

Merlin Trust Report – Visit to Joy Larkcom in West Cork 10th – 17th April 2023

I have been working as Produce Gardener for a food-growing education charity since September 2022. Kitchen gardening and market gardening have been a special interest of mine since retraining in horticulture in 2019 and I have always read and researched food growing on the side of my horticultural training.

I have been researching methods of food growing and making contact with notable and inspiring figures in the field. I had contacted and visited Frances Smith, founder of Appledore salads, in February for a fascinating, informative and truly inspiring meeting and dive through Frances' archive of extensive research & writing. Frances is a contact and friend of Joy Larkcom's, a personal hero of mine, but based as she is in Ireland I had thought that I wouldn't be able to visit.

Feeling buoyed after my trip to Frances Smith, I thought more about visiting Joy and decided to apply for a Merlin Trust award.

Joy's work and approach has been most notable for her ambitious research trips. In the mid 1970s she uprooted with her family and travelled extensively across western Europe documenting food growing practices and methods and collecting seeds which had been long since unheard of in the UK (chronicled in contemporaneous newspaper & magazine articles collated in her 2012 memoir 'Just Vegetating'). This trip brought new and forgotten salad crops and vegetables back to the table in the UK and have had an enormous influence on what we all buy, eat and grow today. This was followed by vegetable study tours to China and other parts of South East Asia in the 1980s. Again, with great and lasting influence on the modern British diet.

In this intrepid spirit I wrote to Joy to suggest a visit and she warmly accepted. I thought it best to drive and take the ferry as opposed to flying, instead travelling via interesting sites along the way.

I visited the kitchen garden of the National Botanical Gardens, Dublin after arriving; a very beautiful walled garden with glasshouse, with plants unnervingly more advanced than in my exposed growing field at work in Kent.



I travelled on to Strokestown Park House. I have been familiar with Strokestown since childhood as my mother's hometown and where my grandparents lived. I knew that the historic glasshouse 'pineapple pit' & 'vinery' had been recently restored and so I went to see it in person.



Storms and strong winds delayed my journey south by 2 days, which meant I didn't make it to Lismore Castle's gardens as planned.

I finally made it to Ardmore, Waterford where I was staying. From here I could travel across to West Cork to visit Joy on consecutive days.

I spent a few days shadowing her and assisting in her garden, one day alongside her gardener Eddie who had recently completed studies at Kinsale College. It was interesting to see the lighthearted tension between the two of them – Eddie's studies in permaculture had given him a respect and sort of reverence for the ubiquitous dandelion, which Joy understood, but she surreptitiously asked me to remove as many flower heads as possible to prevent further spread throughout the garden. Joy showed me her original sketched design for the garden and photographic documentation of early planting and landscaping.



Another colonising plant was an unknown umbellifer which had spread everywhere in the top part of the garden. I spent some time digging it out and this meditative and repetitive process gave me a chance to experience the garden – to see it from many vantage points, to feel the places where the wind whipped and where the wind was successfully slowed by Joy's heavy-duty, ministry-of-defence-worthy windbreak design – a zigzagging system of posts covered with a very sturdy plastic mesh (replacing another mesh which had failed early on) and staggered planting of trees on both sides of the mesh to provide further wind filtration.



From its furthest boundary the garden slopes down to the house. Joy had taken influence from Solveig Bjerre Hanghøj's Munach Herb Garden to create a semi-circular configuration of colour-blocked or 'rainbow' beds fanning up and outwards from the lowest point. A vista was cut through from top to bottom by an avenue of apple trees, trained as crossover cordons and espaliers to create a central walkway. Joy said that the trees having grown had squeezed the walkway slightly and that she should have accounted for this with an extra metre or so of spacing – reassuring to note that even the experts can make simple mistakes, if only by their own high standards. I was struck by her good humour and beaming smile as she explained this, taking the miscalculation in stride and seeing the funny side.

