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Wiggly worms provide an insight into secret world

Newcastle's secret garden is opening to the public for a free family-friendly open day this month (April).

Moorbank Botanic Garden, which is part of Newcastle University, is located on Claremont Road about 20 minutes walk from the city centre. It is home to a tropical greenhouse, desert house, carnivorous plants and outdoor temperate collections.

Visitors to the garden can find everything from pineapples and bananas to local Northumbrian flora, with rosy periwinkles, beautiful orchids, bug-eating venus fly traps, ancient cycads and bizarre living stones in between.

As well as taking a tour of the garden on Saturday 18 April, visitors will have the opportunity to take part in craft activities such as bracelet and mask making, and also try a soil and earthworm survey and make worm slime.

The survey is a part of the Open Air Laboratories project (OPAL), a Big Lottery Fund initiative which aims to encourage more people to get outside to explore, study and protect their environment.

"Although earthworms are vital for healthy plant growth, relatively little is known about the 26 species that live in the UK," explained Moorbank's education officer Katy Barnard. "Charles Darwin was fascinated by earthworms and studied them for many years. In some of his experiments he shone different coloured lights on them, in others his son played the bassoon to them!"

"This project will allow us to build up our understanding of the soil types they live in and their distribution across the country."

OPAL will be helping the public to carry out several national surveys over the next few years, including studies of soil, air pollution, water, biodiversity and climate change. These will generate valuable scientific data concerning the state of our environment.

OPAL is also developing a wide range of local projects and future activities in the North East including moth and butterfly trapping sessions at Moorbank and a summer art school.

The Open Day will take place between 10am and 4pm on Saturday 18 April at Moorbank Botanic Garden, which is located at the top end of Claremont Road (NE2 4NL) just before the cat and dog shelter.

To find out more, please contact Katy Barnard, Moorbank Education Officer, on 0191 246 4807, email katy.barnard@ncl.ac.uk or visit www.ncl.ac.uk/biology/about/facilities/moorbank

For more information about OPAL, visit www.opalexplornature.org

Notes to editor

1. Open Air Laboratories (OPAL) is a new nation-wide partnership initiative that will inspire communities to discover, enjoy and protect their local environments. It aims to create a new generation of nature-lovers by stimulating interest through local and national projects which are accessible, fun and relevant to anyone who wants to take part
2. OPAL will provide the skills and materials needed for the first community-led study of the world around us.
3. The Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces programme was launched in November 2005 to help communities enjoy and improve their local environments. The programme funds a range of activities from local food schemes and farmers markets, to education projects teaching people about the environment. Imperial College London (the leading OPAL partner) was awarded a **£11,760,783** Changing Spaces grant in August 2007
4. The Big Lottery Fund, the largest of the National Lottery good cause distributors, has been rolling out grants to health, education, environment and charitable causes across the UK since its inception in June 2004. It was established by Parliament on 1 December 2006. Full details of the work of the Big Lottery Fund, its programmes and awards are available on the website: www.biglotteryfund.org.uk