

RHS Interchange Fellowship 2024-25 Midterm Report

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How very kind it was of Monty Don to wait until I arrived in the UK to make his British gardens tv series. Monty first introduced me to the world of British gardening in my early days as a horticulturist, listening to him speak on podcasts as I planted the flower beds. It felt very nostalgic and fitting that on my great British garden adventure that this fellowship has allowed me he should be doing the same. I found the questions he was asking gardeners across the country to be ones I had been wondering since arriving. What makes a British garden? Is there such a thing? What makes the British people a gardening people? I have found, and it seemed Monty did too, that when it comes to a question about people and their gardens there never really is one answer. So I was very excited for the many answers I was about to discover.

And the adventure began at RHS Garden Wisley...



I was blown away. The orchard at Wisley. Once a landscape filled with rows and rows of fruit trees, mostly a monoculture of apples, it has undergone a transformation into an ecologically rich environment like no other. All under the fearless leadership of Sheila Das and Paul Kettle and accomplished by the remarkable Edibles Team. On my first day with the Edibles Team, Paul took me around the orchard and explained that it had operated as a typical commercial production orchard since its implementation in the 1950s. It was irrigated, fertilized, and sprayed heavily. This was how you grew fruit then, it was the best practice. With the revolution for organic food production well established in the UK and with Wisley as an example to the public of what to do at home, there was clearly a need for change. Consulting with others in horticulture who have carried out similar changes to their gardens, they decided the best way to make the transition was to pull the plug, cold turkey or bust. Paul told me in a conversation with Fergus Garret that he advised if you insist on weaning the trees off irrigation and spray slowly they will continue to be reliant on the chemicals. Far better to stop all artificial input and let the environment balance out for itself. In five years, it will be productive again. Maybe never again to the extent of when it was being sprayed but enough, and far better ecologically. Looking around I could see how different this orchard was from any I had ever seen. Patches of long grass and short grass, providing a variation of habitat. Tree limbs pruned from the orchard trees left in stacks, keeping plant material that may have beneficial insects and fungi local. Surrounding the orchard, meadow spaces and a newly dug ephemeral pond. Fast growing habitat put in to encourage the birds to come eat the destructive weevils and moths that just discovered a new lease on life since pesticides spray had stopped. Coppices of *Salix* to chip and use as a natural fungicide at the base of the fruit trees. New trees and shrubs, to mix the age, height, and varieties of the fruit grown, no more monocultures! Everything was done to increase biodiversity. Done to follow more closely the processes and diversity found in natural environments. A method sometimes called circular gardening, recreating or mimicking nature. But what was really driving home for me about this amazing project was that this was an experiment. Not a right or wrong way to garden, but learning and adapting over the years. Horticulture always is experimental at heart.



Left: The Orchard on a frosty morning, apples on the right with a patch of fast growing habitat opposite. Right: The apple trees plentiful with fruit

One of the new gardens installed in the orchard was the edible meadow. The gardener who oversees it is the amazing Ewa Krupa. Starting as a student at Wisley she was able to get to know the orchard well before joining the team to now be one of the leaders in its restoration. My favorite thing I learned from Ewa was how to make a meadow. I am now completely obsessed with meadows. I would like to grow meadows everywhere. What was even more exciting was the prospect of an edible meadow. Ok now you really got me! An edible meadow is a space installed and maintained like a meadow, but among the plants selected to grow are edibles like mallows, chicory, *Nasturtium*, clovers, dandelions, species of *Silene* such as *S. latifolia* or *S. dioica*, *Leucanthemum vulgare*, and, a classic meadow beauty, loads and loads of poppies. I believe Ewa had even added some radishes to her mix. Grown from seed, cut back a couple times a year, this is easy enough maintenance once established and the seed bank balances out. In Ewa's meadow she has also created topographical variety with mounds of soil the vegetation grows on, adding some natural drainage, and paths to walk through. There is also a sandy pit kept free of vegetation to provide bare soil for ground nesting pollinators. To highlight the importance of ecotones, the area where two ecosystems meet and a place where hotspots of diversity exist, a hedge row is growing next to the meadow. It is also edible with small fruiting shrubs and even some olive trees for a mediterranean spin that is planting with climate change in mind. The concept of edible meadows is attributed to ecological designer Sid Hill, who consulted with the team at Wisley when they started many of the new spaces in the orchard. My mind was being opened to so many new and exciting ideas and this was still just the beginning.