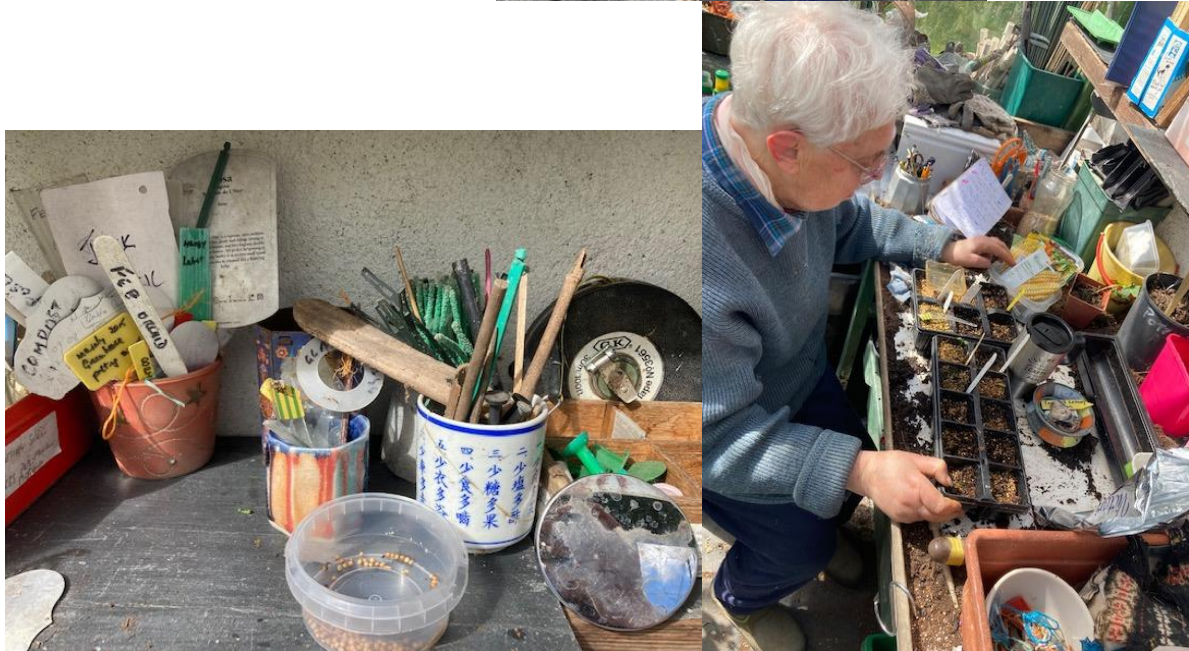


This good humour is representative of my entire experience with Joy. Having started off her career as a student at Wye College, and carrying some of that academic thoroughness and forensic curiosity into her research and writing, it was obvious that she is just as much a believer in conversation, storytelling, sharing connections and observation. Enjoying the joke of mishaps and mistakes, sharing that joke with others and learning from every success and every failure.

At 87, Joy also seems to take her limited mobility in stride and manages to work around it. Her house is connected to an outbuilding by a beautiful and bespoke greenhouse annex made from a scrapped Dutch commercial glasshouse. It contains brickwork raised beds and potting stations. We worked side by side at these stations sowing seeds. Joy shared with me her trick of using a shard of broken glass dabbed in water (not too much) to pick up smaller seeds and deposit them gently in pots filled with growing media.

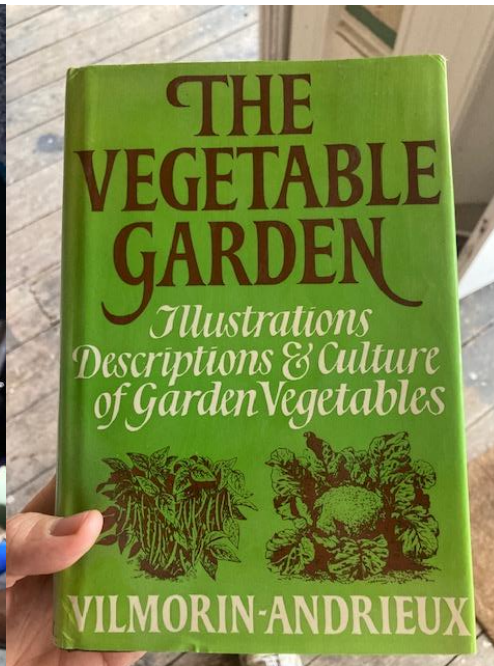
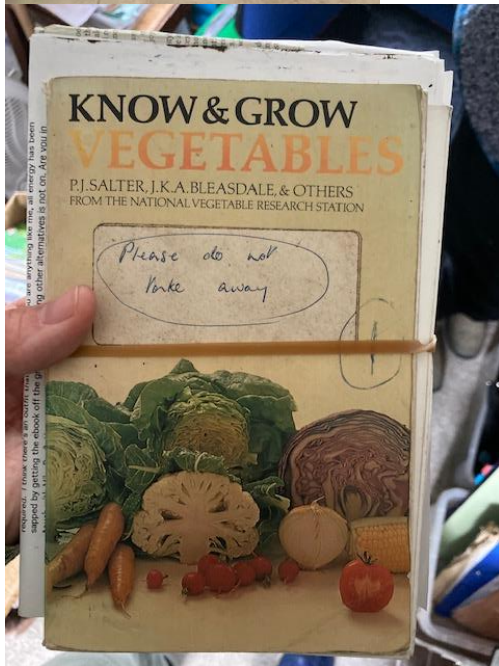


