



Productive Horticulture at the Knepp Estate June '23

RHS bursary report

Cat Hood

A 2-week work placement in June 2023 at the Knepp Rewilding Project in West Sussex U.K., working in the walled kitchen garden and the regenerative market garden.

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Images: Unless otherwise stated all images are taken by the author.



Introduction

This report discusses a work experience placement I undertook in June 2023 as part of my Kew Specialist Certificate studies in Kitchen Garden Production. This role is my second year working professionally in horticulture, having previously completed a 1-year traineeship at the MacRobert Trust in Aberdeenshire. Prior to this I completed an HNC in horticulture and gained experience volunteering in both market and public gardens. While a range of aspects of horticulture interest me, productive growing was what first caught my attention and has been the constant thread throughout my horticultural volunteering, study and work.

With the 2 weeks granted by Kew to undertake a study tour or work experience I decided to spend time at the Knepp estate, as I felt it offered an outstanding opportunity to gain experience working at a site carrying out productive horticulture through a lens of ecological regeneration. My interest in Knepp's gardens was sparked by reading their [Wilding the Garden](#) blog. I felt that the approach currently being experimented with in gardens like these will generate ideas that will become generally accepted practice in the future, as horticulture continues to shift towards less ecologically damaging ways of working. I contacted the site with a request to spend time in both the kitchen and market gardens as I was keen to see how these two spaces approached the same goal – growing food for human consumption using ecologically regenerative approaches – but on different scales and with different additional demands (providing an ornamental space; meeting the needs of a business, etc).

Finally, an additional factor which steered my planning was the environmental impact of my travel and activities. I wanted a placement that offered fascinating learning opportunities closely tied to my professional aspirations, that was local to where I was living and reachable by public transport, and relevant to the contexts in which I am likely to find myself gardening in the future.



Some of my work activities during my time at Knepp. Photos taken by Charlie Harpur.

Overview

Location

Knepp is a 3500-acre family-run estate located in West Sussex. The land consists of heavy clay soil over limestone bedrock, posing challenging conditions for arable farming. After nearly 2 decades of trying to run a viable farming business the owners, Charlie Burrell and Isabella Tree gave up farming and, with financial support from the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, began their first experiments in rewilding. This took the form of restoring the Repton park which formed about 10% of the estate land. The results generated from this inspired them to turn more of the estate over to conservation, and the site is now known as the Knepp Rewilding Project.

The approach taken at Knepp to rewilding has, over time, emerged as a process-led (as opposed to goal-led) practice, seeking to increase the complexity of ecosystems thus allowing opportunities in which ‘self-willed natural processes’ can establish.



Location of the Knepp estate in West Sussex, U.K. Image from Google Maps.

I’ve been aware of Knepp’s work for some time through print and TV features, and became increasingly motivated to visit after following the gardens blog and reading Tree’s 2018 book *Wilding: The return of nature to a British farm*. I was keen to learn more about how the estate’s gardens are used as an extension of the rewilding project, particularly in relation to the redevelopment of the castle’s walled gardens. As practiced at Knepp, rewilding describes a nature-led conservation approach where land-management decisions are made based on how actions will diversify habitat opportunities, encouraging greater ecological complexity to develop within the site. This approach was extended to the site’s two walled gardens, redeveloped between 2019 – 2022. The smaller of these, the [kitchen garden](#), has been planted with a variety of perennial forage plants as well as plants for aesthetic value, and more conventional crops in no-dig beds. I was fascinated to see first-hand how this kitchen garden balances the non-anthropocentric philosophy of rewilding with being a productive, cropping space.

The estate’s [market garden](#) forms a part of their regenerative agriculture venture. Cultivation started in spring 2022 and the site is currently in its first full season of production. A central concept to regenerative agricultural practice is the improvement of soil health, a goal the Knepp market garden pursues through a combination



These courgette plantings in the market garden give an idea of the site’s challenging soil texture.

of organic growing practices, low-till cultivation, and aiming to keep living roots in the soil as much possible through the use of green manures and cover crops.