Left: The edible meadow, surrounded by an in-progress stylish habitat wall that offers options for the critters including spaces of dead hedge, log wall, standing dead wood, and rubble wall. Different material for both aesthetics and for varied habitat. The pit in the middle is kept clear of vegetation for the ground nesting insects. Right: A rainbow shining over our hand scarified bit of meadow in the World Food Garden. A good omen.

A unique and incredible adventure I was able to have early on in this fellowship was partaking in the Walled Kitchen Garden Network's annual forum. Founded by the great Susan Campbell, the WKGN seeks to save kitchen gardens and the art of kitchen gardening from falling into only distant memories. Every year a group of friends, gardeners, and garden enthusiasts get together to learn about and see firsthand these special places. And each year the location changes, to explore the whole of the country in search of these sometimes hidden treasures. This year it was held in Devon, hosted by the National Trust

Garden Knightshayes. The agenda was set, two days of garden visits and a few lectures on recent finds in the walled garden world and stories of garden restorations. I set out on my train from Wisley, eager to see what this adventure had in store.

The next day it began. I sat in the second row, and there in front of me was someone I knew I had seen in a book somewhere. Then it dawned on me and I tapped her on the shoulder. I am pretty sure I said, “Did you do West Dean?” and she laughed. Sure enough she had. It was Sarah Wain. She and her husband, Jim Buckland, who were the wizards responsible for the restoration and creation of the incredible gardens at West Dean, were also attending this forum. They apparently loved walled kitchen gardens too. I couldn’t believe my luck, I get to hang out with these people all weekend? And it didn’t stop with them, many other amazing garden enthusiasts from all backgrounds came together to celebrate walled kitchen gardens and bond over this shared love. Kitchen gardeners, head gardeners, WWOOFing hosts, garden journalists, garden archaeologists, the list goes on. Gardeners. It didn’t matter your background or how much knowledge you had, we were all gardeners and loved growing food. Everyone was embraced and welcomed into this merry band. And everyone was eager to share their knowledge, passion, and excitement for growing food, even bringing a sampling of apples they had grown that year into the restaurant for all to try after dinner.

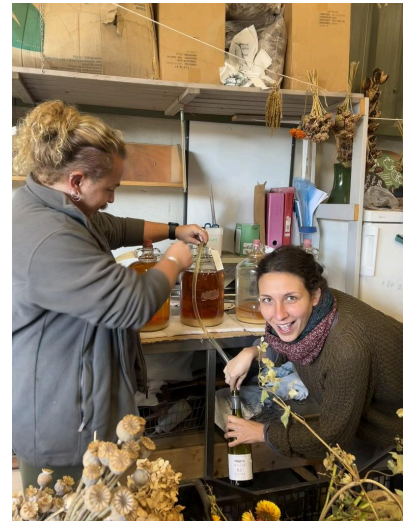


Left: National Trust garden Knightshayes, gorgeous chard and brassicas fill the rows in the walled kitchen garden. Right: Private garden Ashley Court’s walled kitchen garden, lovingly restored by the owners.

I visit gardens specifically to see their vegetable gardens, how amazingly encouraging to see other gardeners did too. The four gardens we toured were National Trust Garden Knightshayes, and private gardens the Regency House, Ashley Court, and Holcombe Court. Each unique in their stories and gardens. Andy, the kitchen gardener at Knightshayes, dealing with heavy weed cover in their beds, up to 30% of the soil, planted pumpkins and *Centaurea* in thick bindweed and let them battle it out. A zero

tolerance approach was not going to work in this sizable garden. Andy's tips were to always plant flowers with your vegetables for our friends the pollinators and to get a cat, for small mammal control of course. In a much smaller property at Ashley court, the owners used their walled kitchen garden to supply the meals they cooked for guests staying at their B&B. They described their garden and its journey of restoration as "so fantastically, romantically chaotic," like finding the Secret Garden. They fed us the most amazing completely vegan lunch, all prepared in house with produce from the garden. Invited to come back for dinner, where there was handmade veggie lattice pie (wow!), I felt like I walked back in time. Into an Agatha Christie novel, maybe. But in only the best sense, no murders of course. And it was fantastically romantic. As this lovely weekend came to a close, I was pretty darn sure I wanted a walled kitchen garden too.

