

Good enough to eat

It's not just that the superior produce is good enough to eat; Stephanie Harrod's beautifully structured kitchen garden also offers food for the soul. Barbara Segall went to meet her at her garden in Norfolk



A dusting of snow reveals the bone structure of the kitchen garden

owners built a tennis court over much of it. It is in a perfect location: south-facing with some shade near the boundary, creating different growing environments in the one area.

A decorative fruit cage with a peaked roof houses raspberries, strawberries and other soft fruits. There is nothing Stephanie likes better after a long day at work than to scoff the soft fruits in the early evening, sometimes straight from the plant. The kitchen garden also houses a stylish greenhouse that accounts for many of the early sowings of tomatoes and over-wintering oriental leaves.

Not only is the kitchen garden the source of tasty produce and stylish products but it is also the place Stephanie loves to spend time. Given her wish that it should look good, it is no surprise that she is keen on the presentation of the garden. She enjoys spending time tidying and weeding so that it is always looking its best.

What to grow

In the kitchen garden Stephanie works with Sharon Louise Allen, who is also a vegetable enthusiast. Stephanie and Sharon draw up a planting plan in October that takes the garden through to October the following year. "We choose what we want to grow and discuss the various growing methods that we would like to try out within the garden," explains Stephanie. Once plants are in place in their growing sites, Sharon puts up bed labels. These are simple blackboards that she writes on with coloured liquid chalk pens. They can be wiped clean and used again next year.

Tomatoes are Stephanie's particular joy. Like many tomato addicts removing side shoots from tomatoes is one of the jobs she makes sure is reserved for her. She grows an abundance of different varieties and experiment with growing methods. "We also start growing tomatoes very early with heat in the greenhouse and use a grow light kit. We set this up on a timer and it extends the

Potatoes begin to lift off in early summer

Since she first bought organic produce a decade ago, Stephanie Harrod has been interested in eating organic produce. The first time she bought organic vegetables she had to travel 30 miles to her nearest supermarket branch. The taste was significantly different and she was hooked. But living, as she does, in a remote part of Norfolk, sourcing local, organically grown vegetables was virtually impossible ten years ago.

By then she had set up Harrod Horticultural, a mail-order business selling products for grow-it-yourself gardeners. She was determined to ensure that all of the products sold were suitable for organic gardening. So, in order to provide



Ornamental and practical, the fruit cages protect all manner of soft fruit, while in the background the attractive Victorian-style greenhouse forms the hub of the garden

products that were both effective and aesthetically pleasing she decided to set up her own kitchen garden. This not only gave her the opportunity to test her products but to indulge her passion for growing and eating organic fruit and vegetables.

While function is paramount, Stephanie wanted the garden to look as good as its produce would taste. She consulted her friend and award-winning garden designer Tom Hoblyn to assist with the design of the garden.

Size and shape

The kitchen garden is about one third of an acre and is rectangular in shape. It is on the site of a much larger kitchen garden that was lost when the previous



The colourful bed labelling system uses coloured chalk

Real growers



Irrigation piping weaves between thirsty courgette plants



Brassicas in the open are vulnerable to pigeon attacks



By late summer the kitchen garden is a hive of productivity

amount of 'day light' available to the plants."

Last year this method of starting tomatoes off was particularly successful for the variety 'Golden Queen', which was then planted out into mini-raised beds with frames and covers, producing quantities of very early, sweet yellow tomatoes. Last year Stephanie and Sharon trialled at least 10 different varieties of tomatoes and Stephanie's favourites were 'Brandywine', 'Golden Queen' and 'Tigerella'. In 2009 they plan to use the covers on all of their outdoor-grown tomatoes to avoid blight. They are also setting up more automated watering systems to cut down on the time spent watering this thirsty plant.

"We also decided to try out sowing carrots at different times and in different situations. We were very successful with our June sowing into a sandy raised bed, allowing us to harvest carrots right through into the New Year." The carrots – 'Autumn King', 'Jeanette F1' and 'Chantenay' – were grown in a 50/50 mix of loam and sand in a 45cm (18in)-deep raised bed.

Stephanie and Sharon grow a lot of produce in containers, including an Earth Box, which is designed for lower maintenance gardening. Ruby chard and spinaches 'Primo F1' and 'Giant Winter' did well last year. This has also been useful for growing oriental greens, of which there has been a steady harvest throughout the winter. This year Stephanie is trying out strawberries, tomatoes, aubergines and peppers using the Earth Box growing system.

Healthy growing

As Stephanie uses solely organic growing methods early planning is crucial, as is soil improvement and plant protection. Stephanie and Sharon use a comprehensive composting system, including a wormery, to ensure that the soil condition is improved year on year. "We also use various means of crop protection, including galvanised hoops covered with fleece, which is also a good method early in the season to warm the soil and the seedlings," adds Stephanie. They swap the fleece for insect mesh later in the season to protect the crops from predators such as whitefly.

The kitchen garden is plagued by slugs and so they trial different combat tactics,

including applying nematodes to every bed. The nematodes are used from March through to the end of September. Physical barriers such as copper rings and tape, and also slug halt (crushed sea shells) are all in use in the kitchen garden's armoury. This year Stephanie has taken a tip from Chris Beardshaw in the BBC's *Wild About Your Garden*, and plans to sprinkle porridge oats around the plants. Apparently slugs love to eat porridge and should leave the plants alone.

It is not all rosy, though. Stephanie confesses: "We have always struggled to grow brassicas as we are plagued by slugs and snails, pigeons, mice and, of course, the cabbage white butterfly, and we also have a poor acid soil." Despite their best efforts to improve the soil and to cover the whole beds with a cage covered with fine insect mesh the brassica crop did not fare well. "Unfortunately some of the pests had already taken up residence before we placed our cage over the bed. This year we have devised yet another plan of action and we will be covering the bed with butterfly netting as opposed to fine mesh, applying nematodes, and planting out in one of our raised beds. If anyone would like to view

our progress, please check out the Kitchen Garden update on our website," (details at end of feature).

To combat blackfly on broad beans Stephanie is calling on the services of the residents of ladybird houses, which she plans to site where the broad beans are destined to grow. Once the beans and the houses are on site she will introduce ladybirds to get the colony started.

However, the garden is already teeming with beneficial insects, attracted by the many plants that Stephanie uses for companion planting. Borage, calendula and cornflowers attract bees and offer colour and ornament to the kitchen garden. Stephanie and Sharon also use plants to repel insect pests, planting double-rows of onions around the carrot beds to deter carrot fly, and garlic in amongst salad leaves to control aphids.

Among the pest controls featured in the garden last year were a series of alarmingly life-like rubber snakes. These devices were in place in rows of peas to frighten off mice. They were a talking point for visitors to the garden, but the jury is out as to whether they were effective against the mice.



Can you spot him? A plastic snake keeps guard over young peas



Stephanie Harrod in her kitchen garden

Top of the crops

Among Stephanie's favourite vegetables are asparagus, carrots – "even the smell of freshly pulled carrots is incredible and the taste is even better" – and, of course, various cultivars of tomato. Potatoes are also among her favourites. Best of all are those from the first crop of new potatoes, which she steams and serves with butter and mint (from the garden of course). Probably top of the list are peas and broad beans, which Stephanie likes to blanch and sauté with shallots and smoked bacon.

Stephanie has a passion for cooking and

eating flavoursome food, a trait which she is sure derives from her Italian grandmother, who was a fabulous cook renowned for wonderful tomato-based pasta sauces and vegetable soups. Even when she was a youngster Stephanie used to cycle to the local shops to buy the family groceries in an era when there were more independent and local shops. Her mother taught her how to select the best produce and this is what drives her passion for quality vegetables and fruit.

Stephanie is delighted when there is a glut of tomatoes as she makes huge quantities of tomato sauce to add to pasta dishes, soups and so on. She also enjoys roasting vegetables, in particular courgettes with cherry tomatoes, drizzled with olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Last year's yellow courgettes were particularly successful and made the perfect accompaniment to roasted 'Gardener's Delight' tomatoes.

Stephanie's top tips

- Sow carrots into sand-loam-filled raised beds in June to enjoy a harvest over the winter.
- Cover outdoor tomato plants to avoid blight.
- Start off most vegetables in modules as opposed to sowing directly into the soil, as this allows you more control over the growing conditions.
- Where possible put irrigation systems into your beds and the greenhouse to have more control over the timing and the amount of water applied.
- Regularly test and improve the soil to give your crops the best conditions possible.
- Protect courgettes and squashes with cloches when they are first planted out to allow plants to gently acclimatise. The cloches will also protect against pests at this early stage.

Harrod Horticultural

Stephanie's father Ronald Harrod founded Harrod Horticultural in 1954 in Lowestoft, Suffolk. The company converted second-hand fishing nets into netting for gardens. The netting machines used were capable of making netting for different purposes, so he moved into the sports market, making netting and posts for a range of sports. There was always a seasonal trough in manufacturing, however, and in 2001, when Stephanie began to develop the mail order catalogue, the company went full-circle and returned to the garden netting market, manufacturing fruit cages made in the sports' netting off-season. In 2002 Stephanie published her first catalogue of just 36 pages. Now the catalogue runs to 112 pages and showcases horticultural products, many of which are manufactured at the company's Lowestoft headquarters. To find out more about Harrod Horticultural and to view the Kitchen Garden section of the website, visit www.harrodhorticultural.com Alternatively call 0845 2185301.