Itinerary & Work Programme

I undertook a 2-week placement from Sunday 4th – Saturday 17th June 2023, spending the first week working alongside the gardens team in the recently re-designed kitchen garden, and the second in the market garden. These 2 weeks occurred during the U.K.'s hottest recorded June (RMS, 2023) with the temperatures providing their own challenges.

While working in the walled garden I undertook duties such as irrigation, weeding, planting out, sowing and bed preparation. I found it interesting and useful to see how the gardens team operated, with fulltime head gardener Charlie Harpur, 2 part-time deputy head-gardeners Moy Fierheller and Suzi Turner, and part-time gardener Karen Finley. I greatly enjoyed seeing a team who worked so collaboratively and respectfully together, with each member having their own responsibilities but also providing support and help for all other members. While I carried out some tasks myself, I also spent time working alongside all members of the team and found these opportunities immensely useful for discussing the tasks in hand and how they related to wider garden projects.

My second week was spent in the newly established market garden, run by joint head-growers Rosanna Catterall and Signe Jensen and colleague Meg Meeres. Throughout the week I was fully involved in all the tasks carried out by this small team including harvesting, bed preparation, planting out, crop protection, weeding and sowing. I greatly appreciated the openness and generosity with which the team shared their experiences of starting a new growing site and the challenges and learnings they've experienced along the way.



The walled kitchen garden attached to the castle showing the no-dig crop beds in the south corner.



The roots, leaves and allium sections of the market garden, showing tarps used for soil protection and breaking down green manures and low tunnels for carrot protection. Duck boards along the front provide protection of pathways during wet weather when the clay soil quickly becomes challengingly muddy.

Challenges

The main challenge I experienced during my time at Knepp was an accident on the Wednesday evening of my first week - I sprained my foot while walking back to the campsite where I was staying. This severely limited my range of movement for a few days due to swelling and pain, and caused uncertainty about staying as I waited to see how quickly it would start to heal. I was immensely grateful to the walled gardens team who provided transport to help me get back and forth from the campsite while my walking was limited, and who found tasks that could be carried out seated for the remaining Thursday and Friday I was with them. Thankfully it was a mild sprain and responded well to treatment with ice and compression bandages, and by the following Monday I was confident that I could go ahead with my week in the market garden as planned.

With hindsight, the other challenge I experienced – particularly during the second week – was the heat. Temperatures reached mid to high 20s for all 5 days I was with the market garden team and this made working in the open, exposed site tiring. However, this was also a useful experience as it was a chance to see how the team balanced welfare against the need to accomplish the week's tasks. They did this by ensuring everyone took a 10-minute shade and water break every hour throughout the afternoon and front-loading the day so that the most strenuous tasks were carried out first while it was coolest.



The openness of the market garden site meant staff had to be conscious of their wellbeing while working in the sun.

Learning gained

I found the 2 weeks I spent at Knepp very enjoyable and felt I was learning throughout the whole experience. I kept a diary noting each day's activities, interesting conversations and new pieces of information. This now provides a useful tool for jogging my memory, such as remembering the clever way Meg showed me to fold a large tarp so that it could be easily moved and unfolded by 1 person (something that once you've been shown, then feels blindingly obvious). However, when trying to explain why these 2 weeks felt so moving to me on a deeper level it's more challenging, and I've found writing this report a useful process for reflecting on and trying to articulate this.

I've divided my learning into 3 categories: Practices, Mindset & Approaches, and Wider context. The obvious category missing from this is straight-up factual information. I considered including this category too, however quickly found that it read as though I was copying and pasting from horticultural textbooks. For this reason, I've decided to focus more on how the experience has impacted my working practices and ideas about gardening.

1. Practices

I appreciate that what I describe here might well seem truisms or too trivial to be worth highlighting, however in the weeks since my placement I've found these small practices showing up as positive changes in my work.

