



Kitchen garden revival

Gardeners and chefs at Trust places are working together to give historic kitchen gardens a new lease of life

Text by Clare Hargreaves





Previous page (top left) Head Gardener David Corscadden and volunteers at Florence Court; and plentiful produce from Trust kitchen gardens.

Historically, some kitchen gardens were as important to the owners of country houses as their furnishings or collections. As the 16th-century poet-farmer Thomas Tusser put it, the kitchen garden provided material 'to trim up their house, and to furnish their pot'. Expensive to construct and often employing the latest technological advances, it provided status for the owners, food for the family, servants and wider community, and flowers for the table and rooms.

Kitchen gardens had their heyday between 1800 and 1940, but they declined after the world wars. Many became neglected, overgrown or used for other purposes.

Now a revival is under way at many of the Trust's historic kitchen gardens, including Florence Court in County Fermanagh and Mottisfont in Hampshire. Here, gardeners and volunteers have been replacing weeds and rubble with fresh, seasonal and sustainable food crops.

The walled garden of Florence Court was at its peak in the late 19th century, when Scottish gardener James Sutherland arrived. He used kitchen produce as part of the walled garden's overall design, planting alpine strawberries for decoration as well as to eat, and a herb garden featuring lavender in ornamental pink, white and purple. At its height, Florence Court employed 12 gardeners, but during the Second World War most of them left to fight, never to return. The kitchen garden was abandoned in 1947 after the last head gardener left.

Thanks to grants from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, National Lottery Community Fund and others, Trust staff and volunteers have been restoring Florence Court's kitchen garden to its 1930s design, using original survey drawings. The team has rebuilt the pathways and planted herbaceous borders to provide cut flowers for the house and attract beneficial insects. As well as well-known fruits and vegetables, including six varieties

Trust staff and volunteers are restoring Florence Court's kitchen garden to its 1930s design

of cabbage, sea kale – a Victorian favourite – and 50 native Irish apple varieties, visitors can expect to find more unusual produce. The team has grown cardoons, which are similar to globe artichokes but the stalks rather than flowers are eaten. There's also oca, resembling a pink carrot, and Worcester berries, a cross between gooseberries and blackcurrants, which are perfect for jams.

'Visitors can buy fresh produce to take home, and the café uses our herbs in its dishes,' says Head Gardener David Corscadden. 'We're excited Florence Court can fulfil this role for the house and community once again.'

The kitchen garden team is also hosting community group sessions, ranging from mental-health charities to primary schools. Next year they plan to rebuild apricot and vinery glasshouses, one of which will become a learning centre for these groups.

David thinks it's important to educate the next generation about fresh food. 'We give kids seeds to grow at home, and we cultivate different vegetable varieties each year so visitors can learn something new and have a reason to return time and again,' he says.

At Mottisfont, meanwhile, this autumn marks the first birthday of its restored kitchen garden. 'Mottisfont was originally an Augustinian priory and its garden

would have supplied the monks and local community with fruit, vegetables and flowers,' explains Head Gardener Jonny Norton. 'Its past gardeners shared horticultural knowledge and skills, such as which vegetable varieties would thrive. It's important we nurture similar skills for future generations.'

Look closely and you'll spot clues to Mottisfont's monastic past, such as the double row of pollarded lime trees planted by its last private owner, Maud Russell, mimicking cloisters. In the new kitchen garden, an octagon of apple trees echoes the shape of a font.

Sustainability and biodiversity have been central to Mottisfont's kitchen garden's transformation. Jonny and his team used reclaimed bricks, timber and the estate's own compost to create raised beds and garden structures. 'We don't use chemicals, and our compost-fed soils are alive with micro-organisms and decomposers.'

Herbs, edible flowers, seasonal vegetables and salad leaves have been planted in accessible raised beds so visitors can get close. 'In medieval times, the monks would have grown herbs largely for medicinal purposes,' says Jonny. 'We're also growing herbs such as thyme, chamomile and caraway, and educating visitors about their uses.'

