

By Phil Penfold.

Bloom 1.

It's one of Europe's biggest yearly campaigns – and it puts a smile on everyone's face. Over 115,000 volunteers in hundreds of village, towns, cities and urban communities give an estimated 1.7 million hours of their time to making the space around them look better and brighter. It is, of course, Britain In Bloom, and this year there are no less than seventy-seven finalists hoping for the Champion Of Champions title. Last year, it was won by Falkland, in Scotland, pipping fellow Scots in Pitlochry to the top spot.

Despite difficult economic times, a terrible winter, drought conditions in some parts of the country, communities have all rallied behind the campaign – begun back in 1963 as a tourism initiative of the British Tourist Authority, and organised by the Royal Horticultural Society since 2002 – and have delivered a bumper crop of entries. Over 1,100 entered in the first stages. Each entry is judged on achievements in horticulture, environmental responsibility and community participation.

There are twelve English regions in the competition, plus “regions” representing Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Jersey and Guernsey, making an overall total of 17.

Some regions in the list of finalists have fared far better than others. Yorkshire has no less than seven finalists, as has the north-west, while Cumbria and London have only three. Scotland leads the list with eleven finalists, but there are only five Welsh schemes left in the running.

Last year there were thirteen special and discretionary awards to communities or individuals who demonstrated excellence in a particular area. The Commercial Award was given to Beighton in Sheffield for the Crystal Peaks Shopping Centre for its responsible approach to the environment, which includes bird boxes, bee-hives on the roof, insect-friendly planting and clean-up events as well as wildlife walks. The town of Douglas on the Isle of Man was given another special award for its youth project, which include a free-running area.

In 2006 the RHS introduced a new non-competitive category for Britain in Bloom, the Neighbourhood Awards, later re-named It's Your Neighbourhood. It is a grassroots community gardening campaign for small groups just starting to “green up” and who are active in cleaning up their local area. The Society firmly believes that gardening improves the quality of life, and that everyone should have access to great gardening experiences. As a registered charity they bring gardening into people's lives, and they support gardeners of all levels and abilities – they range from expert horticulturalists to children who are planting seeds for the very first time.

To celebrate the launch of this year's Britain in Bloom campaign back in March, almost 85,000 new trees were planted across the nation. The RHS teamed up with the Woodland Trust with the aim of doubling the UK's native woods and trees, and in all 320 groups planted no less than 84,420 saplings, including field maple, hawthorn, hazel, dogwood, oak and ash. Whirlow Hall Farm in Sheffield was just one of the participants, and volunteers at the venue, along with pupils from the nearby Prince Edward Primary School at nearby Manor Top and students from Sheffield

University's Environmental Science Society pulled on the wellie boots to get down and dirty with the tree-planting. In total, 500 trees went in – and are thriving. The event was such a roaring success that another planting is planned for this autumn, with yet another 500 trees, and again local youngsters will be involved.

The seven finalists representing Yorkshire are the City of York, Whitby, Shadwell (in north-east Leeds) Dunnington, near Hornsea in East Yorkshire, Ilkley, Woodlesford in Leeds, and the village of Luddenden in Calderdale, near Halifax. Luddenden were the proud winners of the Village category in 2010, and the village has been a conservation area since 1973. Luddenden is passionate about its Britain in Bloom efforts, and the organising team raise funds at plant sales, in raffles, by their open gardens day, and by selling hand-made Christmas and birthday cards. There's even a plant and produce stall in the High Street.

The RHS believe that taking part in Britain In Bloom can bring major benefits to communities. Among them they say, are cleaner and greener surroundings, improving the sense of belonging to a community, and an increase in civic pride. Safer environments are created, with long-term improvements when issues like sustainability, graffiti and littering are addressed, and there's also less anti-social behaviour. There's also evidence of a positive effect on the local economy, with increased commercial enterprise and tourism, and many run-down and disadvantaged areas have been vastly improved.

