

A COMMUNITY GARDEN

If you are thinking of doing such a thing, read on.



There can be no phrase more guaranteed to tug at middle class heartstrings than ‘community garden’. Everybody and her dog seems to know exactly what it means, but when – in our little town – an opportunity arose to start one, we found little agreement! Some people thought ‘food production’; some thought ‘biodiversity’; others thought ‘nice to do things together, meet kindred spirits’; yet others thought ‘aha, a chance to make use of all those surplus plants, seeds, cuttings, garden wastes...’. Still others thought ‘how nice to have a pleasant area to hang out, that other people look after.’ They like the warm feeling of a share in something collective, without having to do much. There was talk of ‘horticultural therapy’, gardens to heal the soul. Personally, as a pedagogical geek, I thought the scheme was a good way to teach beginners about gardens, vegetables, and the cycles of life, and generally raise awareness. How to square all these circles?

As it happens, I had considerable experience of ‘community ventures’ of various kinds, and I knew that early idealism wanes quickly. Accordingly, we tried to keep things as flexible as possible, focusing on low-maintenance perennial plants, large easily maintained areas of grass, and wildlife-friendly choices.

The garden area belonged to The Pound Arts Centre, courtesy of Wiltshire Council. It was originally a school playground, and there are local people who remember it and even used it. The tarmac was removed, but the area was then abandoned, quickly reverting to grass and weeds, of little use except for passing ponies and occasional badger trysts. Badgers can be quite noisy when they’re um...



This is how the area looked before the Community Garden project started.



The view southward from near the main gate. The main path through is on the left, the path into the garden on the right. You can see the main grassed area, surrounded by posts, wires and immature fruit trees. The buildings at the back are residences.

The plot area is broadly rectangular, and open to the sun. The path near the Pound building is used all the time, notably by parents and children going to and from the primary school round the corner. This had to stay. There is an area near the building that remained tarmacked, so this is used for raised vegetable beds allowing accessibility for people in wheelchairs. An open grassy

area is 'enclosed' by trained fruit trees. On one side fan-trained plums and cherries, on another espalier-style apples, pears, quince and apricot. Yet another side features soft fruit, currants, gooseberries, tayberry etc. There is a huge wild blackberry patch in the eastern corner.

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The grassy area is 'balanced' by a long flower border against a stone wall, with a wide 3 m gravel path in between the two. This border has several ornamental hawthorn trees with nectar-rich



The main pathway into the garden. The stone wall is on the right, with the flower border in front, and frames for grapes. Espalier apples and pears are on the left, with perennial herbs such as marjoram.

flowers to encourage insects in spring, a cob-nut tree, and a frame for grapes and kiwi fruit. At the entrance end it has perennial 'garden plants', while the rest is sown with cornfield annuals.

On the south-western side, there is a wall against which compost bays have been constructed from pallets and plywood. It also has huge ivy plants, good for nectar in the autumn. There is also a large 'soil stack' from turf removed in the creation of the path and borders.

The garden is 'topped off' as it were, by an entrance archway of local oak, designed and made by Adam Walton. This will ultimately be clothed by climbers.



A view to the east, showing the archway, lawn area, and flower border. In the foreground are broad beans grown through the winter of 2022-3. The beans were incorporated into the Pound Café's now-celebrated broad bean pâté.

HOW DID WE DO IT AND HOW DID IT GO?

We had some money, about £5000, from various sources. We had plenty of good will. After a general plan was agreed (see sketch at right) we mowed off the long grass and dug up areas for the path, beds and tree strips. The turf was stacked at the far western end and covered with tarpaulin. This will be an enduring resource as loam for potting mixes.

We erected training frames for the trees, using treated round poles and wires. We planted bare-rooted fruit trees in late March of 2022. This was a bit late for bare roots, and they needed constant watering, but nearly all survived, were cut back in the winter and are doing reasonably well in 2023. We lost a cherry, a crab and the kiwi vine.

