

Steeped in the soil

There's an organic garden in Oxfordshire that James Alexander-Sinclair doesn't want anyone to know about. But he'll let you into the secret, provided you don't tell a soul

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM



In brief

Name Worton Organic Garden.
What Market garden, supplying shop and restaurant.
Where Oxfordshire.
Size Seven acres.
Soil Sandy.
Climate Temperate maritime.
Hardiness rating USDA 8.

David and Anneke Blake harvesting leeks and beans in their beautiful and productive garden at Worton Organic Garden in Oxfordshire. These will soon find their way into their shop and delicious dishes in the restaurant.



1

I write this article with a heavy heart. If I write a glowing piece there is a distinct possibility that you lot will be moved to visit and buy stuff. That would mean that there was less left for me so the temptation is to say “Move along there, nothing to see.” But that, sadly, would be not only impolite but selfish and I remember what my mother told me about sharing my toys. So may I introduce to you one of the absolute gems of Oxfordshire: Worton Organic Gardens, an unbelievably productive (and extraordinarily beautiful) garden surrounding a shop groaning with goodies and a practically perfect little restaurant.

This is the purlieu of David and Anneke Blake both hailing from families steeped in the soil, all be it on opposite sides of the globe. David emigrated to Melbourne aged four and had an eclectic career as publican, music agent and bookseller before meeting Anneke in the Netherlands where her family ran a thriving smallholding in the same street as the renowned Dutch garden designer, the late Henk Gerritsen. It was he who put them in touch with the Oppenheimers at Waltham Place in Berkshire where they worked as gardeners at the beginning of the millennium.

A decade or so ago fate (and an advertisement in *Farmers Weekly*) brought them to Worton, where they found a field and a few polytunnels: within a season they had begun to transform it into a thriving garden. “You can make a vegetable garden very

1 Anneke finds the common dislike of yellow puzzling, as she loves it. It’s also the dominant colour in her breathtaking flower borders, which are teeming with sunflowers, rudbeckias and marigolds. **2 Most of the phenomenal range of vegetables** grown at Worton Organic find their way into the shop overseen by David, frequently sporting a jaunty hat. Alongside, vegetables, the shop also sells Dutch cheeses, home-made organic sourdough bread and, on one Sunday each month, fresh fish. **3 While the vegetable garden is David’s domain,** Anneke prefers to concentrate on growing flowers, including *Salvia ‘Amistad’*, which has velvety, dark-purple flowers held on almost-black calyces from May to November. **4 Anneke’s yellow borders** feature some stunning and unusual combinations of plants, such as this broad-leaved *Ricinus communis* amid a sea of yellow tagetes. **5 Two antique rhubarb forcers** surrounded by an eclectic selection of plants, including the tall grass *Stipa gigantea*, mint in flower and *Verbascum* seedheads line the path to the restaurant.

quickly,” says David. “They are basically annuals.” Over the years it has expanded and improved: initially selling produce at local markets and through a veg box scheme although the latter “was very annoying!” remembers Anneke. They now have seven acres under cultivation – fields of fruit trees, avenues of raspberries, and currants, polytunnels brimming with unusual salads and rows and rows of beans, pumpkins, beetroot, spuds... you get the picture. Abundance in abundance and all of it planted and nurtured by David and a team of ever cheerful East Timorese gardeners.

In the middle of this is the shop and restaurant, stocked with an array of organic fruit and vegetables as well as the freshest of fish and great wheels of Dutch cheese – cow, ewe and goat – that ▷



2



3



4



5

Top tomatoes

At Worton they grow amazing tomatoes: so amazing that we have pretty much given up growing them ourselves in despair. David has what he calls ‘sweet boxes’ on his counter – these are punnets of many coloured and multi-flavoured, cherry-sized tomatoes. They are completely irresistible and they seldom last long in our house: I even have one on my desk. However, there are chunkier cultivars as well – this is a quick whisk through some of their favourites.

- **‘Burke’s Backyard’** – an Australian heritage tomato that David was initially reluctant to grow, but it has proved to be a good ‘un.
- **‘Caro Rich’** – hard skinned, which protects it from cracking. The flavour is similar to ‘Melody’ and it contains remarkably few seeds.
- **‘Green Doctors’** – cherry sized growing in amazingly bountiful trusses. Looks unripe, tastes divine.
- **‘Green Giant’** – large with a great deep colour. Great sprinkled with either salt or sugar in a tomato salad.
- **‘Indigo Beauty’** – one of the new wave American cultivars bred in Minnesota. Sweet with a dark, blue-black skin colour.
- **‘Orange Banana’** – very pest resistant. Long trusses of extremely sweet fruit good for drying.
- **‘Stupice’** – a small-to-medium-sized early tomato. Great in a salad – old-fashioned, ‘pure tomato’ taste. Originated in the Czech Republic.
- **‘Sungold’** – gleaming yellow. Sweet and yet sharp at the same time. Really good for indoctrinating children into the joys of tomato eating.





Jair and Fidel from East Timor, and Arnald from the Philippines help David cultivate the seven acres of fruit and vegetables.



