

# Burma Skincare Initiative Spirit of Partnership Garden

Lucy Moorhead, Christopher EM Griffiths, Su M Lwin

We have previously written about the long-standing collaboration between the Burma Skincare Initiative (BSI) and the British Dermatological Nursing Group (BDNG) in a previous *Dermatological Nursing* article.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we shared the BDNG's involvement in the first ever dermatology conference in Myanmar and plans for future work.

As a recap for readers, Myanmar (also known as Burma) is a country of over 54 million people, located in Southeast Asia. The country has been under military dictatorship since its independence from the British in 1948, which has led to a systematic disinvestment in healthcare and education, resulting in minimal provision of skincare throughout the country. There are only three dermatology centres and less than a hundred dermatologists and dermatology trainees serving the entire population in Myanmar – a country that is almost three times the size of the UK.

The BSI, a registered charity in England and Wales (no. 1187197), was founded by Dr Su Lwin and Professor Chris Griffiths in 2019, with an overall mission to promote excellence in sustainable skincare for the people of Myanmar. Since its inception, the charity held the first – and only – international dermatology conference in Myanmar in February 2020. During the conference, four members of the BDNG travelled to the country and taught on the first day dedicated to the nurses through lectures and workshops. The nurse delegates travelled from all parts of the country to attend this meeting. The inaugural BSI conference was a historical milestone as the first educational meeting for dermatological nurses in Myanmar.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, shortly after the conference, Myanmar experienced the COVID pandemic in 2020 and a military coup in 2021. These unprecedented events decimated the already fragile healthcare system in the country.



## Summary:

This article provides an update on the work of the Burma Skincare Initiative (BSI) and its continued collaboration with the British Dermatological Nursing Group (BDNG). In May 2024, the BSI, with support from the BDNG, will be showcasing a garden at the prestigious Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Chelsea Flower Show, and BDNG members will have the opportunity to win tickets to visit!

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## Author info:

Lucy Moorhead is a Nurse Consultant in Inflammatory Skin Disease at St John's Institute of Dermatology, Guys and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, London. Christopher E.M. Griffiths is Emeritus Professor of Dermatology, University of Manchester and Adjunct Professor of Dermatology, King's College London. Su M. Lwin is a Dermatology Registrar at St John's Institute of Dermatology, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust and Honorary Lecturer at King's College London.



In the face of adversity, the BSI has continued to support and promote dermatology in both Myanmar and other strife-ridden areas. Trainee dermatologists from Myanmar have been supported to travel to Europe for conferences and research studies are planned, including ascertaining the prevalence and early diagnosis of mycetoma – a debilitating deep fungal infection seen in rural agricultural communities; and on the diagnosis of immunobullous diseases, which are common in the country.

One output from the work of the BSI has been the development of one-page protocols on diagnosis and management of common skin diseases for non-dermatologist healthcare workers (<https://www.burmaskincare.org/en/clinical-services>). This was part of the BSI's "Essential Emergency Skincare" (EES) programme.<sup>2</sup> These protocols have been used in other conflict zones, including Ukraine. The BDNG has further supported the EES initiative by developing a short video on scabies and how to apply permethrin correctly (<https://www.burmaskincare.org/en/headlines/videos-and-podcasts>), as well as participating in online teaching for frontline healthcare workers.

### The RHS Chelsea Flower Show

With the aim of raising public awareness about the importance of skin disease and sustainable global health partnerships in its management, the BSI submitted a garden design for consideration for exhibition at the 2024 RHS Chelsea Flower Show, which will take place on 21-25 May 2024. It is undoubtedly the place to see cutting-edge garden design, new plants, and find ideas to take home. It draws a global crowd and is the jewel of the international gardening scene. Specialist nurseries reveal new plants for the first time; the best designers from Japan to New York show off their astonishing creations; fashion brands and manufacturers launch their latest lines at the trade stands. It is estimated that 1.68 million

visitors will visit the five-day show and it will attract over 700 members of the media, resulting in significant international coverage. In 2023, the BBC broadcast 12.5 hours of coverage of the Show, reaching 2.4 million people.

In 2024, there will be 35 gardens. The BSI garden, namely: "The Burma Skincare Initiative Spirit of Partnership Garden", is designed by a rising star garden designer, Helen Olney, and was successful in the fiercely competitive 'Sanctuary Garden' category.

The garden will tell the story of an extraordinary skincare partnership, emphasising how dermatologists and nurses support healthcare workers from Myanmar treating adults and children with dermatological conditions. The BDNG was delighted to be given the opportunity to be one of the garden sponsors, alongside Sanofi, the No.7 Beauty Company and Almirall, amongst others. In-kind support is also provided by the Royal College of Physicians, the British Association of Dermatologists and the International League of Dermatological Societies.