Right tool for the job

A useful experience I gained at the market garden was the opportunity to try out tools that were new to me. Many of these were specialised to particular jobs, such as the Lucko wire weeder (pictured right), perfect for quickly running between rows of carrots to disrupt weed seedlings. I found the range of hoes, each suited to slightly different situations and crops, fascinating and I think the diversity of tools used within the market garden – far greater than any ornamental or kitchen garden I've worked in, comes down to economies of scale. Time is so incredibly pressured, even more so than in the latter types of garden, that small efficiencies can make an important difference. While a generalist tool such as a hori hori might be most useful in a smaller garden, where the gardener is doing a wide variety of relatively short tasks, the market garden demonstrated to me that for large-scale tasks having exactly the right tool for the job can pay off.



'Lucko ergonomic wire weeder', particularly good for weeding around carrot seedlings

Weeding: Little and often

Another useful practice I saw being implemented at the market garden was end-of-the-day weeding. All staff aimed to finish their tasks around half an hour before the end of the working day and this remaining time was then used to pick up a hoe. This had a double

benefit of creating a work culture where there wasn't a sense of rushing to carry out large tasks right up until the end of the day, providing a cushion of time to wrap up bigger jobs, and meant that everyone kept on top of an ongoing, continual task.

ID it before you pull it out

At both the market and walled gardens I enjoyed the curiosity that people took when weeding – asking themselves what something was before removing it. This was particularly relevant when I was helping Suzi prepare some of the kitchen garden's no-dig beds for planting. Plants had self-seeded around the edges making an attractive border but one that encroached into the plantable space. Rather than asking me to blanket clear the bed Suzi suggested I remove some of the 'weeds' which she felt would spread too much or be too vigorous, while leaving others which she thought added visual appeal and provided useful nectar sources. She was able to make these judgements due to her knowledge of the site's seedbank and the plants' habits, and her ability to confidently ID seedlings. Unfortunately, due to a miscommunication, I ended up removing some of the plants she'd suggested keeping - another reason for being confident of your ID before taking something out!

2. Mindset & approaches

During my first week I was lucky enough to sit in on one of the Garden Safaris led by deputy head-gardener Moy Fierheller. These bookable events are run to allow members of the public to visit the (usually private) gardens, hear about their redevelopment and the ideas and principles that steered decision-making, and discuss the site with both a gardener and an ecologist.

The event description states: "The aim [of the gardens'] is to maximise biodiversity, while at the same time being as sustainable as possible. It's about challenging old ways of thinking and working with, rather than against, nature" (Knepp, 2023). I found the safari presentation provided useful and interesting context for understanding more about what I was seeing in the gardens.

Design: Destination vs Starting point

The single biggest point I took away from the safari was Moy's emphasis on the design of the garden as a point of origin, not a destination. The redevelopment was led by a gardens advisory board made up of Mick Crawley, James Hitchmough, Jekka McVicar and Tom Stuart-Smith, a combination of expertise that would constitute many people's fantasy garden design league.



Plant community of Monarda fistulosa, Dianthus gigantea, and Salvia nemorosa growing on the north-facing slope of a dry ridge.

The goal of the redevelopment was to apply Knepp’s rewilding practices to the gardens by increasing the diversity of ecological niches present, and so creating spaces in which natural processes can establish themselves. This took the form of changing the levels of the garden by building up and digging down; creating dry ridges, shaded and sunny banks, and moist troughs which may become ephemeral ponds during periods of high rainfall; changing the pH through the addition of different materials (sand, crushed concrete); and typically increasing the stress by reducing the available nutrients. The creation of these different conditions meant that a much greater diversity of plants would be viable. The new planting includes over 900 species (Tree, 2023), more than 20x the number in the previous garden (Fierheller, 2021). I was fascinated by the confidence of the team in their approach to the garden as a space for experimentation. Rather than trying to preserve the design developed by the advisory board as a blueprint of how the garden ‘should’ be, the team apply the concept of ‘limits of acceptable change’. This idea, developed in the world of conservation (Stankey et al., 1985), provides a framework for managing spaces and aiding decision-making around balancing the needs of humans with those of the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996). By using ‘limits of acceptable change’ as their principle for deciding when to intervene in the course the garden takes, this creates space in which the team can observe how the space changes itself, for example by seeing which plants self-seed and colonise which areas, which insects and other creatures pollinate or predate which plants, and what impact rainfall, sun and other weather has on the site. In her [August 2021](#) post for the *Wilding the Garden* blog Moy discusses an example of when and why the decision was made to weed out ox-eye daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) that had become too rampant. The goal in this instance was to reduce numbers of a plant that was limiting the presence and establishment of other plants. I think this treatment of the gardens’ design as a starting point rather than an end to be maintained mirrors the thread of argument Tree discusses throughout *Wilding* – that Knepp’s successes as a haven for multiple U.K. critically-endangered species comes from creating a space where ecosystems can develop complexity via ‘self-willed natural processes’ (Tree, 2018). In the absence of the large herbivores which form the ecosystem engineers of the



