

Bringing Outdoor ELC to the Botanic

September: Working together to bring outdoor ELC to the Botanic

Contributors: Suzanne Hermiston from Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh; our own Mairi Ferris from the Thrive Outdoors team and Lynn McNair, University of Edinburgh and Cowgate Under 5s Centre.

BLOG SERIES



This week sees the start of an exciting collaboration between the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE), Inspiring Scotland's Thrive Outdoors team, the University of Edinburgh and two Edinburgh-based Early Learning and Childcare settings; Edzell Nursery and Outdoor Nursery Edinburgh (ONE).

Over the next six months the partners will undertake research as groups of children from the nurseries experience outdoor play and learning in a unique setting.

Is it possible to have an outdoor Early Learning and Childcare setting within a botanical garden?

That is the main question that RBGE want to discover the answer to and what the parallel research, run by University of Edinburgh and Inspiring Scotland, will explore. Each month, the Thrive Outdoors blog series will feature this project from a range of perspectives.

First up in this exciting series is a conversational blog between Suzanne Herminston from RBGE; our own Mairi Ferris from the Thrive Outdoors team and Lynn McNair, University of Edinburgh, Cowgate Under 5s Centre and Thrive Outdoors Associate as they met onsite for the first time.



Suzanne Herminston



Mairi Ferris



Lynn McNair

What is the inspiration and motivation for you in establishing this project at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh?

Suzanne: “During lockdown we became increasingly aware of the importance of children playing outdoors and reconnecting with nature. This, combined with the Scottish Government’s increased commitment to childcare provision, meant it was the perfect time to consider how the Botanic Gardens could best encourage the next generation of horticulturists and botanists. RBGE hosts the national collection and it’s essential that we secure the future of that collection by supporting the next generation in exploring it in its full glory. Many people already enjoy the garden as a family, but we wanted to allow children to see beyond the simple joy of being in a green space and increasing their knowledge of plants and their impact on our planet. Recent events such as flooding and forest fires internationally, have raised awareness of the challenges of biodiversity loss and the climate emergency, but it’s our responsibility at RBGE to guide children from as early as possible to help them see how their individual actions can make a positive difference.”

Mairi: “For me, the joy of this project is the collaboration and connection of all the partners, it really feels like the perfect demonstration of the National Position Statement on Outdoor Play and Learning in action!

Scotland’s National Position Statement on Outdoor Play and Learning states:

We commit to life-enhancing outdoor play and learning for all of Scotland’s children and young people by:

- *Widening access to the high-quality, diverse greenspaces and natural landscapes that exist throughout all our communities to ensure that all children, young people and families have easy, local access to excellent outdoor play.*
- *Opening up more of our communal and publicly-managed spaces for playing and learning outdoors, ensuring that children and young people know they are entitled to access these spaces and feel safe and comfortable using them.*
- *Enhancing and enriching urban greenspace and built environments to be inviting, play-friendly places, offering easy access to the outdoors and nature close to home.*
- *Empowering every adult involved in the lives of our children and young people with the confidence, enthusiasm and skills to encourage and support them to play and learn outdoors.*
- *Generating and sharing knowledge and evidence-based research to promote better understanding of the benefits of playing and learning outdoors.*

As founder signatories of the Statement, Inspiring Scotland is excited to be part of a project which is aimed at investigating ways to ensure children have access to high quality care and learning experiences within an urban greenspace, which is not traditionally thought of as a space for children’s exploration.”

Lynn: “I am really interested in being part of this project as it first of all meets with my research interests around early childhood and children in nature. Furthermore it is an exciting, innovative venture that opens up the potential for children to be horticulturalists of the future. This project is not simply exploring whether children will play in the space, as we know they will do that, it also invites us to consider the affordances and knowledge enhancement of nature.”

Why is the research element important?

