

Press release
September 2023

Kew celebrates *Queer Nature* with new festival this autumn

Temperate House, Kew Gardens, Saturday 30 September – Sunday 29 October 2023



- **New month-long festival celebrates the connections between queer people, plants and fungi**
- **Large-scale commission from acclaimed New York-based artist Jeffrey Gibson**
- **New festival garden by Patrick Featherstone in collaboration with the Kew Youth Forum**
- **LGBTQ+ scientists, horticulturists, artists, writers, and more come together in a film-based installation exploring personal experiences of queerness and nature brought to life through an installation designed by Adam Nathaniel Furman**
- **Two original spoken word pieces by LiLi K. Bright and Ama Josephine Budge Johnstone**
- **After Hours events include music, cabaret, comedy, drag artists and talks**

This October, Kew's iconic Temperate House is transformed into a celebration of the connections between queer people, plants and fungi, with a vibrant new festival, *Queer Nature* (Sat 30 Sept – Sun 29 Oct).

As part of the festival, Kew has commissioned four bespoke installations, featuring stories by queer artists, gardeners, scientists and more. Step inside the cathedral of glass and discover a large-scale suspended artwork by Jeffrey Gibson, recently announced as the first Indigenous artist to present a solo exhibition at the U.S. Pavilion during the 2024 Venice Biennale. Alongside this, encounter a vibrant garden display and be inspired by real stories of queer people— there is something for everyone.

***House of Spirits* by Jeffrey Gibson**

Suspended in the centre of the Temperate House, this spectacular large-scale installation is artist Jeffrey Gibson's largest UK commission to date. *House of Spirits* is an intricate, layered collage of

fabric, illustration and text, incorporating previously unseen botanical illustrations¹ alongside writing and patterns informed by Gibson's own perspectives on queerness and nature. Fusing vibrant colour and pattern, the artwork will appear to be in a constant state of flux, undulating in the light breeze and glowing from within when bathed in streams of sunlight.

'House' is a reference to *ball culture*, an underground subculture that originated in the queer African-American and Latino communities of New York City. Receiving its world premiere at Kew Gardens, *House of Spirits* also draws inspiration from the work and life of artist and filmmaker Derek Jarman, who was also a renowned artist, stage designer, gardener and gay rights activist.

Within his wide-ranging art practice, New York-based Gibson draws upon his *Choctaw-Cherokee* heritage as well as queer theory, politics and art history. Through mediums such as painting, performance, sculpture, textiles, and video, Gibson celebrates ideas of care, plants and ancestry, and embraces the infinite possibility and diversity within the natural world.

***Breaking the Binary* by Patrick Featherstone and the Kew Youth Forum**

A temporary garden display will take over the South Octagon of the Temperate House, designed by Patrick Featherstone in collaboration with the [Kew Youth Forum](#).

Following three workshops held by Patrick Featherstone and his studio, which is entirely LGBTQ+ run, Featherstone and the Kew Youth Forum have explored how queerness can inform perceptions of plants and ecosystems. Through this horticultural display, they aim to encourage creative thinking and invite visitors to embrace the wonderful complexity of the natural world.

Breaking the Binary features a range of plant species with reproductive methods that offer a challenge to binary language. These include *Oreopanax xalapensis*, which contains multiple types of flowers, *Illicium macranthum*, a dichogamous² species of plant in the star anise family, and *Persicaria amplexicaulis* which has rhizomatous stems, enabling it to spread and reproduce vegetatively.

Queer Voices

LGBTQ+ scientists and horticulturists, historians, artists, writers, and more come together in a series of video interviews, brought to life through an installation designed by Adam Nathaniel Furman.

The interviews cover a range of topics, including the intersection of LGBTQ+ identities and botanical science, the history of queer representation in the arts, and the ways in which nature can inspire and inform queer creativity. Through personal anecdotes, scholarly reflections and artistic interpretations, these individuals shed light on the richness and complexity of queer experiences, as well as how nature plays an integral role in shaping identity, community, and activism.

Contributors include Dr Suzanne Moss, Head of Education & Learning at the RHS, drag artist Cheddar Gorgeous, and Lee Davies, Kew's Fungarium Collections Manager. Visitors will also be invited to share their perspectives on identity and nature as part of this installation.