Panorama image of the walled garden looking toward the planting on ‘Hitchmough ridge’

landscape-scale rewilding project, in the garden the gardeners take their place and so remain the most active agents of change. However, by standing back and observing before intervening: “...dynamism will exist, outcomes will not be wholly predictable, and we gardeners will not dominate over a single fixed picture” (Fierheller, 2023, para. 4). The value of this approach is consistent with an example Tree discusses in relation to the wider rewilding project: “If we had not allowed a dynamic ecosystem to establish here, we would never have had turtledoves in the first place.” (Tree, 2018, p.202).

Curiosity - Looking for what you can't see

Along with the idea of the gardener as one agent among many, the safari highlighted the use of tools like ecological surveys to build up a picture of which other species were present in and using the garden.

As gardeners I think it's easy for us to assume we know what's happening in our garden and who lives there, however the work of the Knepp's ecologists has demonstrated the presence of a far wider range of invertebrates than was previously thought. This aligns with the approach that sees the garden as a site not solely based around the needs of its humans. For example, the photo to the right shows a 'weed' Suzi and I discovered on the edge of one of the no-dig beds. We intended to remove it, then noticed it was populated by small maggots. Not knowing what these were Suzi took a photo, sent it to the ecologist and we left the plant. I forgot to follow-up during my stay, but looking it up now it appears to be a self-seeded figwort (*Scrophularia nodosa*) covered in figwort weevil larvae. I can't say that I felt either the insects or their host added much to the appearance of the garden, but that wasn't the point - they existed and we left them to it. Reading up now, it appears that figwort weevils can cause damage to other genus including *Buddleja*, *Verbascum* and *Phygellus* (RHS, 2023a). If these species in the garden were showing signs of significantly struggling then perhaps one of the team would step in to reduce the population by removing host plants such as the one pictured, but in the absence of this damage I think it's unlikely the team would do anything. Even in cases where an insect was causing damage to a desired plant (see photo right of a striking mullein moth caterpillar feeding on *Verbascum thapsus*) during my time at Knepp the



Above: Figwort (*Scrophularia nodosa*) hosting larvae of figwort weevil. Below: Mullein caterpillar moth on *Verbascum thapsus*



consensus was usually to leave it and see how successfully the plant could grow through the damage.

I believe this approach links to an interesting point Moy made during the safari; she described the site as a ‘toddler garden’. Mostly planted in spring 2022, the majority of planting is ‘young’, the garden is finding its feet and the gardeners are observing what emerges with openness and curiosity. As the garden matures the approach to its care may evolve also. Using tools such as ecological surveys to try and build a more detailed picture of the species present is consistent with rewilding’s shift away from anthropocentrism – it is looking to understand more of the site than simply what is immediately observable. It is asking questions rather than simply assuming we already have the answers.

3. Wider context

Since my placement at Knepp I’ve followed more closely the public debate surrounding rewilding and gardening.

