

The Living Garden Documentation and Evaluation



Overview:

The Living Garden has been a significant research and development project, with a creative programme and artist commissions, all with the aim of revealing the Spode Rose Garden as a creative art space.

How did the programme and project support my creative practice?

The opportunity to dedicate time to this project came at such an important moment for me professionally, as I returned to work after maternity leave, and into the middle of a global pandemic. The project enabled me to spend time reinvigorating my interest in the relationship between artists and gardens, and begin to really think about green arts programming, and how a garden might become a creative resource for a community.

Through programming a series of workshops, I was able to forge important links with other creatives locally, and begin to understand how some of the artists we worked with during the project might develop longer term relationships with the garden. We were also able to reestablish some important partnerships, as well as beginning to forge new ones.

In my own practice which moves between curatorial projects and social practice with a particular focus on ecologies, I have really been able to develop some new thinking that I believe will sustain longer term development for the years to come. The Living Garden project has been so important in terms of development as a mid career artist.

What does this tell me for next steps?

To some extent this project could be viewed as a research and development project, to understand and develop stakeholders for a longer term project. This aspect has been hugely successful, despite the obvious limitations as a result of operating during a pandemic. We have established the garden as a space for creative programming, something we are keen to keep developing, and have as a result been able to begin important conversations with the city council via the HAZ projects and with BCB Festival, as well as in considering the need to in addition develop separately, a gardening programme in addition to the creative programme. Next

steps are to fund raise for both the next phase of the creative programming, plus to begin a programme of gardening and volunteer development activity.

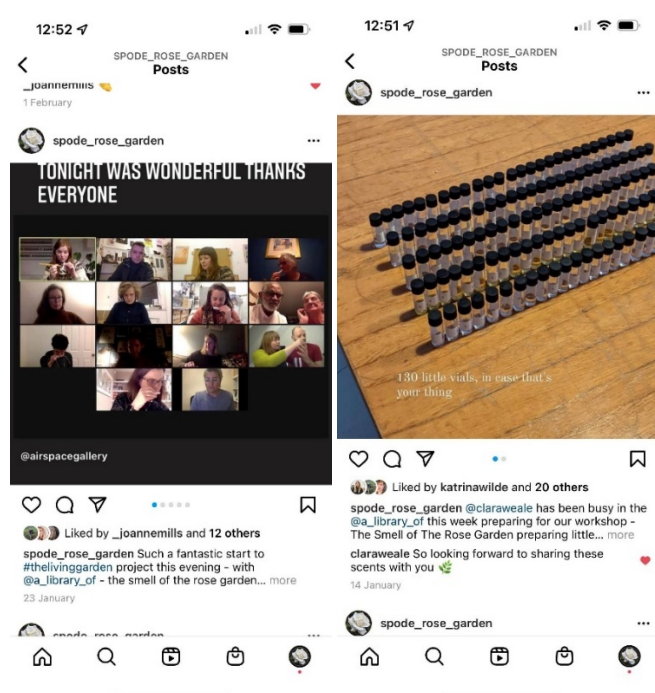
What happened with the Public programme?

Online events:

Clara Weale: The Smell of The Living Garden

23rd January Online public workshop (16 participants), led by Clara Weale of A Library of Olfactive Material and Anna Francis, curator of the Living Garden Programme.

Anna was able to share an edited version of some of the writing that has been able to happen as a result of the programme, alongside the selected smell materials prepared and posted in advance to participants. The idea was to transport people from a winter zoom session, to a Sunny mid summer Spode Rose Garden, via imagery within the writing and smell.



Participants included regular visitors to the garden, but the online nature of the event, also meant that some people that had never visited or even hear of the garden before were able to connect. Feedback from participants included: 'A bliss filled hour in the Spode Rose Garden. Transported there by powerful words from @annafrancisart & scent from Clara's teeny potion bottles posted from the Library of Olfactive Material. (I put my rose tester in the centre of my felt rose!!).' 'Such a beautiful experience! Exactly what was needed after a tough week. Many thanks Anna!' 'It was a wonderful transportive treat for the imagination and the soul, Anna. I found it calming, grounding and uplifting. I needed it more than I thought.'

20th February 2021 The Smell of the Living Garden with the Friends of Spode Rose Garden group and pals. 14 participants.

