

The Cathedral Grounds

A Place For Community And Creation

At a time when we face unparalleled environmental and ecological challenges, amidst a climate emergency that can no longer be ignored, the need for stewardship of the intricate, finely balanced natural world that is God's creation is more important than ever. The Eco-Congregation group at the Cathedral have been doing some thinking and planning about how to attract wildlife and increase biodiversity in our own grounds, and to make these areas more inviting to visitors of all faiths and none. This is being done in collaboration with Jonathan Baxter, our artist-in-residence, as we seek together the regeneration of God's living creation.

In spring 2021 we started to make the North Lawn more welcoming to passing pedestrians by softening its rather austere west and north boundaries. Any lawn is really a meadow waiting to happen, so we left the grass immediately adjacent to the fence unmown from late spring until autumn. Because these narrow areas contain flowering grasses as well as wild flowers (the 'weeds' normally suppressed by mowing, as well as native plants sown from seed), they provide habitat and food sources for a wide range of bees, butterflies, hoverflies, beetles and other insects, as well as birds.

We have worked in collaboration with the Early Days Nursery at Old Coates House, who have been very keen to bring more wildlife into the nursery gardens and to find as many ways as possible to help the children learn about plants and the environment, and how to care for them. After initial discussions about the children's needs, in spring 2020 we created a sensory garden in one of the formal box-lined beds beside the nursery. Two smaller beds adjacent to this were turned into miniature wildlife gardens, with planting to attract bees and butterflies, and we also plan to grow fruit, vegetables, and herbs in containers, to help the children interact directly with the plants and learn where food comes from. The whole project has been received enthusiastically by the youngest gardeners in the Cathedral grounds, and the nursery has very generously met the cost of all the plants and garden sundries.

Every tree that is planted in the grounds contributes in a small but important way to counteracting climate change by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and at the same time helps to create the landscape that will be experienced by the generations that come after us. The existing trees are a major asset, both environmentally and aesthetically, and are also potential sites for strategically placed nest boxes and bird feeders.

In February 2020, as an extension of the Garden of Remembrance, which is itself a wildlife haven, a miniature orchard was planted adjacent to Old Coates House, as a memorial funded



by a generous donation. It has ecological value, attracting birds and insect pollinators, and in the heat of summer it provides light shade and a place for the nursery children to relax, followed in autumn by a very flavoursome crop of apples.

In early spring of 2022, Jonathan and his partner Sarah Gittins created a grass labyrinth at the east end of the South Lawn. Then, after a Sunday morning service in April, members of the congregation sowed wildflower seeds around this newly created space. The labyrinth is both decorative and functional, lending itself to play and exploration by children and indeed people of all ages, and providing a resource for meditation, prayer, and spiritual journeying. It links art and ecology, too, as the wildflowers and taller grasses through which the labyrinth paths are mown provide valuable habitat for bees, butterflies, and other insects.

A major feature of the development of the South Lawn in the summer of 2022 has been the reinstatement of the original path layout to the South Door. The Cathedral had obtained planning permission for this work to be undertaken in conjunction with the development of the new cycle route along Bishop's Walk, with some funding also offered by Edinburgh World Heritage and Garfield Weston Foundation. One suggestion for the future is that the design of any plant borders could echo and enhance the curving layout of the path and so draw the visitor in towards the South Door. Planting dominated by perennials and native species would increase biodiversity and attract insect pollinators, and a colour scheme that echoes the colour combinations in Paolozzi's Millennium Window could be used to make another link between ecology and art.

The Cathedral gardens are the meeting place between the Cathedral and the city and community around us. It is important therefore to think about the ways in which they draw people in and communicate something of the abundant life and beauty we proclaim and celebrate. We hope that by enhancing the community, ecological, artistic, and spiritual value of the Cathedral grounds they may become an enriching environment with which the local and wider community can increasingly engage and derive a sense of meaning and belonging. In the words of Marty Haugen's hymn, all are welcome in this place.

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