Drawing inspiration from the vibrant colours and intricate patterns found in nature, Adam Nathaniel Furman creates a visually striking space that complements the diverse voices and narratives on display, embracing plants as queer symbols and pushing them to their formal limits. Throughout their

¹ Previously unseen illustrations are by Henry Lambert (1836-1909)

² In dichogamous plants the stamens and pistils mature at different times, preventing self-pollination

varied practice, Adam has explored decorative traditions as a challenge to the status quo, with a particular interest in non-Western and queer perspectives.

Reverberations by LiLi K. Bright and Ama Josephine Budge Johnstone

Kew has invited artists Ama Josephine Budge Johnstone and LiLi K. Bright to respond to the theme of *Queer Nature* through two spoken word pieces. As you wander through the Temperate House, their personal perspectives are absorbed by the 10,000 plants found inside, transforming their celebrations of diversity, beauty and queerness within the natural world into ethereal reverberations.

Celebrating the diversity of nature

While the basic system of reproduction in most plants is binary, involving the fusion of male and female gametes, some individual plants do not neatly fit into binaries. In some such plants, flowers can start off by being male and later the female parts become active (and vice versa). Some plants are even more complex, with functionally male, functionally female and hermaphrodite flowers all on the same individual. In fungi even the basic system is anything but binary, with fungi having as many as 36,000 different mating types.

From orchids that can self-pollinate, to avocado trees which are functionally female one day (in order to be pollinated), and functionally male the next (using anthers to spread their pollen), nature is wonderfully complex with infinite possibilities, and it is vitally important that we celebrate and protect the natural world for the wellbeing of people and the future of all life on Earth.

After Hours, 13, 14, 20 & 21 October

Experience Kew as you have never seen it before, with *Queer Nature After Hours*. As night falls and the Temperate House takes on an otherworldly glow, experience music, cabaret, comedy, drag artists and talks alongside a sprinkling of queer joy. Over 18s only. [For a full list of acts, visit our website.](#)



Julie Flavell, Head of Visitor Programmes and Exhibitions at RBG Kew, says: “We are incredibly excited to celebrate the beauty and diversity of plants and fungi at Kew Gardens this autumn. This unique collaboration between art, science, horticulture and LGBTQ+ communities will be the first of its kind at Kew, promising to transform the Temperate House into a unique experience for all to enjoy. We hope visitors will leave feeling inspired by the wonder of the natural world”

Find out more at www.kew.org/queer-nature

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[Hi-res media images are available to download here](#)

Image captions:

Excerpt from House of Spirits © Jeffrey Gibson

Temperate House at Kew © RBG Kew

Jeffrey Gibson in the Temperate House © RBG Kew

For more information or images, please contact the Press Office at pr@kew.org / 0208 332 5607

Queer Nature festival admission:

- Daytime entry to the Queer Nature festival is included when purchasing a ticket to Kew Gardens. Recipients of Universal Credit, Pension Credit and other legacy benefits can visit Kew Gardens and enjoy the Queer Nature festival for £1.
- After Hours tickets must be booked in advance.

Notes to Editors

Autumn Festivals at Kew Gardens

Kew Gardens celebrates a new festival each autumn. Previous Autumn Festivals at Kew include *Japan* in 2021, a celebration of the country's breath-taking plants, art and culture which saw a large-scale artwork by Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota take over the Temperate House alongside horticultural installations, and *Mexico* in 2022.

About Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is a world-famous scientific organisation, internationally respected for its outstanding collections and scientific expertise in plant and fungal diversity, conservation, and sustainable development in the UK and around the globe. Kew's scientists and partners lead the way in the fight against biodiversity loss and finding nature-based solutions to the climate crisis, aided by five key scientific priorities outlined in Kew's Science Strategy 2021-2025. Kew Gardens is also a major international and top London visitor attraction. Kew's 132 hectares of historic, landscaped gardens, and Wakehurst, Kew's Wild Botanic Garden and 'living laboratory', attract over 2.5 million visits every year. Kew Gardens was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2003 and celebrated its 260th anniversary in 2019. Wakehurst is home to the Millennium Seed Bank, the largest wild plant seed bank in the world and a safeguard against the disastrous effects of climate change and biodiversity loss. RBG Kew received approximately one third of its funding from Government through the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and research councils. Further funding needs to support RBG Kew's vital scientific and educational work comes from donors, memberships and commercial activity including ticket sales. For tickets, please visit www.kew.org/kew-gardens/visit-kew-gardens/tickets. Since implementing a new accessibility scheme for those in receipt of Universal Credit, Pension Credit and Legacy Benefits, Kew has welcomed 30,000 visitors with £1 tickets.