Saturday 1st May: An Open Garden Session invited people to come and help give the garden a spring clean. We wanted to test the idea of advertising a public gardening session to see if it would bring a broader range of visitors to come and get involved. We had a big list of jobs and people could opt to take part at whichever level of confidence they had for the tasks. This was really great as it welcomed a different range of visitors to get involved. This is something we would like to explore developing further, by potentially applying for funding from Big Lottery, for a regular volunteer coordinator post for the garden, alongside developing our creative programme, as we have, through this activity recognised that those are different jobs.



The Colours of The Spode Rose Garden with Ceramic Artist Sarah Fraser, a closed workshop in two parts with maximum 12 places available (due to Covid Restrictions.)



Pollinator Focus 30th June at Staffordshire University Nursery.



Ahead of our Moth Night in the rose garden, and as part of our aim to reconnect with some of the garden partners and visitors that we were connected with pre-covid, we were in touch with Staffordshire University Nursery, who used to visit the garden regularly. It became clear that due to risk assessments and health and safety concerns, the children could still not be able to visit the garden, so we worked with the Nursery Teachers to plan ways that the garden could come to them. During their June '30 days wild' project they heard about the garden down the road from the Nursery staff, who also visited the garden to collect plants to bring in for the children to see and hear about. On the final day of their project, Anna Francis came to the nursery, with Bee Keeper Carol Britnell, who brought an observation hive with her, to talk about the important role bees play in the garden.

We also talked about nighttime pollinators, and each child was supported to use a press mould to make a ceramic moth. These were returned to the children to be glazed once fired by British Ceramics Biennial, before being taken to the garden for our nighttime raku event, where they were glaze fired before being given back to the children at nursery.

The Moth Night at The Spode Rose Garden

This was an opportunity to discuss our nighttime pollinators in the garden, and for artist Joanne Mills to begin to share details of her public art commission for the garden. The art work which Jo began to develop focused on the lunar calendar, and its importance to gardeners, which led to thinking about the garden at night. We learned that there is a National Moth Night which encourages surveys and appreciation of our nighttime pollinators. For the moth night, we made moths from sprig moulds, which participants were then able to come and fire in a Japanese Experimental Glazing session in the garden. This was aimed at people that are interested in ceramics, but also aimed to engage with those interested in Ecology. As part of our aims to connect with the University – we connected up with the Ecology department, and Ecology Lecturer Eleanor Atkins, who came on the night to help us set up moth traps and think about how to support a diversity of species in the garden. We discussed potential future partnerships with the Ecology department, and the idea of future Moth Nights in the garden.





The Living Garden: How To @ The Spode Rose Garden event on Saturday, 31st July.



This was the first public event for The Friends of Spode Rose Garden, where participants and visitors were not required to book a ticket ahead of the event, since the pandemic took hold in 2020.

The Friends of Spode Rose Garden group have not been able to hold any public open events like this for some time, and so this was a good test of how events can begin to take place again.



It was evident that we are struggling as a group for volunteers, as all of our volunteers on the day had a very busy day, and people were not able to take a break which is something we need to look at.

We need to also really look to do a recruitment drive, to encourage people to get involved.

The event itself was excellent, with a good range of creative and hands on workshops taking place:





Frances Disley did a healing plant discussion session, and showed people how to make solar infusions and healing balms.



Anna Francis did an Ikebana demonstration.



There was also a very successful plant, jams and chutneys sale.

Overall there were 53 people taking part in the activities, but some people took part in more than one activity. And an additional 18 visitors to the garden. Which was excellent for a rainy day.

Saturday, 18th and Sunday, 19th September: The Living Garden weekend event in the Rose Garden:

Over the Weekend of 18th and 19th September, and included within the British Ceramics Biennial programme, we put on a full weekend of activities and workshops within the garden. Artist Katrina Wilde was commissioned to work with plant materials within the garden across the two days, on day one leading a series of dyeing workshops across the Saturday, and then leading a drop of and dye service on the Sunday. We also had a talk from curator Anna Francis, a yoga session focusing around a moon salutation as a way of celebrating the brand new art work by Jo Mills which celebrates the lunar calendar, a floral painting workshop by Louise SAdams, Signwriting and plant id with Rebecca Davies, one-to-one plant readings with artist Frances Disley, rose propagation with Helen Morgan, as well as plant and jams stand and an apple giveaway.



Two final Winter workshops in the Garden to complete the programme, and to first support the development of new skills for our group, and then second as a way of introducing a new audience to the garden and its resources completed the programme at the end of 2021.



Pruning Workshop with Zdenek Valkoun Walker from Dorothy Clive Gardens, Sunday 21st November. It was great to partner with Dorothy Clive Gardens on leading this hands on sessions. Their head gardener Zdenek offered a two hour hands on workshop on pruning fruit trees, dogwood, roses, hydrangeas and wisteria. There were 6 participants taking part in the session.