Back at Wisley I finished up an amazing month with the Edibles team. How quickly it flew by with excitement, fun, and my brain overflowing with knowledge and new ideas. Some special moments are essential to mention before I move on. The autumn was fully upon us and the harvest ripe. We picked cider apples and pressed them for cider, while renaissance music streamed from the speaker. It felt oh so English. The team banded together to put fabulous edible displays together in the garden, arranging the bounty grown that year including many many gourds, apples, cabbages, sweet potatoes, rosehips, corn, and medlers (a new one for me!). I was happy to contribute with the dried flower bunting to really set it all off. All under the artistic vision and direction of Narissa and Pav! The Edible team exuded artistic and creative energy. I tried to soak it all up. And as the season faded slowly into darker nights and a chill in the air, the garden spaces changed. I am used to a clean sweep putting the beds to sleep for the winter in the east coast of the USA, where temperatures can remain at or below freezing for long periods. But instead, in the World Food Garden in Surrey, where the winters are more mild, we planted up the emptying beds with pak choi, violas, radishes, onions, and let those crops that can overwinter like kales carry on. This is not to say you can't grow winter veg back home in the mid atlantic. Indeed with a little help from frost covers many do. But at least in my experience at some public gardens, it is usually more trouble than it's worth and a cover crop or a covering of compost is a general practice. It really made me appreciate that I was in a different climate. This was something Monty Don brought up in his British Gardens series. That the British Isles mild climate opens it up to a very wide palette of plants to play with in the garden. And that this may be why the British people are such garden folk. It's a very good place to grow a lot of plants.



Top left to right: The great hops excavation in the World Food Garden. The national fig collection, in their autumn best. Beans. Morning mist creating a mood and dew on the asparagus. Cider making with Leo and Ewa, someone had to siphon it out of the bottles. Tomato pants! The edible team's creativity inspired so much art. The harvest display for Wisley's Festival of Flavors.

The place I still dream about at Wisley is Oakwood. I will confess I am not typically a woody kinda gal, but I can't lie that whenever I could I would direct my walk home through Oakwood and catch just one more sniff of the *Camella sasangua* 'Tago-no-tsuki.' I think part of the romance of this place was indeed the garden itself, layer upon layer of woodland plants arranged and maintained in a way to paint a landscape. But the other half of it was the amazing Welcome & Riverside Team I had the privilege of working with at Wisley. First of all, gardeners that keep the biscuit tin overflowing are happy gardeners. You could also feel the passion and joy they felt for their work, which would light up any room. A neat part of rotating through different teams in a garden is you get to observe different ways each person gardens. The focus of the Welcome & Riverside Team was gardening for biodiversity and sustainability. Emma showed me the Pinetum (another very dear spot) and plans to install an ephemeral pond and water meadows in the areas that flood regularly. Eli led heather shearing and shared how they were researching peat free ways to propagate the *Erica*, *Calluna*, and *Daboecia* collections. Rose showed me the monoculture lavender field turned mixed meadow after having assessed that the climate really did not favor the lavenders and, hey, diversity of plants usually encourages diversity of other species. With Jack and Claudia I became a master of the dead hedge. My favorite day with Vicky was planting bulbs with a robin. And all under the fearless leadership of Mark Tuson, who's ecological gardening approach is truly so inspirational and out of the box!



Left to right: Bamboo dead hedge in Oakwood, limiting it to one material can help it look neater and the ends of the bamboo are not only pretty but a home for a bee. As you can see, I was very happy to make dead hedges, the whole process was fascinating! This dead hedge on the right was another I helped with in the rock garden's fern glade. Julia's style of layers of different materials and s-shaped structure is another aesthetically pleasing option.