I was disappointed not to have been able to find a source of 'Ferline' tomato seed – a variety favoured by Joy for its disease resistance but seemingly discontinued. I *had* managed to find some 'Mountain Magic' tomato seed, which we ceremoniously planted together. We looked at tools Joy has collected, including an innovative hand held tool from China made from scrap saw metal – teeth intact. A similar item from Joy's collection was on display at the Garden Museum during my visit to Ireland. The museum now houses Joy's archive.



<https://gardenmuseum.org.uk/exhibitions/joy-larkcom-the-queen-of-vegetables/>

In Joy's vast library we perused the texts which have been key references in her writing. I asked which books she returns to the most or that she couldn't be without and she listed 'Know and Grow Vegetables' (2 volumes) written in association with the National Vegetable Research Station at Wellesbourne, and Vilmorin-Andrieux's 'The Vegetable Garden' - a thick Victorian tome, which I had until now assumed was of more historical than practical interest. Joy assured me that it's a bible, so I diligently found second hand copies online of all three of these for my own collection.



On my second day with Joy I drove across Cork to a tool merchant outside Bantry to collect some things on behalf of my work. Stressful though it seemed at the time to cross the county on an errand when I was keen to get back to work in Joy's garden, this gave me an opportunity to build up something of a geographical context of where I was. A vast and wild landscape surrounded me, and though much of the land was farmed, it didn't seem to shape and scar the land as it does in many of the rural landscapes I'm familiar with. In West Cork (true or not) the impression I got was that nature prevails and dominates.



What I got from my entire trip can be summed up by this drive and this trip across Cork and back again in one day. I'd been anxious to take something back with me – to have something definitive to report to the Merlin Trust and to my employers to justify my time away for the trip – and what I got was a completely new perspective; an opportunity to step back from my work, ask questions and see things entirely differently. I was recommended a book in passing before the journey back north to take the ferry from Dublin – 'An Irish Atlantic Rainforest' by Eoghan Daltun. An account of an ambitious rewilding project on the Beara Peninsula in West Cork. Part of the project's aim is to undo some of the damage caused by sheep and goat farming to the indigenous flora in this region – which is in fact temperate rainforest.

Familiar as I am with some of the rewilding projects underway in the UK, I hadn't thought about this from an Irish perspective. From my childhood experience of visiting my grandparents' farm, rural Ireland had been inextricably linked to sheep and cattle farming for me. The two things going together to form a pastoral ideal as inseparable as ... two things you can't imagine being apart. Reading this book and interrogating and unpacking these assumptions was an awakening.



Similarly, Joy offered me many new perspectives. She and her husband Don had moved to a very wet and windy West Cork from a very dry East Anglia for their retirement. Before I arrived I had expected this to be a pretty hostile environment – isolated, wet and cold – for someone in their 80s to be living out their retirement. On the contrary, I found a bright and chipper person, known to all her neighbours and to the owners of cafes and restaurants in the surrounding towns. On my last day with Joy in the garden, the sun was setting as we were tying up cordon stems of currant bushes in the last of the daylight. Joy told me how happy she and Don had been there and I could see why. Joy's work hasn't been just about cultivating her own garden or her career as a journalist and writer, she has cultivated community – her research and knowledge is shared and she is boundlessly interested and curious about what is new and happening. Her work has brought people to her. She is just as engaged a listener when her own part-time gardener is recounting a visit to a garden that has interested him as she is with anyone else. New research is taken on board, failures are taken in stride and successes are communalised. I had already learnt a great deal from Joy Larkcom before this trip from her books, especially 'Grow your own Vegetables (I habitually buy second hand copies whenever I see them to give to the next person I meet who might need one), and I feel I have learnt a great deal more from meeting her in person.

It's probably shrewd advice to never meet your heroes, but in this case I was exceptionally lucky. I am very grateful to Joy for making the time to receive me on this visit and to the Merlin Trust for making the trip possible.