Suzanne: “RBGE is a research focused organisation, with members of our Science team working globally to carry out research and vital conservation work. It seemed logical, therefore, that our consideration of the benefits of an outdoor nursery within a botanical garden should follow the same – evidence based – approach. We’re also keen to ensure that whatever we learn from the pilot is captured and shared with others, whether that be other botanical gardens considering a similar project or highlighting the value of botanical gardens to nurseries across the UK and early years practitioners. Whatever the outcome, we hope this will be a rich source of learning for so many. Working in partnership with Inspiring Scotland and the University of Edinburgh, brings all the necessary components together to ensure the work we do is supported through best practice guidelines and cutting edge pedagogical research.

Lynn: “The primacy of this research is that it will be ethnographic as the researchers intend to live alongside the children in the everyday lives as they construct and make sense of their surroundings. The children’s behaviour will be studied within the context of the RGB site. In ethnographic research, the data is gathered primarily through observation and informal dialogue with the children (and adults working with the children). As this form of research is relatively unstructured, the researchers will capture raw / fluid data which will be analysed and interpreted for meaning.”

And what of the space?

Mairi: “Initially, although very excited by the prospect of the project, I admit I was sceptical about how children could get a high quality meaningful, child-led, experience here at the Botanics. Would there be echoes of ‘No!’ and ‘You can’t go there!’ ringing round the gardens?!

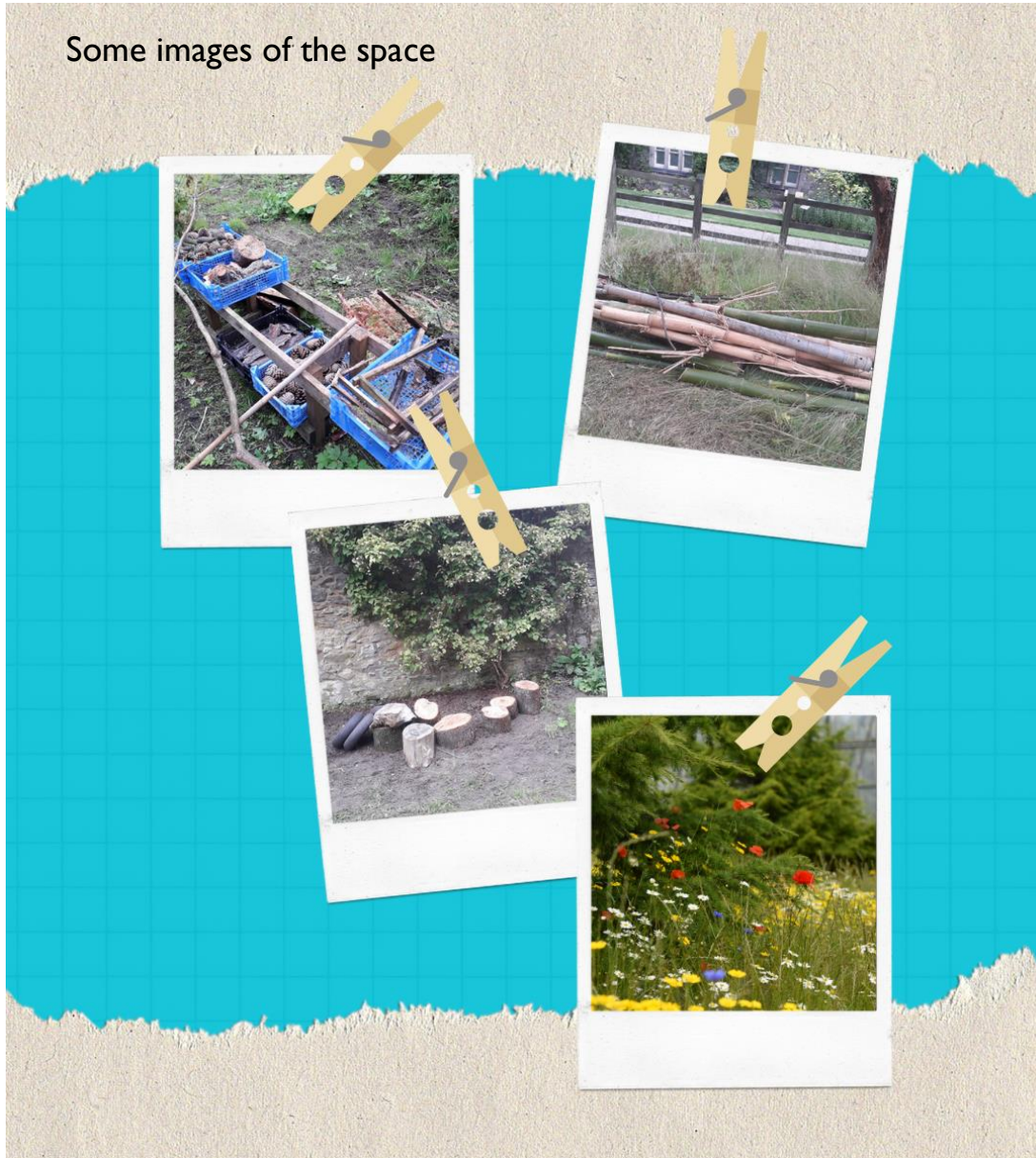
The tension between providing access to children as citizens whilst protecting the precious plant collection has been carefully thought through by the Garden team and a dedicated space has been created as the children’s base.”

