

The image is a full-page background photograph of a garden. In the foreground, there is a large, bushy plant with many thin, upright stems that have small, brownish, seed-like structures. To the right of this plant, there are some dried, brown thistle heads. In the background, a low stone wall runs across the frame, and beyond that, a green field or garden area is visible. The top of the image has a semi-transparent grey overlay where the text is located.

MERLIN TRUST WRAGS AWARD REPORT:

Exploring Different Approaches to Gardening and Growing:
Gardens and Nursery Visits in the South West of England.

September 21st - 26th 2026

Sybille de Cussy.

As a WRAGS trainee, I have the opportunity to work in and observe one garden throughout the year, developing an in-depth understanding of a particular place. With the support of the Merlin Trust Bursary Award, I wanted to complement this experience by visiting a range of gardens and nurseries and exploring different approaches to gardening and growing. I spent a week visiting gardens and nurseries near Bath, encountering approaches to ecological gardening, food growing, plant propagation, specialist horticulture and historic garden management. Each visit offered a different perspective, broadening my practical knowledge and encouraging me to reflect on my own approach to horticulture.

I started the week at **Jo McKerr's Church Farm** garden, focusing on **meadows and wildlife gardening**. Jo's meadow garden demonstrated how native planting, natural succession and minimal intervention can create a diverse and resilient ecosystem. Spending two days working alongside Jo in the dry meadow and woodland meadow was particularly valuable to see how close observation of natural processes can inform practical decisions and encourage a focus on habitats and wider ecosystems alongside individual plants.



Extending the woodland edge planting.



Water bowls contributing to habitats



Tussock meadow and thatch beneficial for wildlife.



Dead wood as vole habitat.



Wall as microclimate.



Wild carrot left to seed around.



Common spotted orchid by the pond.



Common toad found in the tussock.

Native plants plug planting.



The dry meadow, with different stages of succession created by the sloping terrain and hay stacks.

I then spent a day with **Alison Jenkins at Damson Farm**. Her **edible garden** combines annual and perennial crops with permaculture and syntropic principles, creating a productive ecosystem for both people and wildlife. I was inspired by her approach to food growing as gardening in its own right, and by the possibilities of combining productivity, biodiversity and aesthetic interest rather than treating an edible garden simply as a vegetable plot.

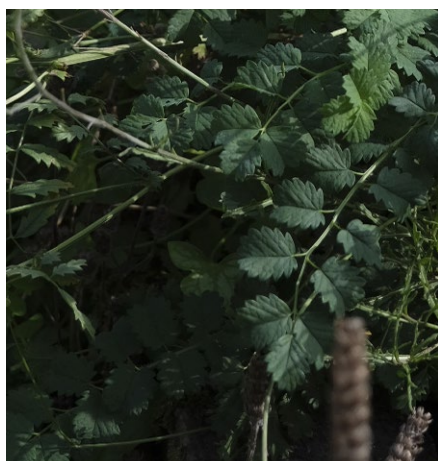


Salad greens harvest.



Climbing crop structures.





Annual and perennial crop planting and harvesting.



The vegetable garden managed with principles from permaculture and syntropic agriculture.

The week continued with a day spent with **Derry Watkins at Specialist nursery.**

Derry's experimental approach to unusual hardy and tender plants demonstrated the value of curiosity, observation and testing plants in different conditions. Seeing her nursery setup also gave me practical ideas for propagation and future growing facilities, while reinforcing the value of using a garden as a living laboratory.



Nicotiana mutabilis seed collection.



Collecting seeds at Hillside Garden.



Seed collection.



The nursery.



The garden as a source for seeds and cuttings.

Nursery set-up.



Taking cuttings.



The glasshouse.

At **Sweet Water Lane Nursery**, I gained another perspective on **small-scale production**, with plants grown specifically for use in conjunction to the owner's garden designs.



Trees imported and kept in airpots prior to planting on projects.



The glasshouse for perennials production.



Polytunnels.

In contrast, a visit to the **wholesale nursery Arvensis Perennials** gave me an insight into larger production and the practical considerations of growing plants at this scale. It was particularly useful to see how plant selection, propagation and cultivation methods are integrated within a commercial growing operation. Seeing different nursery set-ups throughout the week allowed me to compare approaches to propagation, cultivation and workflow.



Stand-off area.

On my way back, I stopped in Oxfordshire to visit **Rousham Historic Gardens**. Rousham offered an interesting contrast to the more experimental approaches seen elsewhere, with its emphasis on preserving an historic landscape and design by William Kent. The visit prompted me to consider different approaches to caring for historic gardens and the importance of allowing a garden's character and philosophy to inform how it develops over time.



The reel and basin as design features and a thread through the garden.



Traditional rose garden and parterre.



the great lawn in front of the main house.

The week broadened my experience beyond a single garden and gave me the opportunity to see how different horticultural philosophies can shape the design, making and care of gardens. With a particular interest in the relationship between garden artistry and wider landscape ecosystems, I found it especially valuable to see this balance approached in different ways: from naturalistic, observational methods and ecological processes to plant combinations, experimentation and strong design interventions. As well as overarching approaches, the week provided me with a myriad of practical tips, new plant species to test and research, and wildlife to look out for, which I can directly apply in the garden and develop as part of my horticultural practice. At a time when horticultural diversity, habitat resilience and food security is so important, this week has given me insight into possible futures that I am curious to continue exploring in other places.