

## Down to earth

The RHS president on his hopes for the horticultural industry

IT'S a shame that the meeting with Sir Nicholas Bacon (or Nico, as everyone in the office prefers) has to be held in the Vincent Square headquarters of the RHS rather than at his home at Raveningham, Norfolk, where he gardens every weekend he can. However, he's just as relaxed here as he hurries down the corridor to 'the DG's office', which is meant to be quieter, although the shouts from the cricket pitch below almost drown out the birdsong in the upper branches of the London plane trees.

Sir Nicholas is the 19th RHS president since its foundation in 1804 and he comes with a barrow-load of expertise, not to mention titles, but it's soon apparent that it's not being Lord Warden of the Stannaries in Cornwall, Master Forester of Dartmoor, the Premier Baronet of England or even president of the Norfolk Beekeepers Association (although he is a devoted apiarist) that makes him so perfect for the role.

'It wasn't a question of liking or hating horticulture, it was just a question of having to do it,' he says. Lady Priscilla Bacon, his mother, was a well-known gardener, who made the garden at Raveningham and its collections of snowdrops and agapanthus, bringing back bulbs of the latter from South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s before anyone in Britain knew much about them. She also opened a nursery hoping that selling plants might pay for the garden (it didn't).

In time-honoured fashion, a packet of radish seeds was handed to the five-year-old Nico with instructions to sow them. 'When they grew, I was told to go and thin them and, when they needed to be picked, I was told to go and put an elastic band around 10 and put them in the box to go to market.'

Gardening remained a matter of duty until he was 17. The *quid pro quo* of hours spent picking

sprays of chrysanthus and packing them into wooden boxes for the markets in Bradford, Leeds and London was food: 'You want breakfast? Fine...'

That changed when he became involved with the National Trust in the mid 1980s and continued when he moved to Raveningham after the death of his father.

He and his wife, Sarah, began to put their mark on the garden, planting a herb garden and making a Francis Bacon mound with a gnomon inscribed with the first line of his ancestor's *Essay of Gardens*, written in 1625: 'God Almighty first planted a Garden.' It's when he describes the stumpery—a process involving lots of chainsaw action—that his eyes light up, however.

It's such spot-on credentials that give a deeper understanding of the problems currently facing horticulture, from the bacteria *xylella* to the dwindling numbers of young people coming into the industry, yet Sir Nicholas is optimistic.

Membership is rising, at almost 500,000, and the RHS is embarking on several ambitious projects, such as the £30 million Bridgewater site at Worsley New Hall, Greater Manchester (*Town & Country, August 22, 2018*). 'Eleven acres of walled garden, the size of the Chelsea Flower Show, but the most important thing to me is that it's next door

to some of the most deprived urban areas of Salford.'

Outreach is something the RHS is very keen on, just as it is about getting into schools. No, he doesn't have figures on how the schools project is working, but it's interesting that it's not only the pupils who don't know where their food comes from—teachers are also shown basic stuff such as how to grow beans in old plastic bottles.

**'Plants, flowers, getting your hands dirty—it's all good for the soul'**

'Plants, flowers, getting your hands dirty, it's all good for the soul'—he bangs the table—and the more we can do the better.' All absolutely commendable and, if there is criticism of the RHS, it's not in this area.

There are mutterings, however, that nurseries are struggling to make ends meet. Sir Nicholas replies that the RHS is focusing help on young nurseries, 'to give a leg up to those new in the game'. Bursaries are available towards the costs of expensive shows such as Chelsea and specialist plant nurseries are being

given space to exhibit in the smart new Welcome Building at Wisley (opening this spring).

'There's talk that, with Brexit, we need to up our game considerably.' He's referring to how other European governments offer their nurseries state support. He isn't pro Government handouts, but thinks there may be other ways to help, such as, with water being a big issue, writing off the tax on creating reservoirs.

'The demand for plant material in this country is absolutely enormous,' he notes, giving a figure of £50 million of exports and £1.2 billion of imports, 'so we have to grow a lot, but we've always imported a lot from around the world and that's got to continue. Having said that, plant-health biosecurity is a fundamental issue.'

He doesn't think we can pull up the drawbridge and prevent the importation of diseases. 'When speaking at a conference last February, the chief plant scientist of Finland said it's not a question of if *xylella* comes, it's when and what you're going to do about it.' Insisting on quarantine and verifying the source of imports is, he believes, the key. The plant security and biohealth steering group on which he sits is looking at assurance marks and working up a plan to present to Defra.

A recent report from Oxford Economics shows that the horticultural and landscape industries contributed £24.2 billion to the country's GDP in 2017. This was commissioned by the Ornamental Horticulture Roundtable Group, which includes RHS director-general Sue Biggs, together with the NFU, BALI (the landscape industry) and the Horticultural Trades Association. 'Before, horticulture didn't speak with one voice, but now we've shown it's a much bigger industry than we ever thought.' Let's hope it's a game changer.

Tiffany Daneff

### On the record

Sir Nicholas Bacon is president of the Royal Horticultural Society. His family estate, Raveningham in Norfolk, is open to the public ([www.raveningham.com](http://www.raveningham.com))

**Where is your favourite place in Britain?** The southern Broads in Norfolk on a cold, dark, blustery, wet February day

**Book?** *Natasha's Dance* (Orlando Figes)—it's about exploring Russian culture and history. I read it 10 years ago and always refer back to it

**Music?** Beethoven's sonatas, which are simply sublime—modern music doesn't really make the grade

**Food?** Crab linguine; I live by the sea and holiday off the west coast of Scotland

