

### 1 French dressing

This is pretty darn lush. It's the 16th-century Château de Villandry in the Loire Valley that was once home to Napoleon Bonaparte's brother Jérôme, but the garden is relatively modern. It was made by a Spanish doctor, Joachim Carvallo, who with his wife Ann Coleman bought the château in 1906. The gardens offer far more than just this famous potager with Renaissance gardens, water gardens and magnificent flower gardens. It is still owned and run by the Carvallo family.



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1 LIZ EDDISON / FLORA PRESS



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### 2 Old-style charm

Those yellow wooden obelisks are quite a brave move but actually work well among a splendid cacophony of vegetables at Osterley Park. The gardens, including the walled potager, of this Georgian country estate on the outskirts of west London have been restored and loved by the National Trust since 1991.

### 3 Back to basics

This is not just any old small garden in Birmingham, this is the small garden in Birmingham owned and gardened by the divine Alys Fowler. Alys is a renowned gardener and writer who has squeezed very last square centimetre of growing space from her garden with a particular emphasis on things to eat.



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2 RACHEL WARNE; 3 NICOLA STOCKEN / GAF PHOTOS; 4 JASON INGRAM



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### 4 Functional beauty

These are the kitchen gardens at Kasteel Hex in Belgium. The house was developed by François-Charles de Velbrück, the Prince-Bishop of Liège at the end of the 18th century (clerics lived rather well in those days). This is a serious vegetable garden but so beautifully kept and arranged that it becomes an honorary potager.



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## Potagers

When is a vegetable garden not a vegetable garden? When it's a potager of course. But does the distinction come down to anything more than pretension or French good taste?

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR

I have got myself into a bit of a pickle. “What would you like to write about this month?” say the nice people at *Gardens Illustrated*. “How about potagers?” say I breezily. So here I am, hoist by my own petard, finding myself in the position of having to come up with a neat answer to the obvious question: when does a vegetable garden become a potager? Some may say one is considerably more pretentious than the other and others maintain that the former is something that should only be permitted in France. However, I think that they have two distinct identities and anyway, we should try to be as one with the French. They may be surly on occasions but they have generously given us many good things.

I reckon – but please feel free to, politely, contradict me if you wish – a potager is an altogether more formal affair designed to be looked at as well as eaten, as opposed to a vegetable garden that is

there purely for food and, as a side effect, healthy labour. This implies that a veg garden cannot look amazing, which is not at all true, but it is a different kind of beauty. It is a beauty born of fecundity, and the promise of ratatouille and raspberries rather than design. I would hazard the theory that the difference is that most people's vegetable gardens are planned while all potagers are designed. A subtle difference but a difference all the same.

Traditionally the potager is very formally laid out – this is a nod to medieval monks who liked a bit of religious imagery in their borders to divert their minds from caterpillars on their brassicas. However, the formality is by no means essential and there is nothing wrong with mixing things up a bit and scattering edibles through the borders. We have been doing it with herbs for centuries so why not fruit and vegetables as well? This works well in smaller >

### 5 Colour blast

Philippa Burrough's garden at Ulting Wick in Essex is stuffed with enough irresistible flowers (particularly tulips and dahlias) to make any florist sick with longing. However, it does not stop there as there is also a potager with oaken-edged beds and squashes dangling from a willow tunnel. Opens for the NGS.

### 6 First love

This is where it all began for me, Barnsley House in Gloucestershire, once home of the great Rosemary Verey. It is now a very spiffy hotel but her memory lives on in the gardens, which are immaculately maintained. As well as the potager there are ponds and knot gardens and, apparently, a very fine afternoon tea.

### 7 Savoir flair

Restored in 1984 after the discovery of some dusty plans in the castle's archives, the gardens at Château Saint-Jean de Beaugard near Paris is one of the rare castle gardens to have survived intact to the present day. Each of the garden's four quarters has been subdivided into 12 squares along with cut flowers and orchards.



