

Fulham Palace House & Garden

The Barbara and Philip Denny Trust

Report 5 – Ellis Lewis

Report date: 10 August 2026

Start Date: 18th March 2025

Where has the time gone? I can't believe that from my first day it's nearly been a year and a half. But they do say time flies when you're having fun. I have grown so much professionally and personally since starting this role and it really has changed my life for the better. Working for a small charitable trust builds so much into your character because of the responsibilities you are exposed to as an apprentice. From COSHH risk assessments to locking the walled garden, looking after your own beds to managing large teams of volunteers, I think it explains why all of the apprentices go on to do amazing things around the country.

Dealing with the drought

Now I could not start this report without addressing the elephant in the garden – the complete lack of rain. I am certainly no meteorologist, but I have studied the rainfall recorded in the garden over the past few months.

- April – 1 mm of rain, most likely just morning dew.
- May – 25 mm, which is considerably less than the normal monthly average.
- June – 25 mm, which all fell in the same night during that crazy thunderstorm. Most of that rain flooded and ran off because the soil was already extremely compacted and dry.
- July so far – not a speck of rain.



Pamunkey sat in front of parched main lawn

Over the months of April to July, we should technically average around 295mm of rain; unfortunately, we have not got anywhere near that figure. It's a sign that our climate really is changing and that we need to address the issue in horticulture even more.

Kitchen garden responsibilities

In the kitchen garden the broad beans were a huge success. They are now out and have been replaced with squash to see the vegetable bed through the rest of the season. I spent a few mornings erecting my bean structure for my climbing French and runner beans and planted dwarf French beans which are just starting to come into full production.

Earlier in the year I requested that we grew onions and shallots because I used to grow them regularly on my allotment. They are genuinely one of the easiest crops to grow as they require very little watering, and they were a good success and selling well on the market barrow.

I am also responsible for the 'new and miscellaneous' vegetable plants, which have been particularly interesting to monitor and see how they get on. The celeriac is growing well compared to the celery, which has not been a great. The achocha we grew last year was thriving, whereas this year's crop is looking a bit straggly. I think this is a combination of the drought and late planting. It has started to pick up in recent days, so I hope we will still get a good crop from it.

Many of the plants that fall under the new and miscellaneous category naturally grow in a range of climates around the world, so trialing them in our changing UK climate may be the way forward. I have also been growing sweet potatoes, which enjoy the heat but also need plenty of moisture, so finding the right balance with watering has been key to their success in this weather. I also requested that we grow luffa in the vinery, and I was excited to see it come into flower just a week ago.



Herb garden

Earlier in the year I was very pleased to review the herb garden and, as someone who loves a project, I completed a renovation and refurbishment of the bed. I cut down and completely removed many enormous woody herbs (*Rosmarinus officinalis*, *Salvia officinalis*) and restructured the planting to make it far more accessible for harvesting.

In the garden

As mentioned in my section on the drought, much of the garden is suffering. The drought-tolerant border that frames the Palace has been particularly interesting to observe because it has shown us which plants are coping and what could be used more in the future. Plants such as *Bergenia* 'Apple Blossom', *Origanum vulgare* and *Gillenia trifoliata* are not performing as well as they have in previous years. In contrast, *Rosa* 'Kew Gardens', *Teucrium fruiticans.*, *Choisya* × *dewitteana* 'Aztec Pearl' and *Salvia* 'Hot Lips' are all thriving.

The knot garden is, as always, looking really good. I have recently propagated some of the plants from these beds and others, including *Stipa tenuissima*, *Penstemon* 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn', *Silene coronaria*, *Verbena bonariensis* and *Rosmarinus officinalis Prostratus* Group – which will all be grown on and sold on the market barrow.

We have also completed the first trim of the newly planted knot garden Podocarpus hedge. We are keeping it quite short (20x20cm), which I'm a big fan of because it gives the garden good bone structure while allowing the planting beds to be the main attraction.

The Compton border is also looking good. Some plants are thriving, including *Ficus carica*, *Tamarix* -- and *Pelargonium tetragonum*, while others are showing the effects of the prolonged weather, including *Magnolia virginiana*, *Rhododendron viscosum* and *Rhus typhina*. The decline of the *Rhus typhina* may also be linked to a fungal problem rather than just the dry weather.

Although the hosepipe ban is in place, it does allow some exemptions for food production and national plant collections, which has been a massive relief.

Horticultural knowledge and college

I'm definitely still learning my plant identification. I am trying to revise my plants, but I know it's something I need to invest more of my spare time into.

In June I completed my college course at Capel Manor College. I will receive my results once I have left in September. The course has been excellent because it provides a broad overview of horticulture. I was also very lucky to have an amazing class and an even better tutor, who was not only knowledgeable and professional, but genuinely passionate about helping us learn and succeed.

Biodiversity and sustainability

We had a really interesting workshop with Tony Madgwick, a wasp and bee specialist, who took us on a tour of the garden looking at our amazing wildlife and explaining how our work in the garden supports the wider ecosystem. Such as leaving standing deadwood, growing pollinator friendly species and growing organically.

As always, I am continuing to learn about organic growing, chemical-free gardening, composting, wildlife gardening and many other aspects of sustainable horticulture. Sustainability is at the heart of Fulham Palace, and it has been great to put these ideas into practice in the garden. In my vegetable beds I have used companion planting and integrated pest management (biological control), releasing natural predators instead of using pesticides. For example, I released ladybirds to control the black aphids on my broad beans. With the dry weather this year, careful watering has also been a key part of looking after the garden and making the best use of the water available.



Posing with Tony Madgwick

Team update

Earlier in the year we went on a team trip to the London Garden Network, which was a valuable opportunity to meet other horticulturists. Lucy also gave an amazing talk on biodiversity at the Palace.

Unfortunately, we are one down in the garden as Jonathan's time as our temporary gardener came to an end. He was such a valuable and knowledgeable member of the team – it was very sad to see him go.

My colleague Ezra and I will both sadly leave the garden team on Friday 28th August. I am very pleased that we are both moving on to exciting new opportunities. I will be joining RHS Rosemoor to begin a Level 3 horticultural supervisor apprenticeship, while Ezra is heading to the University of Cambridge botanic garden.



Myself, Lucy and Ezra in the Walled Garden

Other things to note:

- Ezra and I spent 3 days at Kew training for our PA1 & PA6 spraying course.
- I had a 3-day student swap with the apprentice at Chiswick House which was a very valuable experience. I learnt lots from working in the walled vegetable garden about water usage in the garden, perennial crops and homemade fertilizers.

In conclusion

It has been an absolute joy doing this course and, quite frankly, I really didn't know what I was signing up for. I feel incredibly honoured and privileged to have worked day to day in such a beautiful botanic garden with such an amazing team. I would just like to say a sincere thank you to the Barbara and Philip Denny Trust for supporting this programme. It is a truly valuable apprenticeship for the horticultural industry, and I am incredibly grateful for the opportunities it has given me.

Ellis Lewis