The sanctuary garden, one of seven this year, measures 12x6m and will be located on Royal Hospital Way at the Chelsea Showground. This is a unique opportunity to raise awareness of the paucity of skincare in Myanmar; the importance of dermatology as a specialty, and the pivotal role nurses and dermatologists play in the care of patients. Among the myriad themes the garden symbolises, dermatology nursing will be showcased to an audience who have little concept or understanding of the breadth of our specialty and the invaluable work that nurses do.

The inclusion of the BSI garden marks three firsts for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show: the first Burmese garden; the first garden with a theme of skin disease and skin health; and the

first debut garden design by someone not in the profession. It is the second time that a garden has considered nurses, following on from the Florence Nightingale Garden exhibited in 2022 to celebrate the bicentenary of Florence Nightingale's birth, which now aptly resides in its permanent home at St Thomas' Hospital in South London.

The garden designer, Helen Olney, has more than 20 years' experience in digital design, and is currently the creative director for BBC Sounds. In 2020, she decided to pursue her passion for plants and gardens and graduated with distinction from the London College of Garden Design. Helen is delighted to be working with the BSI and to have had her first design accepted at Chelsea. She said: "I feel honoured to have the opportunity to work with such a fantastic charity as the Burma Skincare Initiative and to play a small part in highlighting the lived experience of skin disease, and in particular, the challenges faced by people in the beautiful country of Myanmar. I'm learning so much along the way and feel hugely privileged to be working alongside a fantastic team of specialists. The creation of the garden really is very much a team effort and like the garden itself, a story of partnership and friendship."

## Designing the garden

The design and creation of a garden is a huge undertaking. The cycle of planning for the show lasts 15 months. It takes 17 days to build the show garden from bare grass to the finished article and then just four days to break down the garden for its removal to a permanent, legacy site at Dulwich College in South East London.

The south-facing garden will seek to inspire those looking to create their own Burmese garden, and is influenced by the landscape and character of Myanmar and the extraordinary skincare partnership working with the healthcare system. All of the plants included in the garden can be grown in both the UK and Myanmar. The diversity of Myanmar and its people are represented through different planting zones and features in the garden, and the challenging and disrupted environments in which the charity works are symbolised by the part-ruined stupa or shrine, here overgrown and reclaimed by foliage. The stupas included in the garden will have ferns and plants growing from gaps in the brickwork.

Textures such as bark, plants, moss and lichen are illustrative of the skin diseases affecting people supported by the charity. A traditional Burmese stilt house astride a lily pond represents the sanctuary the charity offers to those seeking relief and support. Burmese stilt houses are not just shelters but symbols of spirituality, community and identity commonly found in areas prone to flooding. The house is made from recycled timber with a thatched roof and sits above a pool offering views of a cascading waterfall.

A dry-stone bench is inspired by the 28th letter of the Burmese alphabet, *la*, which together with its accent forms the word *Lar*, meaning 'coming together'. The naturalistic

planting combines contrasting textures and constrained colours, while edible and ornamental plants are woven together. Broadleaf plantain is included in the garden to highlight its use in traditional Burmese medicine to treat skin conditions such as eczema.

Other included plants are:

- **Acer davidii. Known as the snakebark maple**, this Burmese native tree has striking snakeskin-like bark. It has been selected as its bark is reminiscent of some of the skin diseases affecting people supported by the Burma Skincare Initiative
- **Nymphaea alba ('waterlily' in the UK and 'kya' in Burma)**, which is found in many British gardens and parks and in many ponds and lakes in Burma. It is revered for its beauty across the world – emerging from the muddy depths to burst into full bloom creating a spectacular display
- Loved by pollinators, **digitalis lanata or the grecian foxglove** is an evergreen, perennial species used for its strong architectural form and unusual flowers
- A Burma native, the perennial **anemone rivularis or riverside windflower**, which produces delicate, silky white flowers tinged with blue on the reverse and with violet-blue anthers
- **Selinum wallichianum or Wallich milk parsley**, which grows on the open, sunny slopes of the Himalayas. Reliable and hardy in the UK, it provides a long season of interest with fern-like foliage, clouds of delicate white flowers held on red-tinged stems, and beautiful seed heads later in the year.

Sustainability has been at the forefront of the garden's design. Most plants will be sourced in the UK and grown using peat-free compost in recycled and recyclable pots. The building of the garden will use reclaimed materials wherever possible, and sustainable building techniques will include the use of dry bed foundations and dry-stone walling. Equally, the efficiency of construction and breakdown are considered in the design. The garden will also include many wildlife-friendly plants that provide food and shelter for birds, bees, and insects.

We look forward to updating readers on the garden, as well as RHS Chelsea Flower Show in later issues of the journal. Please also keep your eyes peeled on the weekly BDNG bulletin as members will have the opportunity to win tickets to attend the show and visit the garden in person.

## References

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3. Htet KZ, Griffiths CEM, Lwin SM. Essential emergency skincare: a global health dermatology innovation for Myanmar and beyond. *British Journal of Dermatology* 2023. **189(6)**: 760-763.