Wreath Making workshop with Louise Adams and Mark Delft of Stockton Brook Studios, Sunday, 28th November. Louise shared information about her project for the rose garden, and using some materials from the garden (holly, and willow) as well as extra foraged materials from Louise's own garden, the workshop demonstrated how natural plant materials can be used to make a festive foliage display. Unfortunately, this was the weekend of Storm Arwen, so had to make the decision to move the workshop from the rose garden to AirSpace Gallery, but were still able to make the connections to the garden. We did not want to postpone, as the session had already been postponed from December 2020 as a result of Covid 19 restrictions. There were 12 participants in this hands on workshop.



Artworks Commissioned for The Spode Rose Garden as part of The Living Garden Project:

The Living Garden Logo by Ceramic Designer June Branscombe



Part of the remit of the project has been to explore the links between the garden and heritage skills. It was fantastic to work with some artists and designers who have previously been made redundant from the ceramics industry and to find ways of repurposing their skills in the garden programme. June Branscombe designed the logo for the Living Garden using her skills as a designer (working for firms such as Royal Doulton and Crown Derby.)

Floral Banners by Louise Adams



Louise Adams has been undertaking a residency within the garden over the full year 2021, and in addition has lead a number of activities for The Living Garden programme. This included developing 3 banners, in blue and white, considering the popular Spode Blue and White ceramics, and celebrating the blue and white colour scheme of the Spode Rose Garden flora.

. 'Most of all I want to communicate and record something of the spirit of the place. It is a garden, not a wild place, and I really appreciate the work, skill and love that makes it.'

Quote from artist Louise Adams.

The Terminator and the Limb by ceramic artist Joanne Mills (Horticultural Ceramic Sculpture)



Joanne Mills project for the garden was the most significant and ambitious as part of The Living Garden programme, providing a longer and more intensive relationship with the garden space, and a significant professional development opportunity for Jo.



Jo was able to employ an assistant to help her in building and installing the sculpture, due to the flexible materials and expenses budget, which was an important point to learn. This was on top of her artist fee, which was very positive and meant the artist revenue was protected.

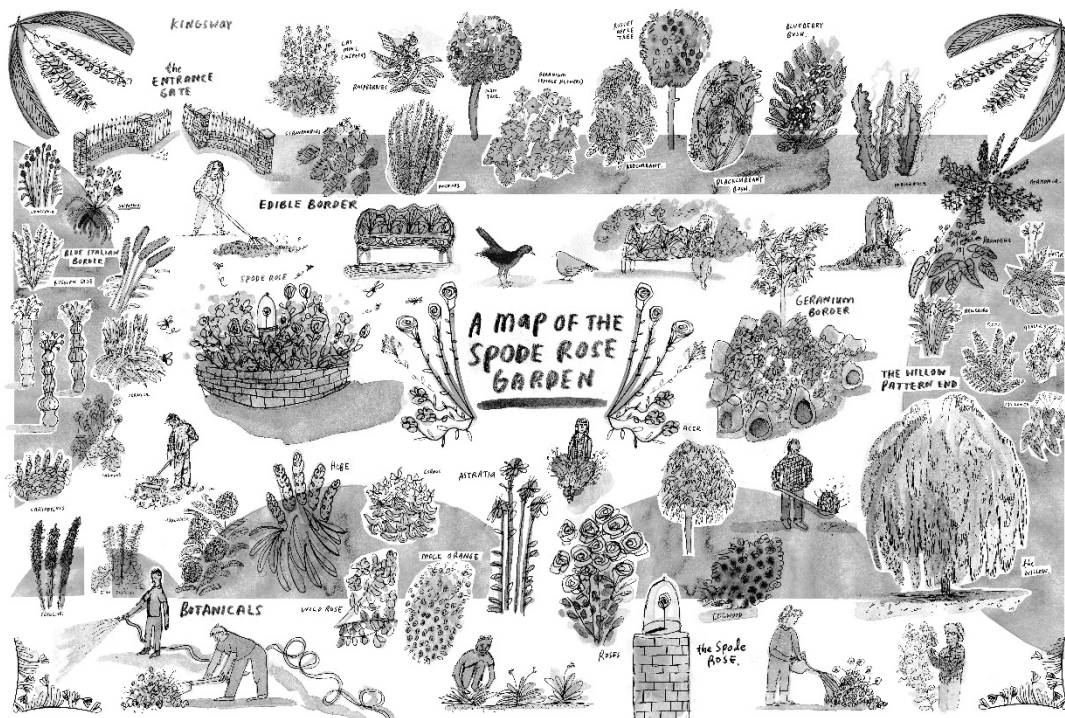
Joanne Mills' statement about the project:

The long-term view required when creating a garden, was something I was thinking about when creating the work. I looked at some of the earliest physical calendars, that chart the lunar cycle through marks engraved into bone or hollows dug into the ground. The hollows in the terracotta forms require light to create the shadows that suggest the lunar cycle, they will shift with not only the natural conditions of weather and light, but they will also be impacted upon by the human presence, much like the garden itself.

The geranium bed lacked a containing structure, so this was where I felt that I could contribute something to the garden. I like to imagine that one day, the forms will be covered in moss, with plants slipping between gaps, scaling their boundaries.

Rebecca Davies Map.

One aspect of the work we wanted to explore alongside the creative hands on workshops, was to include developing multiples which can be sold in the garden in future to raise funds for further projects and activity. As part of the Living Garden workshops we commissioned Rebecca Davies to lead a sign writing activity in the garden, with two purposes, to generate some signage to show people what is growing in the garden, but also to map the plants there to then commission Rebecca to create a map of the garden, for the creation of artworks and multiples for the next steps of the project.



The resulting artwork is a brilliant record of the garden and The Living Garden project.

Developing Partnerships:

The most significant partnership between the Friends of Spode Rose Garden volunteers continues to be with AirSpace Gallery, who have continued to be an important support and partner with The Living Garden project. AirSpace was able to use their Web Platform as a space to house content for the programme, and to create events etc as a way to connect the garden to an arts programme. This seems mutually beneficial, but is particularly useful for the Rose Garden, who do not have a dedicated website. AirSpace studio artists attended events and Glen Stoker, AirSpace Gallery director provided important support at all but two events, and was able to also help with installation of artworks.

We were able to develop the partnership with British Ceramics Biennial, by meeting with Rhiannon Ewing James, and establishing support from BCB and connections, we were able to really maximise the audience for the work, as the artworks were named within the BCB programme.

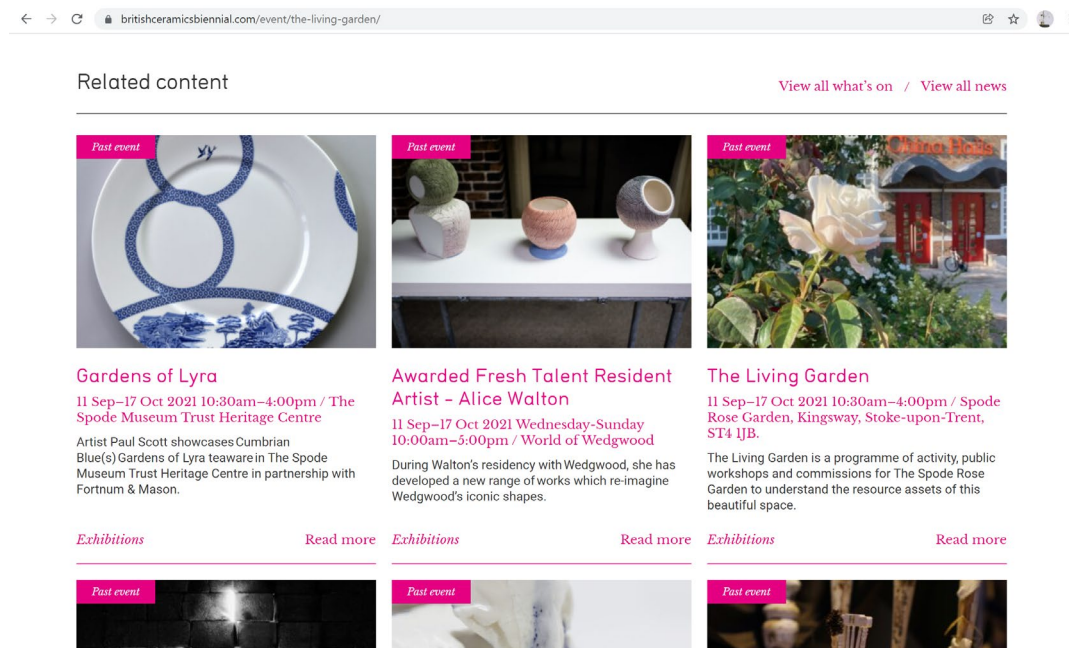


Image: The Living Garden on the BCB website, as part of the 2021 Festival programme.