Many of the vegetable varieties have an Italian flavour, reflecting both Maud Russell's love of Italy and Jonny's previous experience working in Italian gardens. Look out for chicory, Florence fennel and giant Sicilian parsley, and vibrant gourds climbing its cloister-style pergolas.

Food and Beverage Manager Richard Thompson is keenly awaiting the first harvest to use in their cafés. 'It's fantastic to think not about food miles, but food metres,' he says. 'It feels right both for Mottisfont's history, and the Trust's ambition to produce more sustainable food.'

Clare Hargreaves is a freelance food and travel writer.

i Find out more about the projects at nationaltrust.org.uk/florence-court and nationaltrust.org.uk/mottisfont



Top kitchen gardens to visit



For history lovers... Chartwell, Kent

Churchill laid the brick wall around Chartwell's kitchen garden, which supplied 10 Downing Street with fresh produce during WWII. The garden was restored in 2006.



For heritage tomatoes... Knightshayes, Devon

This 2.5-acre walled garden built in 1876 comes complete with fairy-tale turrets. Both heritage and modern varieties are grown, including over 150 kinds of heritage tomato.



For glasshouses... Clumber Park, Nottinghamshire

The 130m glasshouse runs the width of the garden and is the longest in Trust care. Discover over 130 varieties of rhubarb and 123 varieties of apple.



For unusual varieties... Attingham Park, Shropshire

Find newly restored glasshouses and unusual varieties ranging from white icicle radish to the long prickly cucumber. Both date from the 18th century.



For longevity... Llanerchaeron, Ceredigion

This 18th-century Welsh estate has survived virtually unaltered for the past 200 years. Don't miss its cape gooseberries and 170-year-old apple trees.



Recipe

Mottisfont roast beetroot hummus with rocket and a herb flatbread

Makes six flatbreads with enough hummus to go with each

Ingredients

For the hummus:

500g raw fresh beetroot
1 clove of garlic
1 x 400g tin chickpeas, drained
Zest of half a lemon
Juice of quarter of a lemon
Sea salt, to taste
White pepper, to taste

For the flatbreads:

300g bread flour
10g finely chopped herbs from the garden (use whatever you have available)
8g salt
120ml warm (not hot) water
70ml oil (olive oil is best but vegetable oil is also fine)

Method

For the beetroot hummus:

1. Preheat your oven to 200°C/180°C fan/350°F/gas mark 4/5.
2. Peel and chop the raw beetroot into cubes about 2–3cm wide. Oil and season them and place on a baking tray.
3. Roast in the oven for about 20 minutes, or until the beetroot is soft enough to eat. Add the garlic clove and roast for another 5 minutes.
4. Remove from the oven and allow to cool.
5. Once cool, place in a blender with the chickpeas, lemon zest and juice, and blend to a paste (we tend to leave ours roughly blended as it shows off the beetroot to its best). Season to taste while blending.
6. Place in a sealed plastic tub or a Kilner jar. Keep for up to 3 days in the fridge.

For the flatbread:

1. Put the sieved flour, herbs and salt in your mixer with a dough hook attachment. Start the mixer on low, and add the water and oil to the flour a little at a time until it is all combined, then let the dough mix for at least 5 minutes.
2. Once the dough is fully kneaded and elastic, remove to a lightly oiled bowl and cover with a cloth. Leave for 15–20 minutes.
3. Remove the dough and place on a floured board or work surface. Divide into 6 equal balls.
4. Roll the dough for each ball into an oval shape about 3mm thick, then cook on a lightly oiled griddle or in a frying pan for 2 minutes each side. If you prefer, you can use a thick, preheated baking sheet in the oven. Cook for 3 minutes on each side at 220°C/200°C fan/430°F/gas mark 6.

Serving instructions

Serve the hummus with your warm flatbread and a handful of fresh rocket for a nutritious and tasty autumn lunch. ○



Top tip

‘This recipe, created by our chef David Paterson, makes the most of the fresh herbs, beetroot and rocket harvested from the new kitchen garden. David likes thyme, but you can use whichever herbs you prefer.’

Richard Thompson and Jonny Norton

