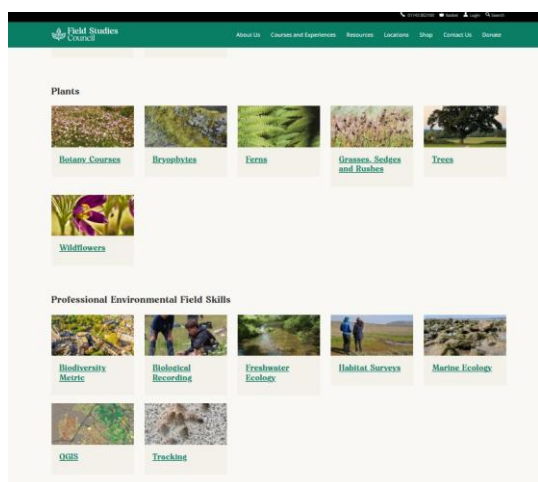
There are many run by organizations, consultancies and individuals. Some are aimed at people already (or preparing for) careers as ecological consultants, farm advisers, land managers or conservationists. Others are focused on those who know they want to know more but do not yet have a clear career goal. Most courses charge a fee, which may include accommodation, so it is important for you to decide that the course is what you want before devoting your time and resources to it.

The [Countryside Jobs Service](#) website has a directory of courses of field identification and survey skills that can be a quick way to see what is available.

The [Species Recovery Trust](#) runs training courses about specific groups of plants or habitats that develop surveying skills as well as identification. These can be in person or on-line, supported by their publications and YouTube video:



The [Field Studies Council](#), as well as running courses for schools and further education groups, also has many courses for individuals. These are at different levels from introductory to advanced and can last from a half day to weeks. As well as focusing on individual plant groups that are more difficult to identify, such as grasses, bryophytes, ferns and fungi there are also courses about specific habitats making use of the FSC network of field stations.

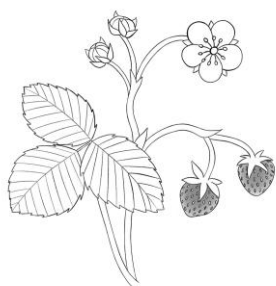


Part of course directory from the Field Studies Council

To learn more plant ID skills, the website [Name That Plant](#), by Dr Richard Milne from University of Edinburgh, has a structured plant ID system that gives more than a simple ID. It lets you think about key ID features and how flowering plants are grouped together.

Companies such as [Teylu Ecology](#) and universities such as [Napier](#) also run training courses in specific subjects, both on-line and in person.

To summarise, there are many ID courses out there, and the internet is your friend to help you find the right one for you.



Questions from past BUC semi-finals and finals

Do you know the answers?

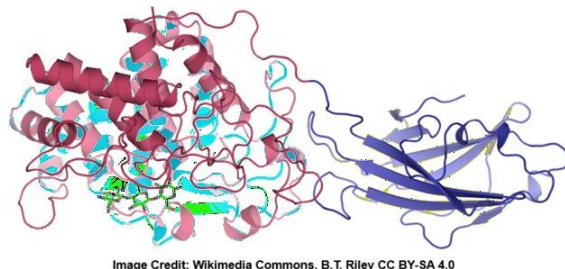
1. Production of which glass house crop often involves the use of *Bombus terrestris*?



2. Starflower oil is derived from the seeds of which plant, which also gives its name to its family?

3. There are two *Drosera* hybrids found in the UK. One native species is a parent of both. Which is this?

4. What enzyme breaks down cellulose into simple sugars?



5. In what chemical is carbon dioxide stored overnight during Crassulacean Acid Metabolism (CAM)?

The Alarming Botanical Walls

Introduced to the semi-finals and final of Botanical University Challenge since 2024. Sixteen names to put into four groups, and then explain what each group has in common. All within a few minutes!

This style of question is in the BBC 2 TV programme [Only Connect](#). They are also on the website [Puzzgrid](#).

Try out walls from past BUC competitions

2024 Botanical Walls

Practice walls: [#98818](#) [#98819](#) [#99615](#)

Semifinals 2024: [#98715](#) [#98716](#) [#98717](#) [#98718](#)

Final 2024: [#98711](#) [#98712](#)

2025 Botanical Walls

Semifinals 2025: [#108531](#) [#108532](#) [#108550](#)

[#108553](#)

Finals 2025: [#108556](#) [#108557](#)

See the team from [University of York team Take it or Leaf It](#) totally smash their wall in the 2024 [semifinal](#)!

Enjoy!

JOKE THYME!

Which is the most confusing member of the Poaceae?

Bamboo-zle!

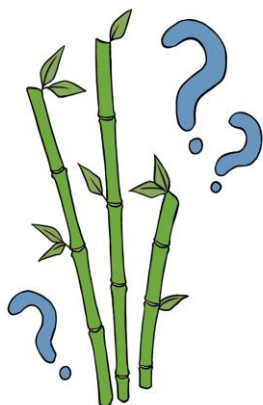


Image credit: Ansa Mitchell

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).

Contribute to *The Thymes*

Got a botanical story or other content to contribute?

Are you interested in editing or design?

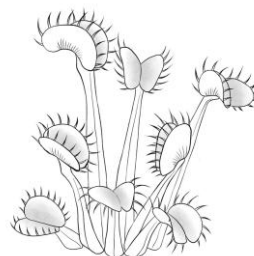
We need your skills and enthusiasm!

Contact us via Dr M at: j.mitchley@reading.ac.uk

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: October 2026



**Answers to the BUC taster questions
(All have featured in previous BUC contests):**

1. Tomatoes
2. Borage, Boraginaceae
3. *Drosera rotundifolia*
4. Cellulase (4-β-D-glucan 4-glucanohydrolase)
5. Malic acid (malate)