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5 MARRIANNE MAJERUS GARDEN IMAGES; ULTING WICK © JOHN GLOVER / GAP PHOTOS; 7 GILLES LE SCANIFF & JOÏLLE-CAROLINE MAYER / THE GARDEN COLLECTION / FP / BGS PHOTO



JASON INGRAM

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### 8 Perfectly formed

As well as designing gardens across the world for all sorts of eminences, Arne Maynard still makes time for his own garden, Allt-y-Bela in the Usk Valley. As you would expect there is beautiful topiary and some fine borders but also this charming vegetable and cutting garden.

### Further reading

If you are going to grow vegetables then, for goodness sake, grow the best you possibly can. These are useful guides to getting the most from your potager.

- **Abundance: How to Store and Preserve your Garden Produce** by Alys Fowler (Kyle Books, 2016). Invaluable for learning how to make what you grow last.
- **The Great Vegetable Plot** by Sarah Raven (BBC Books, 2005). A guide to creating a beautiful plot full of the best possible things to eat. Sarah's other great book, *The Cutting Garden*, will give you ideas of what to grow among the veg.
- **The New Kitchen Garden** by Mark Diacono (Headline Home, 2015). Mark is the master of the unusual vegetable and the surprisingly good fruit. He can also cook.

▷ gardens where there may not be space to fence off a dedicated vegetable area. In one of my first gardens (indeed the first one that was not mostly concrete) we had courgettes among roses and just outside my office window right now we have pumpkins among rudbeckias. For even smaller gardens the same effect can be achieved with containers.

The first potager I ever encountered was in Rosemary Verey's garden at Barnsley House in Gloucestershire. I had seen it in books (along with the remarkable Laburnum Walk) and it was with great excitement (and some trepidation as Mrs Verey was, at that time, alive and rumbling around the garden) that we went to visit. They say that you should never meet your idols and in this case that was true as the garden was much smaller than I expected – I think one may have been inclined to say the same thing when

meeting, say, Napoleon. My second potager was a different kettle of fish: or might I say poisson as it was in France. Nobody will ever complain that Villandry is too small: there are nine squares stuffed with colour co-ordinated vegetables that are changed twice during the year to keep the visitor happy. This neatly avoids the dilemma facing every vegetable garden: the moment when they are looking their best is also the moment when we need to start eating their produce so they are soon reduced to a straggle of leftover foliage and expanses of bare soil. The balance between food and beauty is a difficult one to manage.

To get round this little dilemma, wise potager gardeners also plant up a selection of annuals and perennials among the vegetables. This wins on many levels – it extends the season, gives us flowers to cut to go with our vats of bean chutney and also

brings us into the realms of companion planting. This is probably not the place to delve into this particular subject: but suffice to say that it is a way of creating happy plant communities where the flowers and vegetables band together to ward off various pests or attract pollinators.

So have we solved the problem? Have we come up with a decent explanation of the differences between veg gardens and potagers? I hope so. There will always be a slight division between gardeners who prefer vegetables and those who are ornamentalists. We have that in this house: my wife is very much in charge of vegetables, I do flowers. A potager garden is like the Korean de-militarised zone – a place where the two diametrically opposed parties can come together and work harmoniously. Actually that is nothing at all like Korea, but wouldn't it be nice if it were. □

### Potagers to visit

- Barnsley House**  
Barnsley, Cirencester, Gloucestershire GL7 5EE.  
Tel 01285 740000, barnsleyhouse.com/the-gardens/
- Château de Saint-Jean de Beaugard**  
Rue du Château, 91940 Saint-Jean de Beaugard, France.  
Tel +33 (0)1 60 12 00 01, domsaintjeanbeaugard.com
- Château de Villandry**  
3 rue Principale, 37510 Villandry, France.  
Tel +33 (0)2 47 50 02 09, chateauvillandry.fr/en
- Osterley Park**  
Jersey Road, Isleworth, Middlesex TW7 4RB.  
Tel 020 8232 5050, nationaltrust.org.uk/osterley-park-and-house