**Speech by Mr. Rüdiger Paul Kirsten, president of the AEFP, at the Prize-Giving ceremony of the European Entente Florale 2022 in Balatonfüred on Saturday 24 September 2022.**

Lord Mayer of Balatonfüred, Members of Parliament, visiting Mayors from all participating countries in Europe, senior officials from councils of the participating towns and villages, our esteemed volunteers without whom none of this would be possible and other distinguished guests. A very warm welcome to all Board and Jury Members and national Coordinators of the AEFP and other partner countries.

 I would like to extend a word of thanks to the organising committee for the Prize Giving Ceremony 2022. We are happy and very grateful, that Balatonfüred agreed to take on the difficult challenge to host the ceremony this year. We had planned to hold this ceremony at lake Balaton back in 2020. But the whole world was unfortunately confronted with a pandemic crisis situation, which dramatically impacted the daily lives of every human being on the planet. After a gap of two years, we have restarted our competition again in 2022. In this year of hope, we were happy to re-commence the running of the competition. It is important not to forget, that only some hundred kilometres away in Europe an horrific and unbelievable war in the Ukraine is now raging. We think of all the victims of this war at this difficult time.

Due to the Pandemic in 2020, the Entente Florale family lost our esteemed former president and board member for Austria, Mr. Herbert Titz. In his memory and with the agreement of his beloved family, the board of AEFP decided to create a special prize in this year’s competition.

In remembrance of Herbert and all the victims of the COVID Pandemic and all the people in the world, who suffer under the oppression of war or violence, we will now maintain a minute’s silence.

Thank you very much for your participation and attention.

For me personally, it is very nice to be back this year in Hungary spending some time, on the banks of the beautiful lake Balaton.

In the first instance, this area rekindles many joyful memories for me from my childhood. In my youth and teenage years, we spent many of our summer holidays in this beautiful part of Hungary. We were thankful for the great hospitality and friendship which was afforded to us by the Hungarian people.

But secondly, it was Hungary, which opened the iron curtain in August 1989 and took a decisive step towards freedom and the reunification of Europe.

I am so thankful to the organizers of the pan-European festival on the border with Austria.

The Hungarian People through their actions and fortitude removed the first stone from the Berlin wall.

The current mission of our European competition is to encourage greater European unity and to promote the development of green infrastructure and environmental sustainability. Our main aim is to recognise and promote the importance of public green space, parks and gardens in cities towns and villages, with the objective of improving the quality of life of communities. The central characteristics and themes of the Entente Florale Europe competition are:

1. ornamental horticulture,
2. sustainability and environmental awareness,
3. the effort and involvement of citizens.

 Participants were judged by an expert panel of judges. This year, the panel of judges once again performed a difficult but rewarding task. They visited, viewed and judged 9 towns and villages. As the president of the AEFP, I would like to thank the panel of judges for their untiring efforts. I would especially like to thank the chair of the panel of judges Dr. Christy Boylan from Ireland. Also, I want to thank our Secretary General Mr. Willian Kearney for all the preparations and communications with participants and the media work as well.

 The criteria applied by the jury are based on our overall mission as an Organisation. The main assessment criteria applied during the competition are:

* vegetation and landscape,
* sustainability and environment in the broadest sense of the word

and very importantly,

* the involvement of citizens. After all we have to realise that those citizens are our target group.

Access to green space is the element providing a high added value to ~~in~~ our lives. In economic and social terms, the significant added value of green spaces has been confirmed in numerous scientific studies.

Those living in areas with greater access to green space for instance, live healthier lives. They suffer less from depression or diabetes. Also, people spending more time in a greener living environment, recover from stress and long COVID disease much more quickly.

Access to public sports and playing in parks and gardens has a positive effect on children’s behaviours and social awareness.

The list goes on.

Green space is good not only for our health, but also for the economy. After all, green space generates direct cash. Homes in leafy surroundings are more expensive, which can be a positive thing for municipalities, as it means they will receive more money from property tax. Also, an American study has shown that the additional value generated from city parks is about one hundred times greater than the annual budget reserved for the parks’ care and maintenance.

And we should not forget the important contribution of parks and gardens to the reduction of CO 2, fine particulate dust, water storage and reduction of noise pollution.

 Ladies and gentlemen, no one can ignore climate change.

This year we had in all parts of Europe serious heatwaves with temperatures of over 40 degrees. The glaciers in the Alps have melted very rapidly over the last number of months.

It is a fact, that the temperature in cities is up to 8 degrees higher than the surrounding hinterland, the so-called urban ‘heat island’ effect. We therefore need ‘cooling-down’ measures, such as green roofs and more green and blue infrastructure ranging from public parks to small private gardens.

That is why there are multiple initiatives in Europe to measure and chart the changes in the temperature of cities, because the urban ‘heat island’ badly affects the health of a city´s population.

This year I am a little disappointed that none of the 2022 participants in the competition were in a position to identify local measures to deal with the climate change. We need more engagement in relation to this issue.

 During recent discussions with administrators and officials from participating municipalities in Europe, it struck me that they are very enthusiastic about improving the quality of life of citizens, through the development of parks and gardens. They realise that these facilities add enormous value to the living environment of their citizens. Green space is no longer unimportant, it will be the main principle to be considered in all future planning and urban development.

They also realise that a sustainable green settlement, will establish a separate identity to enable it to stand out from the rest. Settlements that not just are green, but also think green, score highly in many respects. Green branding has also very positive effects, just think of tourism and leisure.

Our competition fully endorses municipalities who wish to pursue this type of development.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hereby want to thank all towns and villages for their participation in the competition. We know indeed that it was not easy to organize your participation, during these difficult pandemic times.

I think that all towns and villages in the competition in 2022 are shining examples of how to work for the sustainability of your settlements. You will be considered as a reference point for other Towns and villages across Europe in the future. I am extremely satisfied with the commitment of the citizens of the participating towns and villages, when it comes to the green policies and their implementation.

 I feel that healthy, green settlements are the future.

The message that green is important has struck home, and we should all be proud of that. It is the duty of the board of the AEFP to develop the competition further. The time is now.

 We hope for the future, that the different challenges can be accepted in all countries and everybody in Europe has the possibility to live in peace and freedom, in a sustainable green environment.

 Ladies and gentleman, I am convinced that we will have a joyous awards ceremony this evening and a very happy weekend.

 Once more, Thank you Balatonfüred for your great hospitality.

I thank all of you for your attention.