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**List of talks**

**A botanical tour of fruits and seeds**

This talk offers a journey of botanical discovery into the world of fruits and seeds, taking in grapes, apricots, raspberries, cocoa pods and pineapples. Intriguingly, it also includes tomatoes, hazelnuts and cucumbers, and you will discover why an acorn is a fruit, but a strawberry isn't! You will also see the world's largest seed.

**Cambridge University Botanic Garden**

Since opening in 1846, Cambridge University Botanic Garden has been a place of beauty, conservation, learning and discovery. This talk looks at how the Garden has developed over time, how its plants are cared for sustainably, and what happens behind the scenes in research and education. Discover how the Garden connects people with plants through its collections, learning programmes and outreach activities.

**Darwin, the Beagle voyage, and his Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection**

Charles Darwin was born in 1809, when it was widely believed that species were created and unchanging, and there was no accepted understanding of inheritance. As Darwin sought scientific explanations for the diversity of life, he was working against deeply rooted cultural and intellectual assumptions within an often cautious and conservative scientific establishment. This talk explores his early life, key observations made during the voyage of the Beagle, and the doubts and challenges he faced while developing his Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection. We conclude by reflecting on how his ideas have stood the test of time.

**Early Evolution of Land Plants**

From the formation of our Solar System around 4.5 billion years ago to the emergence of the first seed-bearing plants, this talk traces the remarkable story of plant evolution. Discover what conditions were like on the early Earth, explore the fossil evidence for the earliest life forms, and learn how the ancestors of today's plants made the extraordinary transition from water onto land. Along the way, we will examine the challenges that plants faced in this new environment, and the ingenious adaptations that allowed them to overcome these obstacles and transform the planet.

**Flora and Geology of the Chilterns**

The Chiltern Hills form a National Landscape of outstanding beauty, rich in diverse plant life. This talk explores how the hills were formed, and reveals how the influences of underlying geology and historic land use have given rise to the wide variety of plants that thrive here. Discover some of the characteristic species of Chiltern woodlands and grasslands, and how they are perfectly adapted to this distinctive landscape.

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**Flowers and pollinators**
This talk begins by exploring the co-evolution of plants and insects, providing context for the remarkable diversity of floral forms we see today. Discover some of the extraordinary relationships between highly adapted flowers and their pollinators, and gain a deeper understanding of the vital role pollinating insects play in our ecosystems. We will also consider the challenges pollinators currently face, before finishing with plenty of practical advice on how to support them in your garden or local community space.

**Galapagos Islands**
The Galápagos Islands are like nowhere else on Earth. Having visited them twice, twenty years apart, Karen offers a unique perspective on this extraordinary archipelago. Discover how these volcanic islands formed, why they are unique, and how their plants and animals came to live there. Learn about some of the iconic species that call Galápagos home, and how human activity has affected the islands - for better and for worse.

**Grand Bahama**
One of the '700 islands in the sun', Grand Bahama (Karen's birthplace) offers turquoise seas and shining white sands. Beyond this there is more to discover, from mangrove ecosystems and coral reefs to inland caves, each supporting distinctive communities of wildlife. Hurricane Dorian devastated much of the island in 2019. Find out how the people, wildlife, and landscapes were affected, and how the recovery is unfolding.

**Grand Teton National Park**
Just south of Yellowstone lies Grand Teton National Park - smaller than its famous neighbour, yet every bit as captivating. This illustrated talk explores its dramatic alpine landscapes, pristine lakes, mountain rivers, and abundant wildlife, while also delving into the park's fascinating social history and the people who helped shape it.

**History and Ecology of Whiteleaf Hill**
Whiteleaf Hill is a remarkable area of chalk grassland and woodland high on the Chilterns escarpment, with far-reaching views and a history stretching back thousands of years. This talk explores the fascinating story of the hill through its landscape, archaeology and plants. We'll bring to life two of its most distinctive archaeological features – the Neolithic long barrow and the much more recent Whiteleaf Cross – uncover the history of its chalk grassland and ancient semi-natural woodland, and discover some of the characteristic plants that make their home there.

**Holly, Ivy and Mistletoe**
Between them, holly, ivy and mistletoe have become inseparable from the festive season, but there is much more to these familiar plants than Christmas decorations. This talk takes a closer look at their fascinating botany – from holly's prickly leaves and ivy's remarkable transformation as it matures, to mistletoe's unusual parasitic lifestyle. We'll explore their flowers, fruits and ecology, discover the wildlife that depends on them, and uncover some of the folklore, traditions and symbolism that have surrounded these plants through the centuries.

