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European Garden Award 2018/2019

1st Prize: EUROPE'S HERITAGE OF GARDENS AND GARDENING:

ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS KEW

Where does one start to describe the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew?

Kew has many other dimensions and influential connections which helps nurture and engage the world of plant science and conservation relating to our planets endangered plants.

Kew is not just a garden with rare plants and historic buildings, it is a business, a library, a centre of learning and training of specialist horticultural skills. I picked up Kew's introduction leaflet which I was impressed to see is written in 7 different languages which reflects the level of international interest and awareness.

Kew has been re-energised with a new vision, clear direction, and significant investment to develop a business model that is no longer dependent on public funding. This modern vision embraces Kew's collection of rare and endangered plants, addresses the conservation of its historic assets, looks to create a vibrant and immersive experience for its visitors, and engages a diverse audience in new, creative, and meaningful ways.

All life depends on plants, and Kew's work provides vital support to plant science and plant conservation which it so proactively engages with across Europe and throughout the world.

A few facts....

Kew is London's largest UNESCO World Heritage Site, and home to the most diverse collection of living plants anywhere in the world.

Kew's Herbarium contains around seven million preserved vascular plant specimens that have been collected around the world over the past 170 years.

Kew's iconic temperate house had been closed for 5 years but is now newly restored and was reopened this year by Sir David Attenborough. The temperate house contains 10,000 plants and protects hundreds of rare and threatened plant species, representing 1500 different species. I was fascinated to learn that 200 of these species had been propagated

from seed held in Kew's Millennium Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place; their mission is to seek out and conserve 25% of the world's plant species by 2020. This is an almost unbelievable story line that that could easily have appeared in the science future film Jurassic Park.

Also reopened this year is the restored Pagoda, along with no less than 80 dragons and 253 steps which visitors may take to enjoy a panoramic view of the gardens from above.

Visitors to Kew can also visit the Princess of Wales Conservatory, The Tropical Palm House, , climb high into the tree canopy on the Treetop Walkway, visit the Hive – a striking installation that highlights the importance of Bees, browse two galleries which showcase botanical art, or engage with the programme of summer and winter events which next year will see the return of the highly acclaimed Chihuly exhibition.

A new children's garden will open next spring, as will upgraded catering facilities that support both the developing visitor experience and commercial aspects of Kew's business model.

The introduction three years ago of the long double borders which were designed in-house, looked stunning on both occasions I have visited this year.

The EGHN award for Europe's Heritage of Gardens and Gardening is not simply an award based on what Kew has been doing for so many years, but for the ability to take stock, challenge its purpose, and refocus its rich resources and assets in a way that is relevant to new challenges, new audiences and current times. The EGHN recognises that Kew is one of Europe's great cultural assets, and also that it is embracing the multiple challenges which are so very relevant to all botanical collections and plant conservation around the world.

Many congratulations to the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew.