

Notes on the Garden: Kitchen Garden

This intimate walled garden is a part of Packwood that is very close to my heart. There is room to experiment with colours and textures without spoiling the magic of the borders in the formal garden. Seeing something that I've sown flourish and turn into something edible never fails to excite me!

Our earliest reference to this garden is from 1723, where it looks slightly smaller than it does today, but contains a basic layout that we have largely kept to during its restoration over recent years. The current layout consists of four main growing areas, with paths running north-south and east-west. A central dipping pond acts as a focal point, and a useful means of filling up our watering cans. A timber archway and pleached crab apples add height to what would otherwise be quite a flat space, and we add additional supports in the form of wigwams for sweet peas and runner beans to make sure there are plenty of interesting visual elements.

Our four growing areas are supplemented by additional beds which support a range of different veg and cut flowers for the house. This includes space for annual as well as perennial flower material, pumpkins and squashes, and for this year, onions and garlic running along the base of our grape vines. A herb border runs along the length of one wall, stocked with herbs that would have been used not just for culinary purposes, but a range of needs in an 18th century household. This includes soapwort (*Saponaria officinalis*) for laundry, madder (*Rubia tinctorum*) for dyeing and treating kidney disorders, and St John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) to aid trouble sleeping and calm the nerves.

We try to grow on organic principles in the Kitchen Garden which involves various different methods. From late autumn into winter we add a 2-3inch thick layer of mulch, and this year we are experimenting with a 'no dig' approach to incorporating this into the veg plots. Not digging will hopefully better preserve the structure of the soil, which in turn will be better able to hold onto moisture without the need for lots of sprinklers, as well as meaning less carbon is released into the atmosphere.

Companion planting is a great way to attract beneficial insects and prevent less desirable ones from attacking our crops. Nasturtiums are not only edible and attractive, but act as a 'decoy' plant, attracting caterpillars and other pests and distracting them from the other goods on offer! Parsley and chamomile help to deter various pests that damage onions, and calendula deters aphids from beans, whilst attracting predators such as ladybirds and lacewings.

Rotating our crops is a good way to avoid a build up of pests and disease that could develop in the soil if the same plants are grown there year on year. Each main veg bed is devoted to a different family or type of vegetable such as brassicas (cabbage and broccoli), roots (parsnips and carrots), and legumes (peas and beans). We also have a perennial veg bed that is in the process of being revamped, but contains asparagus, artichokes, rhubarb and a new selection of summer and autumn fruiting raspberries.

Variety rather than quantity is our aim in the Kitchen Garden, but a considerable amount of our produce is used in the café to contribute to the delicious meals on offer, whilst surplus produce is made available to visitors for donations. The most recent addition to the Kitchen Garden is our new cat Milo. He's two years old and was adopted from a local rescue centre, and has become a firm favourite with visitors (and myself!), as well as doing a sterling job stopping mice from nibbling away at our plants.

During this current challenging time, our plans for the Kitchen Garden this year have had to be put on hold. But with a lot of hard work and the support of our invaluable volunteers, I'm sure we'll be able to recover, and keep this space as beautiful and productive as ever.

By Robyn Booth