Over the past weeks media personality gardeners Monty Don and Alan Titchmarsh have written about their concerns regarding the relationship between rewilding and gardening (Phillips, 2023). In an opinion piece published in the July 2023 issue of *Gardener’s World* Don summarises his thoughts:

“It is as though a so-called ‘wild’ garden that mimics natural conditions is somehow worthier and more natural than one in which mankind’s creative skills are more obviously played out. This is puritanical nonsense. If you want a truly wild garden then simply walk away. Leave any patch of ground completely untouched by human hand and it will happily become whatever it wants to be. The result might be beautiful and richly satisfying as well as very good for wildlife of all kinds, but it will not be a garden.” (Don, 2023, p.19)

For Don: “...deliberate and skilful evidence of human handiwork, is the opposite of trendy ‘rewilding’ and completely, triumphantly beautiful” and: “...really good gardening integrates and incorporates as much of the natural world as is possible... [so that] the natural and human worlds combine to create a garden that is unnatural and contrived, but sublime” (Don, 2023).

What I find interesting is that much in these views overlaps with those of both Isabella Tree and Knepp’s head gardener Charlie Harpur. In a response published on the Knepp website Harpur states:

“...rewilding is not just abandoning land (I would be out of a job if it was). The key to creating a mosaic of different habitats... is disturbance. In the rewilding project at Knepp we have animals to graze, browse, rootle etc, which sculpts the land and creates a range of

varying habitats – homes for an array of different species. And here is the crossover: in the unique, domestic context of the garden, the gardener is the keystone species. Active gardening is therefore actually needed to create a dynamic landscape which provides different opportunities for wildlife.” (Harpur, 2023, para.3)

Here, all parties agree that the actions of gardeners have a central role to play in the creation of a garden as a space that is beautiful and species-rich. All agree that for a garden to *be* a garden this involves a combination of gardener’s work combined with the plantlife they encourage to grow there. From what I have seen of Knepp, combined with Don’s statement, I believe both also agree that incorporating the natural world is a valuable and important tool towards achieving a beautiful garden.

So where is the disagreement? Don’s comments above suggest that, to him, rewilding is synonymous with abandonment, an interpretation shared by Titchmarsh who is quoted in *The Sun* as saying that he: “will not leave [his garden] to become a natural haven for native plants because I know that in reality it will support a dwindling range of plant and wildlife species,” as the site would revert to: “the patch of chest-high brambles that it would become were I to let it go” (Phillips, 2023).

Knepp’s approach stresses the important role of gardeners, stating: “...a garden is only complex and species-rich because of the interventions of the gardener” (Tree, 2023).

However, the understanding of rewilding in relation to gardens as neglect and ‘letting-go’ appears widespread. John Little of the GreenRoofCo, a designer and planting advocate whose work appears overlap in many aspects with Knepp’s, discussed an example of rewilding-as-neglect during his presentation at the London Gardens Network seminar in April 2022 (now available on YouTube). In this case, the council had ‘rewilded’ an area of public planting by adding high-fertility soil to a site and then leaving it to be colonised by whatever plants appeared. In Little’s view, a more considered and ‘gardened’ approach: “Would’ve shown some respect to the people who live here, no consultation...This utterly middleclass rubbish of rewilding” (LGN, 2022, 26:20).

Writing in a long-form *Guardian* feature discussing the controversial management of Ventnor Botanic Garden, Mark O’Connell observes that it’s easy to dismiss pro- / anti-rewilding views as another line in liberal / conservative culture wars. However, I think this is too simplistic and not a particularly helpful way of framing the debate. Polarised views around the term ‘rewilding’ aren’t a recent development; Tree discusses in *Wilding* Knepp’s reservations around using the term specifically because of its ambiguity and the range of practises that are carried out within conservation under this label.

As it applies to gardening, I think some of the areas of disagreement lie simply in differences of taste – entirely valid but perhaps not grounds alone to dismiss the same in others. Some of the debate however clearly stems from both the depiction of rewilding as neglecting space in the name of greenwashing, and actual instances where this is what has happened - a form of management very much the opposite of Knepp’s interpretation of rewilding a garden as a means of increasing ecosystem complexity.