Susan Davies, who is Chair of Whitby in Bloom (they won the Best in Small Coastal category of Yorkshire in Bloom last year) refutes any idea that the contest is just a matter of digging over a few flower beds and “putting up some nice hanging baskets”. In Whitby, hundreds of people help the effort to win the coveted awards, “and hundreds more, when they see us out and about, painting benches, re-making signage, planting in the borders, whatever we're doing, stop us and give us some plants, or a packet of seeds, or a cash donation, all of which are gratefully received. The RHS have asked me to count the heads and to give them a figure of the number of people involved and I've had to say ‘Sorry, I simply can't, there are so many’. It's like throwing a pebble into a pond, the ripples go on forever.

“We've been involved in BIB for several decades, and I can honestly say that the past winter was one of the worst we've ever experienced, killing off many, many varieties of plants which we thought could withstand just about anything that nature could throw at us. And the bad weather also meant that a lot of volunteers were unable to do the many over-winter jobs that have to be done. There are several of them that are now of ‘the third age’, and they couldn't get out of their houses, let alone do any garden maintenance!

“But we all take great heart from the fact that every school in Whitby is involved these days, they each have an individual project (one is building scarecrows from recycled materials) and they are all eco-friendly. There's one young man I could name who has told us that he already had a burning ambition to take over from Alan Titchmarsh. All I can say is ‘Go for it – set your sights high!’”

Susan's many BIB colleagues weave the rich history of their town into the dozens of eye-stopping exhibits, and she reminds visitors and townsfolk alike that one of their

most famous sons, Captain Cook, set out in the Endeavour from the harbour at Whitby, with part of his mission being to discover new plant species where-ever he made landfall. She sees BIB as bonding together “horticulture, partnership and the environment”, and she says: “The other thing that people get completely wrong is that they believe that the Britain in Bloom effort starts in early summer and finished as autumn arrives. Not so. The results are announced in September (this year it’ll be on the 25th, and in St. Andrews in Scotland) and as soon as we find out what they are, there’s time for a cup of tea, or a gin and tonic or whatever takes your fancy, and then it all starts again. We’re already well advanced with several projects for 2012, and years beyond that. You have to plan ahead!”

For Yorkshire, there are four sets of judges – there are two to each team – and together they will travel the county, giving their verdicts. Head of the RHS judges this year is Scarborough’s Roger Burnett, an old hand of the Britain in Bloom contest. Roger insists that “when the results are finally announced, whoever gets the final prizes, the real winners are those who have taken part – at whatever level.” He has been in horticulture for nearly forty years, first in the Parks and Countryside Department at Scarborough council, and then as their Community Environment officer. And while Roger has a fierce loyalty to his home patch, he emphasises that all the judges (who are all given a training course before their work begins) have “absolute and strict impartiality”.

He says: “All the contestants know well in advance when the judges will be arriving to make their rounds. And when judging is done, we always put aside ample time to discuss our decisions with them, to give advice when they ask for it, practical comment and critical assessments. We are honest, and we do it in a very amicable way. It’s a sort of feedback surgery, and it is always appreciated. What do we mark on? Well, there are fifteen sub-categories in all, but the three main ones are Horticultural Achievement, which counts for 50% of the marks, and Environmental Responsibility and Community Participation, which have 25% each. We look for innovative planting – all sorts of things, but it isn’t just what we see on the day, we look for the year-round effort and involvement too. We generally do two contestants every day. It means at least a fortnight away from home, and this year I’ve been to fourteen gardens. The minimum number that a judge visits is ten”. Roger cites last year’s entrant from Coleraine in Northern Ireland as being “horticultural excellence at it’s best” (although it didn’t get a Gold Medal), and he also loved the efforts made at Tetbury in Gloucestershire.

Roger’s eagle eye this year will have been cast over entrants from Ilkley and York and others much further afield, such as Holyhead in Wales and Halstead in East Anglia. “It’s hectic, but it is all enormous fun, and I think all the judges, being keen horticulturalists themselves, are forever getting new ideas for their own gardens and organisations,” he says.

And does he have some advice for someone wanting to join the scheme, where a local authority doesn’t seem to be that keen to get involved in these lean times? He chuckles: “Just get on with it. Get started and get going. Ask for forgiveness, not for permission....”

Now those 77 entrants are waiting for the results. And the winner is....