The BCB provided help and support through use of their studios and kilns for the firing of both artworks made within the public art commission, but also, providing equipment and support for the public workshops. This included advertising the Weekender events, which helped to reach a wider audience, and including the new commissions within the garden as part of the BCB 2021 programme, which saw new visitors coming to the garden over September and October 2021.

The Friends of Spode Rose Garden were keen to rekindle connections with the BCB Clay studio, and in particular their Clay Comrades group, which we were able to do, via targeted ceramics workshops that would be of interest to them, including raku and working with freshly dug clay to make slips. Through connecting with artists Joanne Mills and Sarah Fraser, who both run the studios, there was a natural connection. When the garden had an open day with a plant sale, lots of the Clay Comrades supported the event by donating plants and then also attending the day. We hope to continue to develop this relationship into further programming.

Connecting with ACAVA Studio artists.

When the garden officially opened back in 2017, we had developed a great partnership with ACAVA studios Spode, and worked closely with Ben Eastop of ACAVA to programme two years of the Stoke Art Map. When Ben retired from ACAVA we lost touch with the studios and wanted to find ways to reconnect. This programme has enabled us to do that, with artists from the studios visiting the activities we have programmed, but in particular in developing a workshop and activity in the garden with artist Katrina Wilde.



Katrina was interested to explore and test out the potential to grow plants for dyeing in the garden, and with this in mind we built a small bed in the garden for her to begin to test some ideas. Katrina led a fantastic dyeing workshop across the two day Weekender, using the plants she had grown but also other plants available in the garden. We are keen to develop further links with Katrina and to mount a longer term project in the garden.

Staffordshire University Fine Art Course Connections and Placement

One important aspect of the garden project has been to attempt to make better links with current undergraduates at the University, and to support them to see the garden as a resource. This has included exploring links with the Ecology course via the Moth Night, and by connecting with art students on the BA Hons Fine Art, initially giving a talk for students about the Rose Garden project and the Living Garden Programme and then offering a placement opportunity for undergraduates. For one of the Fine Art students we were able to support a Professional Practice Placement within the garden. The art student Gabrielle Johnson undertook a creative project in response to the garden which included examining the garden and its history, in relation to Spode and its heritage, and then developing an artwork in conversation with The Friends of Spode Rose Garden group. Gabrielle talked in her placement evaluation about the experience having significant impact on how she feels about her career in the arts and what she will do next. The ability to provide important professional development opportunities for emerging artists in Stoke is something we hope to expand upon for further work in the garden in the coming years.



Staffordshire University Nursery

As mentioned we were able to reconnect with the nursery by visiting them at their site, as they could not visit the garden, but we hope that as they move to their Forest School, and Covid Restrictions Ease, we may be able to welcome the children back to the garden again soon. The Nursery manager has confirmed the importance of the garden to their learning opportunities, and in developing local partnerships.

New collaborations for The Living Garden next steps: The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery.

In order to expand public engagement and knowledge of the Garden, we were keen to utilise The Living Garden project to develop new links across the city, and potential to connect to the City Museum.

A very positive meeting with the Museum Manager at The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery has secured a commitment to developing a curated exhibition in the next phase of The Living Garden, showcasing works and materials created within The Living Garden, alongside the Museum Collections, as well as looking at supporting the museum to develop their outdoor green space programming in partnership with The Spode Rose Garden.

This is a very exciting outcome to the project, and represents significant development for both the Garden and Anna Francis as creative programmer and artist.

Participants and Visitors Table:

Event and Date	Participants	Visitors
The Smell of The Living Garden 23 rd January Online public workshop	16 (of those artists = 9)	n/an/a
The Smell of The Living Garden 20 th February Online workshop with the Friends of Group	14 (of those artists = 10)	n/a
Open Gardening Day Saturday 1 st May	15	n/a
The Colours of The Spode Rose Garden with Ceramic Artist Sarah Fraser, May 15 th	10 (of those artists = 6)	Closed to visitors
Pollinator Focus 30 th June at Staffordshire University Nursery	19	n/a
Moth Night And Raku, Friday 9 th July	17 (of those artists = 9)	n/a
How To @ The Spode Rose Garden, Saturday, 31 st July	53 (of those artists 10)	18
The Living Garden weekend	64 (of those artists 11)	29
Pruning Workshop Sunday 21 st November	6 (of those artists = 3)	n/a
Wreath Making workshop	11	n/a
TOTAL	225 (of those artists = 58)	47

Analysis of Feedback from the artist we worked with:

Artists have fed back that working within The Living Garden programme was 'a highlight of the year'. For some of the artists, this was an important first public activity post-covid, while for others, the commissioning of new work in a public space has represented an important shift change in their professional practice. What has become clear is that in programming creative workshops, we can support the general public to learn new skills and experience working with creative practitioners in a safe outdoor environment, but also, through careful programming, we can put together hands on sessions which represent important professional development for a broad range of creative practitioners, while supporting artists to develop their research and practice.

Providing an appropriate, all inclusive fee of £300 for a workshop session meant that artists could decide for themselves how to allocate the budget for materials and artist fee. In addition, being flexible in terms of materials budget for larger commissions, also being able to be spent on buying in assistant support was clearly a benefit to artists working on ambitious commissions.

Comments from the artists we worked with demonstrate that the workshops enabled a sense of network and connection for the artists that got involved – something we hope to continue to nurture for future programmes.

Some significant comments from artists:

- This project supported me to spend a significant period of time developing my studio-based practice, in contrast to my socially engaged work. The setting of the garden allowed me to consider how I could create work for a public space and challenged me to work on a much larger scale than I have done before.
- Being connected with other artists was really important – for example the online olfactive materials workshop and listening to Anna's writing. This really helped to give a sense of place when thinking about the garden. It also provided a creative community, making connections with others during a particularly disconnected time.
- The freedom to use the allocated budget as suited really helped. I realised early on that the material costs would be quite low, whereas the time to make the work would be more than the artist time, so I decided to employ an assistant to help me with some of the preparatory work – giving me more time to work on the build.

Analysis of Feedback and engagement from The Public:

One of the key aspects of the project was around developing new links with the public and ensuring people know about the garden, as an important green space to visit and spend time. The public programme of activity was key to continuing with this aim, but in addition, we were keen to develop our social media presence.

At the start of the project we had made 194 posts on the Spode Rose Garden Instagram page, and by the end of the process we had made 298 posts (as well as additional stories.)

At the start of the project we had 359 followers, and by the end this has raised to 570. This is significant, and is something to continue to build on for the future. The social media output was also shared on Facebook, where a post would be seen by an average of 70 people.

One thing we had hoped might happen was that the creative programme would encourage more people to get involved in volunteering in the garden, in terms of the gardening/horticulture activity. What has become clear is that this is a different aspect of the gardening and requires a different approach – programming specific gardening sessions with communicated aims throughout the year is something we will aim to do, but separately from the creative and cultural programme.

Feedback from visiting community members showed that for some people, the project has raised awareness about the garden 'I didn't know this was here, its lovely.'

While other people expressed enjoyment about the activities on offer, and wanting to visit again. In addition to this, participant comments demonstrate that the creative activities offered in the safe outdoor space have inspired people to try new things, and in some cases, to look to develop their skills further v=beyond the session, which is hugely rewarding to hear.

Some key comments from

- Really enjoyed ourselves, looking forward to next time.
- Thanks for today, my boy loved it
- Lovely hour spent, thanks for the activities and mint.
- Absolutely lovely time at the Friends of Spode Rose Garden event today. So nice to see people I've not seen for ages! Will look forward to eating my jam too!
- You've inspired me. I have a set of frogs and a beginners book of ikebana heading my way. Just keep looking in my garden what flowers I'm going to use. Thank you.
- A bliss filled hour in the Spode Rose Garden. Organised by @AirSpaceGallery. Transported there by powerful words from @annafrancisart & scent from Clara's teeny potion bottles posted from the Library of Olfactive Material.
- Such a beautiful experience! Exactly what was needed after a tough week.

- It was a wonderful transportive treat for the imagination and the soul. I found it calming, grounding and uplifting. I needed it more than I thought!

The programme and feedback received demonstrate that this vital resource (A city green space) became ever more valuable during the pandemic, as we were able to programme a range of sessions for both families and creatives. The Living Garden provided a brilliant learning opportunity, to plan for our next steps which will be:

- A further programme of creative workshops supporting artists to develop ideas and research whilst providing interesting and developmental sessions for the public to engage in green creative ecologies.
- A series of creative commissions to continue the work we have started to develop longer term relationships with key creatives, that support our partner development
- Find funding to pay for a volunteer coordinator role which will focus on the horticultural aspects of the garden and its community programme
- Develop a new partnership with the City Museum, as a way to disseminate the creative work developed.