Harpur and Tree have both publicly invited Titchmarsh and Don to visit Knepp and see the gardens first-hand. As far as I'm aware, neither has taken up this offer. Perhaps they've seen enough images to know the gardens simply aren't to their tastes - what to one gardener is 'triumphantly beautiful' horticulture will leave another cold – in which case, probably politest to say nothing. I'm fully aware that my own tastes dictate my preferences around horticultural jobs as much as anyone else's. Last winter I was involved in rose pergola maintenance - pruning and training so that laterals twined anticlockwise, 1-foot apart, up the pillars. I'm know the tradition such features come from, but the hundreds of hours involved in shaping the plants into a form they resisted so strongly made me question whether this time and energy could be better used. In June, the effect of the roses flowering on the pillars clearly delighted thousands of visitors and I'm glad they enjoyed it, but for me it's not a garden feature that elicits strong feelings of excitement or wonder.

As a teenager I studied at an art school and working at Knepp has connected some of my ideas about creativity with what I find most exciting and interesting in horticulture. Many of my tutors felt strongly that the designer or artist had to account for and justify every aspect of a piece, a paralysing weight of decisions that contributed to alienating me from this field. A few years later, I came across a philosophy that to me described a much more positive and exciting relationship with creative output: it described artworks (specifically ceramics) as one third the work of the materials, the process, and the artist. For me, this liberating view opened space for spontaneity, surprise and the possibility of creating work so much more interesting than what I had set out towards. Within horticulture, I believe that approaches which allow gardeners to be *a* factor shaping the creation of a space, allowing for other species and natural-processes to also play a role, makes for an outcome that can be so much more complex, interesting, and satisfying for both humans and the ecosystem as a whole.



Goat topiary, bean structures, and fennel (Foeniculum vulgare) amidst ornamental flowers in the kitchen garden.

Conclusion

While only 2 weeks long, my work experience at Knepp has had an immense impact on me, challenging and extending my ideas about horticulture. Its effects are still unfolding and, as I found through the experience of picking up and trying new tools in the market garden, you don't know what you don't know – even small things that might seem trivial in the moment can end up having a long reach. The tricky part is knowing which tools you need – it would be easy to blow your entire budget on a catalogue's worth of implements only to find none are quite what you're looking for. I think this is a good demonstration of the value of opportunities like work placements – they provide a chance for horticulturists to gain hands on experience in settings not their own, potentially discovering tools, practices and ideas they otherwise wouldn't encounter.

I applied to Knepp because I wanted to learn more about growing productively in a regenerative way. While I certainly learnt about very practical aspects of this subject (living roots in soil, the ins and outs of green manures in dig and no-dig systems, some intense discussions about compost and mycorrhiza) the experience also opened my eyes in ways I hadn't expected: it helped me identify and articulate my thoughts about some of the tensions present in contemporary gardening and where I locate myself within these. For this I am immensely grateful.

The extent to which my time at Knepp has shaped my ideas about horticulture, and how this will inform my future work, remain to be seen. Writing this report has been a useful first step - an opportunity to reflect on my learning and what I gained from the experience. It also provides a welcome chance to thank the people and organisations who made it possible.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to say a huge and heartfelt thank you to Charlie, Moy, Suzi, Karen, Signe, Rosanna and Meg, all of whom made me feel immediately welcome and who could not have been more generous in making sure I was able to get the most out of my experience.

I'd also like to thank the **RHS Bursary** committee and the **Kew Guild**, both of whom provided funding that helped cover my accommodation, food, travel and unexpected expenses and which enabled me to take part fully in my work placement without worrying about the associated costs. I would also like to extend this thank you to the **Merlin Trust** who also generously made funding available and which in the event I was fortunate enough not to need to draw on.

Appendix: Further images

I have tried to include pictures throughout this report related to its content. The following pages contain further images to give greater sense of the garden during the snapshot of time I was there.



The walled kitchen garden, showing some of the mixed ornamental and productive edible plantings.