5

1 Anneke uses cut flowers from her borders to create artful displays, such as this mix of zinnias from the Benary's Giant Series, for the restaurant. **2 Leeks and other staple** British veg grow alongside exotics from around the world. **3 The purple plumes of *Amaranthus* 'Hopi Red Dye'** add a dramatic contrast to the yellow *Rudbeckia hirta* 'Prairie Sun'. **4 Anneke grows swathes of dahlias**, including this *Dahlia* 'Otto's Thrill'. **5 *L'arte di mangiar bene*** or the art of eating well perfectly sums up David and Anneke's philosophy. It's also the motto of their shop, which you reach by cutting through Anneke's deep borders with *Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Herbstsonne' and *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Transparent' lining your path. **6 Borlotti beans provide a speckled** burst of colour. **7 Worton grows and rows of unusual leaves**, including these relatively new Salanova lettuces. **8 David harvests a *Solanum melongena* 'Black Pearl'** an excellent aubergine that is well suited to the British climate. **9 Although this pumpkin is known as *Cucurbita maxima* 'Atlantic Giant'** it's actually quite modest in size.



6



7



8



9



Another of Anneke's displays featuring several cut flowers, including the dark-red *Dahlia* 'Karma Naomi', the peach-coloured *D.* 'Cornel Brons' and the claret-red *D.* 'Ivanetti'.

▷ bear no resemblance to the scarlet waxed slices of childhood edam. It is all housed in a fabulous home-made shack that keeps expanding: while I was there Anneke was itching to go off and order wood for an extension. David runs the shop – eccentrically hatted with classical music booming and a glass of wine close at hand – and will always steer one towards what is particularly good that week. Anneke is an excellent, though sometimes reluctant, cook who is adept at combining very simple but invigorating flavours (often with a tinkle of Indonesia) although she would always rather be gardening.

"I hated gardening as a child," she admits. Even now she is pretty indifferent about growing vegetables (very much David's department) and prefers to concentrate on flowers. As you arrive at Worton Organic you are immediately greeted with long double borders that take your breath away – they are very yellow. "Some people are averse to yellow," explains a puzzled Anneke. "I find it a most uplifting colour full of joy. The Buddhists consider it the colour of the gateway to heaven." David chips in: "...and in music it is the colour of the trumpet". The beds are full of sunflowers, rudbeckias and marigolds, and in addition there are great swathes of dahlias, tulips, amaranthus and everything else you need for cutting.

I have now shared the secret and I trust that I will not be pushed out or deprived of my punnet of perfect tomatoes by a whole load of interloping visitors. By all means visit, soak up the

atmosphere, admire the borders, coo at the chickens and scratch the pigs, but please don't eat everything. Thank you. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Worton Organic Garden, Worton, near Cassington, Oxfordshire OX29 4SU.

Tel 07718 518964.

Web wortonorganicgarden.com

Open Friday, Saturday and Sunday year round.

Turn the page for three delicious recipes from Worton Organic.



Worton tomato salad

- 3 or 4 different coloured beefsteak tomatoes
 - 1 large, or 2 small shallots, finely sliced or diced
 - Purple basil
- For the dressing:**
- 1tbsp Dijon mustard
 - 1tbsp red wine vinegar
 - 1 clove of garlic crushed
 - 6tbsp sunflower oil
 - Pinch of salt
 - Pinch of sugar

Cut the tomatoes horizontally, to expose their beautiful structure and arrange the slices in a nice and colourful way on the plate, scatter the chopped shallots, and pour the dressing over the tomatoes and shallots. Sprinkle the chopped basil on top and finish with a bit of freshly ground black pepper. Serve immediately.



Bread and butter pickles (makes approx 5-6 jars)

- 750g small gherkins
 - 450g shallots
 - 1 green bell pepper
 - 50g salt
- For the brine:**
- 475ml cider vinegar
 - 180g light brown sugar
 - ½tsp turmeric powder
 - ¼tsp ground cloves
 - 1tbsp yellow mustard seeds
 - ½tsp celery seeds

Slice gherkins, shallots and pepper thinly and mix with the salt in a large bowl, cover and set aside for a minimum of 3 hours.

Preheat the oven to 160°C/Gas 3. Prepare your jars, by washing in hot, soapy water and then place the wet jars upside down on a baking tray and place in the preheated oven for around 15 minutes to sterilise them.

Put all the brine ingredients in a non-reactive pan and bring to the boil, stirring occasionally to dissolve the sugar. Boil for 5 minutes. Drain the vegetables and rinse in cold water, drain again and add them to the hot brine. Reheat slowly to just below boiling point, stirring occasionally. Spoon the mixture into the warm, sterilised jars and seal with vinegar-proof lids.

The pickle is ready to eat immediately with cheese and a slice of rye sourdough – or any good bread – but if stored in a sealed jar it will keep for up to a year.



Plum and mulberry frangipane tart

- For the pastry:**
- 100g cold butter, cubed
 - 75g caster sugar
 - 1 egg, beaten
 - 200g plain flour, plus extra for dusting
 - Pinch of salt
- For the filling:**
- 170g butter, softened
 - 170g caster sugar
 - 2 eggs, beaten
 - 80g ground almonds
 - 40g plain flour
 - 40g self-raising flour
 - 300g plums
 - 300g mulberries

First make the pastry. Beat the butter with the sugar and a pinch of salt until white. Add the beaten egg and fold in the flour

gently. Let it rest for an hour or so and then roll out the pastry and line a 28cm round, loose bottomed, fluted tart tin. Let it rest again for 30 minutes. Bake blind for 25 minutes in a preheated oven at 180°C/Gas 4. Take out the baking beans and bake for another 5 to 10 minutes, then turn the oven down slightly to around 170°C/Gas 3.

In the meantime make the filling. Beat the butter and sugar in an electric mixer until white. Add the ground almonds, plain flour and self-raising flour and eggs. Cut the plums in half and remove the stones. Fill the tart case with the frangipane mixture and put the plums, cut side up, gently on top. Scatter the mulberries around the plums. Bake in the preheated oven for 40 minutes.