**Joshua Tree National Park**

Joshua Tree National Park in California combines striking rock formations with an extraordinary diversity of desert plants. This talk introduces the park's unique landscape, exploring its climate, geology and characteristic vegetation. Discover how iconic species such as the Joshua tree and its companions have adapted to survive and thrive in such a demanding environment.

**Musical Plants**

Humans have been making music for at least 40,000 years, and this talk shines a spotlight on the plants that we use in our music-making. Discover the biology behind the unique qualities that make each plant perfect for the instrument it is used to make. Covering pan pipes, drumsticks, oboe reeds, guitars, violins, rainsticks and more.

**Plant adaptations**

Discover how plants evolve in different ways in different habitats (tropics, arid lands, bogs) and develop specialisations to make them perfectly adapted to where they live. This talk includes the Giant Amazon Water Lily and other tropical rainforest plants, cacti from the American deserts, Aloes from Africa, carnivorous plants, and more.

**More plant adaptations!**

This talk is an 'overflow' of the talk above, and offers a spotlight on more plants that display amazing adaptations. Starting with 'Fire and Ice' we look at how plants have evolved to these extreme temperature conditions. This talk also investigates leaf-loss and autumn colour in our deciduous trees, the carnivorous 'tank bromeliads' of the Venezuelan tepuis, the ingenious ivy-leaved toadflax, and the very-entertaining 'squirting cucumber'.

**Plants of a Sensory Garden**

A sensory garden is a place to experience with some or all of the senses – sight, sound, touch, smell and even taste. This talk explores how thoughtful plant choices can create a garden that is rich in sensory experiences. We'll look at a selection of plants and discover what they can offer through their colour, form, texture, fragrance, movement and flavour. We'll also venture beyond plants to understand how 'hard-scaping' features such as paving choice, sculptures and water can add another dimension to the sensory garden.

**Ranunculaceae - Introducing the Buttercup Family**

The buttercup family is about much more than buttercups! Ranunculaceae includes a rich variety of familiar wildflowers and popular garden plants, from lesser celandines and wood anemones to hellebores and clematis. But what links these seemingly different plants? This talk introduces the shared features that help us recognise members of Ranunculaceae. Using a selection of species, Karen reveals the diversity of this ancient plant family and shows that understanding how to look at a plant can help us to make sense of the wonderful variety of wildflowers around us.

**Remarkable plants**
In this illustrated talk, Karen shines a spotlight on 10 remarkable plants chosen for their beauty, unique life cycles, medicinal properties, or historical significance. From the towering Titan Arum to the delicate Madagascan periwinkle, and from cotton to the cocoa de mer, each plant has a fascinating story to tell.

**Rosaceae - Introducing the Rose Family:**
The rose family is about much more than roses! Rosaceae includes many familiar cultivated fruits, popular garden plants and wildflowers. But what do these seemingly different plants have in common? This talk introduces the idea of a 'plant family' and explores the shared vegetative and reproductive features that unite the Rosaceae members. The fruits of this family are remarkably diverse, and learning to recognise their different forms is a valuable aid to wildflower identification. Using a selection of species, Karen will introduce you to the fascinating world of botanical fruits, from tiny, dry achenes to juicy pomes.

**The Ridgeway Trail**
In 2024, Karen completed the Ridgeway long-distance walk, a route that winds through the North Wessex Downs and the Chiltern Hills. Rich in history and natural beauty, the Ridgeway reveals a landscape of geological interest, shaped by thousands of years of human activity. In this illustrated talk, Karen brings the trail to life, sharing its fascinating stories and distinctive features.

**The Story of Chocolate**
Join Karen for a journey into the world of chocolate — from the tropical cocoa pod to the treats we enjoy today. Learn how cocoa grows, is harvested, and transformed into chocolate, while tracing its fascinating history from the Aztecs and Spanish explorers to the chocolatiers of Europe. Handle dried cocoa pods and sample an Aztec-style chocolate drink if you dare… made with chilli and cinnamon, but no milk or sugar!

**Yellowstone National Park**
The first national park in the United States, and widely believed to be the first in the world, Yellowstone is perhaps the most famous of all national parks. Unlike anywhere else on earth, covering 3000 square miles, it is home not only to hydrothermal and geological features, but also to a stunning array of plants and animals. This talk offers an introduction to this vast and colourful landscape.