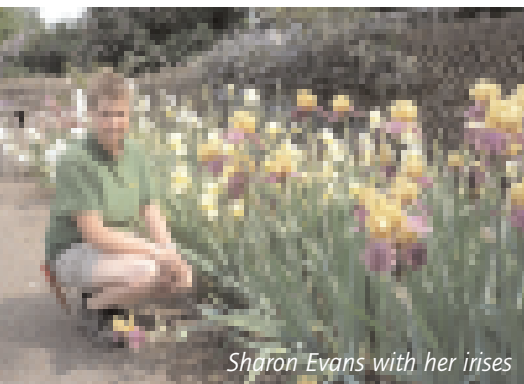


Everything in the garden is lovely

Text and photos by Michael Davison

At Poet's Corner in the grounds of Pembroke Lodge I watched gardener Sharon Evans tending the magnificent collection of irises: more than 50 different varieties, ranging from deepest purple to yellow and the most delicate peach, arranged against a cottage-garden brick wall. "I'm obsessed by irises," said Sharon.



Sharon Evans with her irises

Sharon is charge-hand of the team of five gardeners who work a five-day week round the year to maintain in tip-top condition the 11-acre gardens of Pembroke Lodge, one of the most visited areas in all London's Royal Parks, with a display that reaches the height of its summer glory from June to August. I joined the team at mid-morning break time in their "mess-room" and asked what jobs they had been doing since they started work at 7.30am.

The main task for Harvey Penn (a veteran of 15 years' service) and Alan Wilkins and Mark Diprose (5 years) had been planting out the first of some 1,500 marigolds to border the summer display in the oval bed near King Henry's Mound. Frankie Angel, in only his third week in the gardens and

enjoying the outdoor life, had begun the day with an hour of litter clearance before joining the bedding-out team. Danny Stafford, serving his apprenticeship, had made a 5am start on strimming the Park roadsides, and then mowing the lawns and grass borders in the gardens. At other seasons, other jobs beckon: pruning, hedge clipping, digging and mulching, plant dividing, lawn maintenance, leaf clearance. "There are no quiet times," they all agreed.

It was as an apprentice that Sharon, 34, started work in Richmond Park 11 years ago, learning a variety of jobs around the Park and spending two years at the Isabella Plantation before being put in charge at Pembroke Lodge. Today she was to spend hours on her knees weeding the herbaceous borders, starting with her beloved irises. The iris collection was donated in the 1990s by George



Left to right: Mark Diprose, Harvey Penn, Alan Wilkins and Frankie Angel, with Sharon Evans in front.

Lissaman of Sheen, and in 2003 Sharon embarked upon planting out selected varieties, identifying and labelling them with the help of 20 books on irises. Three specimens won awards at the British Iris Society show earlier this year.

My advice to summer visitors: don't miss the irises. They are located at Poet's Corner, named after poet James Thomson, near the Richmond Gate end of the gardens. To reach it from the main entrance you'll pass through two more of Pembroke Lodge's treasures: the spectacular rose garden and the shady John Beer Laburnum Walk (right).

Maintaining all these beds, lawns and borders is labour-intensive. It has taken four years of hard work, in the intervals between routine tasks, to prepare the latest attraction, The Dell, a shady woodland area at the southern end of the gardens. Here informal beds incorporate shade perennials and specimen trees and shrubs which will be at their best in spring. Through the Dell winds a path edged with cedar logs hauled by the gardeners from fallen trees near the

Dysart Gate. On the grassy slopes below I could see rabbits running about, which explains the need for wire barriers to protect the new plantings, some of which cost as much as £10 for a single bulb.

Human visitors, particularly at the weekends, can cause problems too. On occasion, children have been known to slide down the slopes and even trample through flower beds and pick flowers. It must be disheartening for the gardeners to see their work violated, but they take it in their stride. "In many ways we are the victims of our own success," was the comment of Jo Scrivener, Richmond Park Assistant Manager, whom I met in his office at Holly Lodge. Jo's training is in horticulture, so he directs operations at Pembroke Lodge and in the Isabella Plantation. In this role he complements that of fellow Assistant Park Manager Adam Curtis whose concern is with the wider, wilder areas of the Park.



Cultivating gardens that attract larger crowds every year brings the inevitable problems of combining public access with the needs of conservation. On the evidence I saw at Pembroke Lodge, Jo has a dedicated team who reconcile their duties to plants and public with ease.