Suzanne: “Identifying an appropriate space within the garden for the nursery was definitely challenging. Our original plans put the children right in the heart of the garden, but by observing the children during six exploratory visits, where different groups of 5 or 6 children visited for one afternoon each, we quickly realised that this location would not provide an opportunity for the child led approach we hoped to cultivate. Sitting within the national collection didn’t allow for ‘free exploration’ without having to limit enquiring minds. Rather than the whole experience being based on what the children couldn’t do, we wanted to start by allowing them to build a relationship with the garden with fewer limitations, whilst we worked with them to help them understand the difference between an open forest space and a protected botanical garden. In this way we hope that they will soon learn to identify the difference between the two spaces, whilst equally enjoying and respecting both. The new site, was previously unused and provides a perfect space to do so. It also offers the added advantage of being close to the Garden of Tranquillity (used by dementia groups and care homes), which we hope may allow for intergenerational learning opportunities as the project progresses. The new site – now named “our wee garden” - offers the perfect mix of rugged landscape, muddy sections and beautiful mature trees which form an amazing canopy for protection from the elements (not to mention being perfect for our mini explorers to create their own dens and look for fairies!).”

Lynn: “On my way to the RBGE site I had pictured in my mind a cultured garden environment. However, the moment Suzanne introduced me to the site I was stunned by its beauty and its immense potentialities. I have always had a deep interest in the planetary ecosystem and indeed, I am, a sentimental nature lover; and the site offers opportunities for children (my greatest love) to explore and be in nature. The space is magical, with mature trees, where children will, I have no doubt, explore the nooks and imaginative spaces; there are mud piles, where children can delve into this rich natural resource...there are quiet spaces, for contemplative thought. In the background alongside the birds and insects you can hear the trickle of water...in truth, after a very busy day, I did not want to leave this beautiful space...I am extremely excited to begin our research in order to discover how the children make meaning of this magical space.”

Stay tuned as we continue this blog series sharing the next part of this exciting journey on **Friday the 15th of October!**

Some images of the space



Enjoy this blog? Then keep an eye for the next blog in this series where both the up's and downs of piloting a new outdoor ELC in a botanical garden will be shared as well as the key learnings along the way!

Join in the conversation, add your pictures, or just chat with us at:
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or by email to amy@inspiringscotland.org.uk

Useful Links

Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh: <https://www.rbge.org.uk/>

University of Edinburgh: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/lynn-mcnair>

Inspiring Scotland, Thrive Outdoors: <https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/what-we-do/our-funds/thrive-outdoors/>

National Position Statement for Outdoor Play and Learning:
<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/scotlands-national-position-statement-on-outdoor-play-and-learning/>