

1st International Congress of Historic Botanical Gardens

Summary of sessions and conference conclusions

Opening ceremony

There were welcome addresses by representatives of the organizations involved in the preparation of the conferences emphasizing the importance of the conference subject and topics. The conference was then declared open by the Vicepresident of the International Association of Botanical Gardens (IABG), Michael Kiehn.

Keynote lecture by Tim Entwistle, President of the IABG

Tim presented the structure and the work of the IABG – with special emphasis on the relevance for Historic Botanical Gardens. He also showed examples of how botanic gardens can deal with their historical background to use it for actual and future projects.

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Theme 1: Historic Botanic Gardens (Case studies and definitions)

In its keynote lecture, Peter Wyse Jackson highlighted the remarkable number of Botanic gardens created over the last 40 years as well as the many national and international organizations (e.g., Botanic Gardens Conservation International) or policies (as the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation or the U.N. Sustainable Development goals) established at the same time. Through research, conservation and education actions BGs have considerably influenced sustainable development in relation to biodiversity and climate change responses, even (partly through new media channels) during the pandemic.

The next speakers presented, from the perspective of “old” Botanical Gardens, overviews about historical developments, changes of interests and missions over the centuries, current functions of historical BGs collections, co-operations, conservation and ex situ management of threatened species, including special foci on old trees, education and training, also paying attention to the social role incl. public engagement, or to the inspiration for artists.

Different approaches for defining Historical Botanical Gardens were discussed (see below – round table).

The session finishes with a call for more botanic gardens to address the great global challenges to be faced in the future, by learning from our past and developing priorities that align with the greatest needs to safeguard plants and nature for the coming century.

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Theme 2: Botanic Gardens and the introduction of economically important species

The keynote of Esteban Bermejo showed the multifaced ways of exchange of economically important plants between different parts of the world and the role Botanical Gardens played in this process.

He emphasized that we still lack awareness about many of these processes and actors, especially for minor or underutilized crops, and that this is an important topic of the history of many Botanic Gardens.

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Theme 3: History is now – documenting and protecting contemporary gardens for posterity

In the keynote lecture Michael Kiehn stated that is the true nature of botanic gardens to evolve, and permanently facing changes regarding their missions, their statute, their collections as well as their buildings or their design. This raises questions which historic components to safeguard. Many ways of documentation (plant lists, databases, documents, testimonies of every change) are useful for optimal and synergetic decisions what is worth protecting.

The following speakers pointed to the need of skilled gardeners to secure the survival of collections heritage value, requiring proper training and options to pass on experience to the next person in charge, and to share information collected in an individual garden with other gardens and larger professional networks.

Poster presentation:

Ten poster presentations included reports about the history of gardens in Athens (Greece), Posnan and Warsaw (Poland), Ukraine, Lisbon (Portugal) and Hungary. They dealt with a number of topics of broad interest, e.g.:

- Problems caused by progressive urbanization, like constant lowering of groundwater levels, increasing noise pollution, lack of possibilities to further expand the garden area, but also to some positive effects like well-developed public transport network.
- Conservation of indigenous genetic material, selection of genotypes with special characters (e.g., taste) and cultivation characteristics as well as resistance to various stresses. This can serve as springboard for the commercialization and sustainable utilization in future breeding programs of wild-growing fruit species.
- Challenges connected with management of special collections (like succulents) requiring constant substantive supervision and high commitment of employees.
- Keeping updated regarding taxonomic changes (in databases and labelling).
- Development of gardens devoted to special topics (e.g., to Arts, to explore, research, and disseminate the connections between Art and Science by promoting knowledge of plants from around the world that are used to provide raw materials for artistic practice throughout history).
- The importance of national networks to secure the work of Botanical Gardens (shown for Ukraine, with the goal to develop Botanical Gardens as places representing both cultural and historical heritage).
- Difficulties arising from a legal status as historical monument, e.g., for a public oriented management of trees and sites.
- Synergies of Historic Botanical Gardens with tourism.

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Theme 4: Managing Historic Botanical Gardens (problems and issues) preserving the past while responding to contemporary needs.

In her keynote lecture Teresa Andresen presented the program of touristic routes of Historical Gardens in Portugal (which includes the BGs of the University of Lisbon, Coimbra, Porto, and Madeira) and is part of the European Routes of Historic Gardens. She explained the selection and certification process and the benefits for the participating gardens.

After a short discussion about certification schemes and criteria also the importance of having skillful gardeners/owners was emphasized, which is increased by the network developed in the process.

The following presenters showed examples for different types of restoration projects related to historic buildings or thematic displays, including interesting ways how to finance such activities. But also problems encountered in historical gardens (depletion of soils, invasive species, climate change effects) were addressed. Best practices to promote old trees or conservation of threatened species were shown.

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Theme 5: Tourism opportunities for Historical Botanic Gardens

The speakers clearly pointed out the synergies between Historic Botanical Gardens and tourism. Different approaches based on SWAT-analyses show the advantages for public and society (unique settings, unique enigmatic plants, historical backgrounds) and for the the garden managers/owners (income, recognition, involvement in regional/sectoral projects). Also the importance of developing different ways of telling the stories of places and collections was emphasised.

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Round table: Promoting and protecting our historical legacy

After intensive discussion on a need of a definition for „Historic Botanical Garden“, and of elements and aspects to be considered (e.g., that a definition must result in an added value for the gardens covered by that definition, and that it is necessary to encourage synergies between preservation, development, and public needs and demands) a definition was proposed:

Historic Botanical Garden: A botanic garden accessible to and useful for the public, being a testimonial for the history of Sciences, with recognized and documented historical value that has preserved authenticity and integrity.

It was agreed that a qualification scheme for Historic Botanical Gardens will be needed.

The International Association of Botanical Garden (IABG) committed itself to develop a scheme for the recognition/accreditaion of Historic Botanical Gardens and will work on tis using the results of the discussions of the conference.

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Two personal additions:

- Many thanks again to Dalila, George and the whole organizing team
- Many people have expressed an interest in a follow-up congress – and we even have received already first bids for potential organisers – thus we should seriously plan this – perhaps in three years time

Summary compiled by Michael Kiehn; with support of Maité Delmas, Eleni Maloupa, and Teresa Andresen

