

Speech: Environment Secretary Michael Gove at RHS Chelsea Flower Show

Thank you for those incredibly kind words and thank you also for the chance to come to Chelsea. Like all of you here I'm captivated by what's been achieved by the designers, growers and everyone who has been brought together to create something truly magical for a limited period of time and something that we can all share.

It's a very special moment in the light of the nation Chelsea Flower Show. It's a very special organisation the RHS and can I begin by expressing the thanks that I feel all of us to Sir Nicholas, the RHS and to everyone who has made this Chelsea possible. Can we show our gratitude please.

This has been something of a Chelsea weekend for me. I spent Saturday at Wembley with my son watching Chelsea Football Club who afloat the FA cup. I can see that many of you were there. But it's a somewhat different crowd who are here this afternoon. But what we are also celebrating is excellence in another field.

But of course, both the Chelsea Flower Show and the FA cup were significant events this weekend. But there's another event even more significant, if you forgive me this weekend, that was of course, the wonderful wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. And like many of you, I was held wrapped by the sermon delivered by Michael Curry. I thought that perhaps after hearing that sermon I should rewrite my speech.

I shall begin thus, there's a power in flowers, flower power can change the world. And indeed, there is a power in flowers, and flowers can change our world because its flowers that provide us with food and drink. It's flowers that clean up the mess that mankind makes and ensures that climate change can be dealt with by coping with the CO2 that we emit.

It's flowers increasingly that are providing the treatments that will heal the sick. It's flowers that ensure our Earth remains in balance. And in that sense, those who invest and those who care for, those who husband and nurture flowers, those who work in horticulture are those who are contributing so powerfully to keeping our Earth in balance and ensuring that future generations have a chance to flourish. So Chelsea as well as being an amazing celebration of creative, aesthetic power and of commercial flavour.

It's also a celebration of those who do the most fundamental work of all, the work of nurturing this planet, the only one that we have, so it can survive and flourish in the future. But of course, that work as Nicholas reminded us is threatened and challenged by the impact of globalisation and climate change.

Now of course, globalisation and trade brings many benefits, it's the single most powerful force for rescuing us from poverty and of course, the whole

history of the RHS, the history of Chelsea is a history of taking different parts of the globe and celebrating fusion and growth.

But even as our history is one of trade and interchanging, even as globalisation brings benefits. We know that the unique mixture of global trade flows on the scale that we have at the moment, and climate change occurring at the pace it is at the moment creates new threats and new dangers to the UK's environment and particularly to plant life here. Whether it's Oak Processionary Moth or Xlyella, it is the case that changing weather and also the flow of international trade brings to our shores, bugs, parasites and threats which now have a chance to flourish, multiply and cause devastation as never before.

And that requires vigilance and above all, it requires a partnership between Government and the industry in order to ensure that we can continue to enjoy the benefits of trade. But we also provide protection for that which we grow here. And in particular, I want to thank Nicola Spence and all those who within the Defra family do so much in order to ensure that we have appropriate protection for that what we grow here. And the particular threat of Xlyella as Sir Nicholas pointed out has acted as a wakeup call, a particular goad to ensure that we do everything necessary in order to provide protection for our plants and our environment.

And the plant health service carries out targeted inspections of plant and wood imports at ports and airports every day of the year in order to ensure that we can be protected. For the past five years, the UK and the work of the plant health service has ensure this have made around 900 interceptions of harmful organisms from Non-EU countries. That's more than any other EU member state, that's around 40% of the EU total, and it's that energetic work which has ensured that our nurseries can continue to flourish and we can continue to protect that what we grow here. And only last week, our plant inspectors outed the thousand pest to the UK plant health register. It's an invaluable tool which reflects the outstanding work in making sure that we screen new pests and new diseases, and ensure that growing here can continue successfully. And of course, we continue to monitor these threats and we continually seek to ensure that we have the arrangements in place and expertise at hand in order to be able to deal with threats like Xlyella and others.

Now of course, as well as the action that's been taken which already exists within the Defra family. There's more activity that we are launching today which you may have heard about. Today we are launching the Action Oak initiative and this particular initiative is intended to ensure that we, Defra, the RHS and others can bring together world-leading research in order to ensure that the oak, one of our most iconic species, can be protected from the predators and pests that increasingly pose a threat to this amazing example of the glory in the garden that is England. And of course that work, the Action Oak initiative, is simply one of a number of areas of collaboration which Defra seeks to lead with people in this room and with industry beyond it.

And Sir Nicholas has already spoken about the new senior cross-industry

alliance which meets for the first time on Wednesday and it will bring together the nurseries, retailers, tree suppliers, landscapers, foresters and of course our Chief Plant Officer Nicola. To ensure that all of the usual rivalries that exist in the commercial world are put aside so we can have one joint endeavour in order to provide the highest levels of biosecurity, in order to provide them with the reassurance they need. And in particular, we should note that here at Chelsea decisions have already been taken without waiting for Government in order to ensure that the appropriate protections are in place.

And that's the case the RHS here has banned from its show. Nine of the overseas growing species that are already known to be a Xylella risk, including rosemary and oleander. And of course where the RHS have led, other nurseries are following, Barcham is a specialist tree grower has again displayed outstanding leadership in the way it grows its own stock and makes sure it never imports any plants from immediate release. I believe that it's through working together with the best in the industry and making sure that we use the expertise that we have that to provide that higher level of biosecurity which Nicholas has asked for and is so important.

Because since we published our biosecurity strategy in 2014, I believe that we in this country have built a stronger reputation for setting the highest standards of biosecurity for plants and trees. Our approach is based on science combined with grassroots vigilance and with the inspections which our expert team are responsible for. But we all agree in this room that there is no room for complacency and I do believe that there are opportunities as we leave the European Union to tighten our security further.

In the ten years' time, I wanted to be able to say that our oaks are thriving, that pests have been kept at bay, and I want my children and grandchildren to be able to come to Chelsea to marvel at the diversity of what is on show here. To pleasure and joy in the nature world around them, and to know that the power that there is in flowers is their preserved and enhanced for generations yet to come.

Thank you all very much.