I could really go on and on about my time at Wisley. It was a truly special time. At the end of my three months with these lovely people and glorious garden, I could not believe how at home I felt. I was becoming a real Wisley gardener adding many practical skills to my horticultural belt. A pruning masterclass took me through apple, pear, grape, fig, and soft fruit maintenance. With both a mixture of traditional techniques and a more ecological approach, letting the form be a little more wild to follow the natural growth of the trees. On the Woodland team, Helen taught me how to scythe like in the old days. Daisy taught me to crochet. And the Alpine Team opened a whole new, tiny, world to me. Everything I

learned in Alpine was new. Growing plants in inorganic material. Using sand plunges, where the plants in terracotta pots are plunged into damp sand to regulate water levels, through osmosis, and temperature to mimic their natural growing environment. *Massonia Dionysia*, *Lachenailia*, *Primula auricula*, *Moraea*, so many new plants for me! It was also in Alpine that I fed a robin from my hand. A dream come true. But the most special part of my whole time at Wisley was the people I met. Incredible students who welcomed me to Hanbury and counted me as one of their own. Also embracing me as an American for reasons like Thanksgiving. Every gardener's kindness and generosity of time and knowledge helped me grow exponentially and reinforced my solid belief that garden people are the best kind of people. It was very hard to leave Wisley.



Left to right: The colors were hung to signal if the American was home or away. Group trip to Bedgebury National Pinetum and Forest, with an amazing tour by Jack. Thanksgiving at Hanbury with the gang!

Two momentous occasions called for a short break. Christmas and my birthday. I dragged my siblings all over my new found home, showing off some favorite spots like Ashdown Forest in West Sussex and the Seven Sisters cliffs. We had an English Christmas with crackers and the new Wallace and Gromit (*Vengeance Most Fowl*). Then a trip to Scotland, as Edinburgh was the destination of my new garden placement. For my birthday I watched red kites eat squirrels. This was followed by a surprise trip to a surprise local. Flanders Moss National Nature Reserve, an ancient bog. It is a raised bog habitat, a wet puddle of a place where dead plant material piles up on each other over time and these piles are what form peat. NatureScot, who take care of this reserve, record that one millimetre a year of peat is being laid down here a year. Witnessing this incredibly beautiful landscape was haunting. Not just because Scotland is haunted, but because you could see firsthand what we lose when we don't practice sustainable horticulture. The RHS's peat free initiative is one example of British horticulture making strides in the industry. Running many peat free growing trials with nurseries around the country, Hillier, Vitacress, Allensmore Nurseries, and more, with very promising results. The RHS itself has pledged to be 100% peat-free by this year. If we are capable of causing plant and animal species to go extinct and obliterate natural resources I am sure we could try to go to the opposite extreme to save and preserve them. And standing in the golden light of the fading day, in this completely magical space, how necessary it is to preserve these special places in our beautiful home.



Left: Reunited with a Longwood pal. *Victoria* 'Longwood Hybrid' set to grow in the greenhouses at RBGE. Right: Flanders Moss, ancient bog.

It is always lovely to see a friend when you are out traveling. At the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh I found *Victoria* 'Longwood Hybrid.' Ten of *Victoria* actually, arrived as seed in a package from Longwood Gardens. I was eager to help with sowing these seeds as the connection to Longwood, my alma mater, was special. It was quick but it was fun. Five seeds were placed in a jar of water and five in terracotta filled with gravel, a test to see the quality of germination for each method. Across the hall we placed them in a pool of heated water to let them begin their journey of growth. How cool to see plants come to grow here from my home garden! I was happy to hear of the RBGE's close connection with Longwood and indeed many other organizations. As a prominent place for studies in botanical science, taxonomic research, and outstanding collections, the RBGE reaches people around the world. On a tour around the research greenhouses I saw plants whose genes were being studied to make decisions on taxonomic classification. As gardeners we hear about these name changes and wonder what's up with them, it was amazing to see where it all actually happens, putting a face to the name if you will. A tremendous event that happened at the end of my time at RBGE though drove home how special it is to have these garden connections. Storm Éowyn. An extratropical cyclone with extremely high winds, Edinburgh was issued a red warning, not a usual occurrence. The storm knocked down many trees in the garden and smashed glass panes in the glasshouses. It was deeply sad, especially seeing the broken *Cedrus deodara*, the gardens tallest specimen, planted 1859. On social media the condolences and words of encouragement flooded in. From gardens around the country like Kew and Bristol Botanic, but also from around across the pond, Denver Botanic and Brooklyn Botanic in the USA. So very special!

Two gardens down, many more to go. Time is simply flying by and the gardening community seems to be getting bigger and bigger. Who knew there were so many wonderful people and gardens in the world. I wonder if I can see them all. Meet them all. With a helicopter to catch tomorrow for Tresco Abbey, I better call it for this report. It is possible the next may be very very long.