

Park it!  
celebrating people in parks

# CASE STUDY

## Park It! Northern Ireland



# Botanic Beat

## Belfast Botanic Gardens, 07.08.05



### The park

The Botanic Gardens were opened in 1828 and subsequently developed with extensive plant collections and features. They feature a unique Tropical Ravine house and a large Palm House, both of which were restored in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These features are surrounded by formal gardens, while the southern part of is made up of more informal recreation areas. They are situated to the south of the city centre, near Queen's University.

### The event

In the principle of a botanic garden seeking to display the diversity of the world's plant life, Botanic Beat celebrated the modern day multiculturalism of Belfast and the people who use the park. It linked the exotic and unique nature of the Botanic Gardens and its plants to an afternoon of world music and local and regional performances. While the Botanic Gardens are home to the city's annual Mela, it had not staged a truly multicultural event before.



Over 10,000 people attended this event which featured music throughout the afternoon from a renowned local jazz band, Ulster Scots and traditional Irish folk bands. The diversity of the city was demonstrated through Indian dancing and African drumming demonstrations, while a highly popular Salsa class at the end of the day had everybody dancing.

Alongside the music, children could have a go at archery sessions, a slow bicycle race or a Frisbee competition. There was also a variety of community stalls for people to browse, as well as a demonstration of the art of chainsaw sculpture.

### The community group

The Friends of Belfast Botanic Gardens was originally established over one hundred years ago and recently reformed about ten years ago. The Friends have a regular programme of activities and keep their members informed through a newsletter. They have started a development fund project and are assisting with lottery funding in providing a number of improvements to the gardens.

### Feedback

Nearly 95% of visitors rated the overall event as 'excellent' or 'good'. 100% of people said they would attend a future event in the park based on their experiences of this event and over 70% of people said they would visit the park more often as a result (figures based on a representative survey conducted on the day).

The multicultural theme to the day was decided upon very early by the Friends and proved to be extremely popular with the visitors, creating a relaxed, family-friendly atmosphere.



It's very gratifying to see the gardens put to such a good use by such a wide range of communities and age groups from all across Belfast. It's made all the work worthwhile!

Frank Caddy,  
Chair of the Friends of the  
Botanic Gardens

#### The benefits

The Friends felt that the group knitted together as a team which improved relationships between members and was a major step forwards for the group. They were particularly encouraged by the large turnout of members on the day of the event, especially of those members who were not actively and regularly involved in the normal activities of the group.

The Friends felt that the event did a great deal in raising the awareness of the park across the city and further a-field, with visitors coming from as far as Scotland. The popularity of the event demonstrated that the park has truly developed as a resource for the whole community, something that would not have been seen in the past.

The event successfully raised awareness of the park's historical features, particularly of the historic Palm House and the unique Tropical Ravine. The council and the Friends are planning a restoration project for both of these buildings. The Friends stall had historic displays about the Palm House, educating people about the value of this unique resource and the need for its restoration. The Friends also worked hard to attract people into the Palm House on the day to demonstrate its value. They ran a popular raffle (to act as a charge for entry), which successfully raised over £300 for the Friends group.

The Friends are in the process of making a grant application to stage an event in 2006. They are using the organisation of Botanic Beat as a case study to illustrate what they are capable of when they work in partnership with the council and external organisations. They found the feedback gathered on the day particularly useful as hard evidence of their achievements and are hopeful for success.

#### The future

The group and the council would like to organise an event again next year, although they feel in order to put something on again they would start planning earlier. They are keen to develop this as an annual calendar event, although are aware that it is likely to take as long as three years to develop an event in people's minds which is regular and in their diary every year. The Friends and the council feel that the multicultural theme of the event worked very well and is something they would repeat at the next event.



## Lessons learnt

- Conduct a walkabout on site with everyone coming on the day to allocate tasks and ascertain responsibility. Have a central list of all the volunteers' contact details.
- Maximise the lead-in time for marketing and event booking.
- Make a news story quirky and different to increase your chances of coverage. You must be prepared that sometimes you will not secure as much media coverage as hoped, as marketing can often seem limitless.
- Create critical paths with key deadlines and dates for all partners as early as possible.
- Consider contracting out responsibility for musical performances throughout the afternoon to a professional, who can make sure that everything is integrated and compatible. This will be dependent on the availability of funding.
- For menial but necessary tasks such as litter picking, make sure that everyone contributes, to avoid alienating or developing resentment in the few who do.

### Further information

Frank Caddy, Friends of the Botanic Gardens - [fecaddy@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:fecaddy@tiscali.co.uk)

Alex McNeill, Park Manager, Belfast Botanic Gardens - [McNeillA@BelfastCity.gov.uk](mailto:McNeillA@BelfastCity.gov.uk)

### Links

Park It! – [www.park-it.org.uk](http://www.park-it.org.uk)

GreenSpace – [www.green-space.org.uk](http://www.green-space.org.uk)

Heritage Lottery Fund – [www.hlf.org.uk](http://www.hlf.org.uk)

Belfast City Council - [www.belfastcity.gov.uk](http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk)