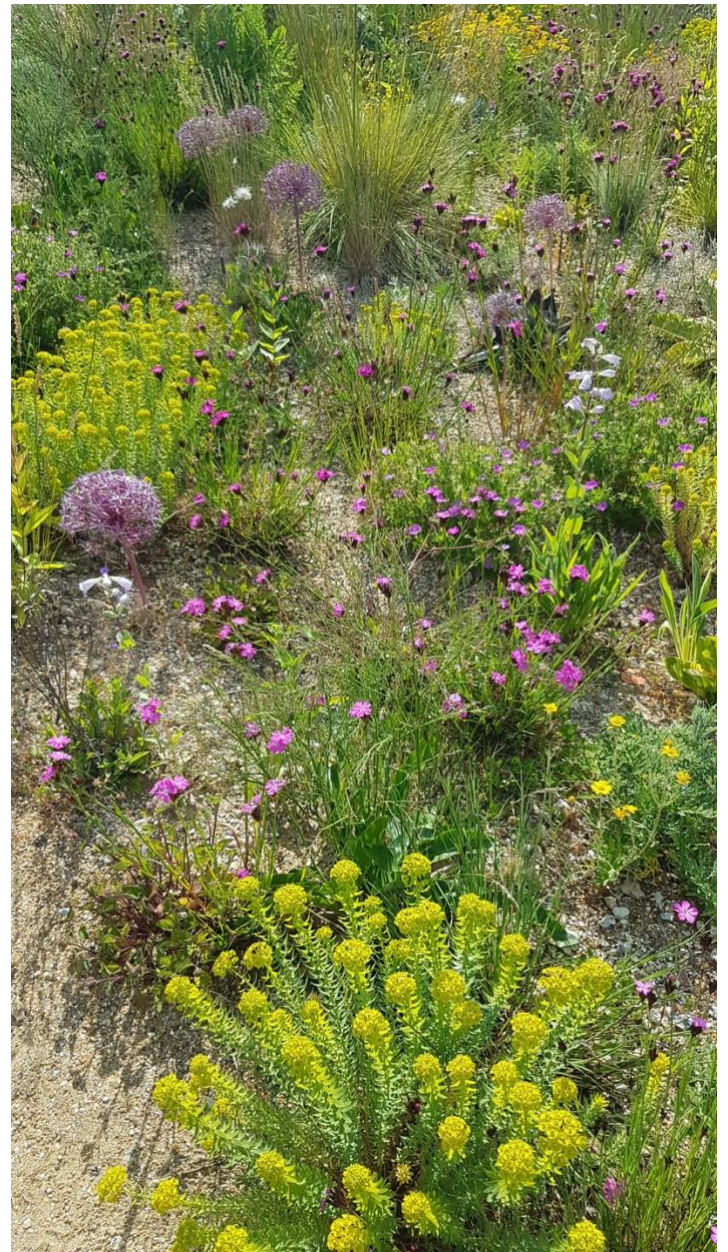


The attractive and structural 'bee-friendly' hive, situated in a corner of the walled kitchen garden.



Image left: Herbs interplanted with edibles in the walled kitchen garden. Irrigation via sprinkler on the veg beds is visible in the background.

Image below: Planting combination on the dry, north-facing ridge in the walled garden.





The full, uncropped image of the beautiful mullein moth caterpillar and its Verbascum Thapsus host, complete with frass and feeding-damaged leaves



Image above: Planting in the walled garden.

Image below: Planting around the walled garden swimming pool, showing some of the vertical structural elements.





Image above: Shady seating area at the back of the kitchen garden.

Image left: Rhubarb planted as a perennial crop amongst herbs and ornamental plants in the kitchen garden.

Image below: A wider view of one of the kitchen garden's 'rhubarb beds'





Courgette plants being planted out, interspersed with maize and companion flower plantings as well as some permitted 'weeds'. A double handful of well-rotted manure was placed in the hole to give the young plants a boost of nutrients.



A module-raised cabbage seedling I planted out, under hoop and mesh to protect from crows.



Top: A dense population of ladybird larvae predating black bean aphid on broad beans. Plants also show notched damage from pea and bean weevil. Centre: Rows of tomato plants being grown up strings under cover of the caterpillar tunnels. Bottom: The caterpillar tunnels tarped root bed, and surrounding wind-break trees.



*The kitchen garden with clumps of self-seeded ox-eye daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) scattered throughout the paths and the old water tank, now collecting rainwater, in the centre.*

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