Sturdy deep boxes for vegetables were provided by the local 'men's shed', and these were filled with a commercial peat-free compost mix that has proved very effective. Courgettes, salads and herbs flourished, followed by winter onions, garlic, broad beans, rocket, land cress and cornsalad. In the spring/summer of 2023 these have been replaced with peas, tomatoes, kale, basil, courgettes, chard, beetroot, chicory and various salads.



The original plan. This has been followed fairly closely, although the pond is now planned for the south corner and the compost bunkers are along the northeast boundary.

The flower border was sown with a cornfield annual mix and worked spectacularly, a riot of colour until the autumn. It successfully self-seeded and was even more spectacular in late May and June 2023, but then looked shaggy and 'spent', needing thinning and weeding. This has now been done (by volunteers) and looks neater, but we shall see what happens later.



The lawn area is easily maintained by mowing, thanks to one dedicated volunteer. Spring bulbs have been planted in two circles in the centre (see photo) Once the bulbs have died down, long grass is allowed to grow, which is



later scythed (another volunteer) and available as hay. On warm summer evenings, during event intervals in The Pound, the audience can spill out and enjoy their glasses of wine on the lawn and among the flowers, a kind of micro-Glyndebourne.

The original plan suggested a pond in the corner of the lawn area, but there were many concerns about health and safety, so a more remote and secure spot has been earmarked in the southeast corner of the garden. This is as yet unconstructed.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

We have confirmed that enthusiasm for these things is fickle. There is an open 'volunteer day' every month, and this attracts variable numbers of people, making planning difficult. It could be five, it could be eighteen. We do what we can. We have an email list of almost fifty, but the essential work is done by a dedicated handful of volunteers, although it is not onerous. I am one of this core, and handily I live round the corner.

Harvesting can be problematic. Who does the produce belong to? It is generally understood that the Pound Café has first dibs. The Café staff are gradually learning what is available, how to harvest and how to use the stuff, but it is not available all the time and they cannot plan menus round it. We rely on judicious, semi-official scumping for most harvesting.

Since it generally falls to me to plan the crops and planting sequences, I am often able to harvest and take things into the café to see if they can use them, which they usually can. The broad beans were turned into a pâté that is so successful they continue to buy in broad beans for the recipe! Otherwise, I take stuff home. I will also take things others do not recognise as crops, for example rocket and land cress flowers, broad bean leaves and small pods, cornsalad, onions gone to seed. I also take basil for pesto, 'prunings' of surplus growth and chard for the guinea pigs.

Timing is often critical in horticulture, and all manner of things can happen in between the monthly mass sessions. Things need watering, and harvesting when they are ready, and if ground is cleared, it makes sense to get plants and seeds in earlier rather than later. Fortunately, I live nearby and can easily keep an eye on things, but I wonder what would happen if there were no 'me'.

Many earnest middle-class people have illusions about 'food production' They imagine that significant quantities are being

produced, and that this is a Good Thing. Sadly, it is not the case: we are producing tiny quantities of food, and in my view the educational aspect is much more significant. On this account I try to grow as many varieties as possible, often unusual things that people might not know about. I also write little explanatory blurbs, encapsulate them, and stick them in the beds.



A crab apple tree freshly planted. A memorial to the late Queen. Me on the left, Adam Walton on the right.

There are paradoxes about 'growing your own', health and food security. What we can produce ourselves is exactly what nutritionists tell us we should eat more of. Our fresh fruit and vegetables are chock-full of the micronutrients that keep us healthy. But they have almost no protein, fats or carbohydrates. Meanwhile, the poorer parts of society who suffer from food insecurity need *macronutrients* (calories and proteins) and often do not recognise garden veg as real food. So in a funny way, even though we are growing the healthiest possible food, we're not really helping those who most need it. I continue to scratch my head about this.

On the whole it is typical of community projects that after a burst of enthusiasm, they are forgotten and fall onto a dedicated individual or group, who eventually get fed up and 'burn out'. Fortunately in this case the duties are light and are found rather enjoyable by the core group. In terms of eye-appeal and amenity, the garden has been a great success and is widely admired. It is likely to become a model of its kind. The Town Council even gave it an award!

As a kind of 'bottom line', it is probably fair to say that a project like this will not work without a dedicated core group who take psychological ownership, one of whom should be an experienced gardener.