

Veg with a view

The sloping kitchen garden at Chatsworth, Derbyshire, is both grand and intimate, enjoying views out into the Peaks. Penny Bunting meets gardener Adrian Brocklebank

>Garden FACTFILE

- Location:** Chatsworth, near Bakewell in the Peak District
- Size:** one hectare (2.5 acres)
- Aspect:** west-facing slope
- Soil type:** free-draining, slightly acidic
- Key features:** brick-built raised beds, Victorian greenhouses
- Garden age:** 22 years
- Gardener:** Adrian Brocklebank
- Owner:** The Duke and Duchess of Devonshire

Visiting the kitchen gardens of stately homes is always a great way to get inspiration for our own plots.

And there can be few places more inspirational than the vegetable garden at Chatsworth, Derbyshire.

Home to the Cavendish family since 1549, Chatsworth is one of the UK's most iconic houses. Hundreds of thousands of people visit the house and gardens each year, but the kitchen garden remains a bit of a secret. On entering the grounds most visitors turn right to head straight for the famous 300-year-old cascade or the maze. But turn left and you'll discover a vegetable grower's paradise.

To get to the kitchen garden visitors must wander beneath an intricately woven willow arch – a sculpture by artist Laura Ellen Bacon – and through the gloriously colourful cutting garden, strategically positioned alongside the edibles to attract vital pollinators. Flowers such as dahlias, echinacea and achillea 'Gold Plate' are grown here to provide flower arrangements for the house.

Sitting comfortably

The vegetable garden itself looks as though it's been here for hundreds of years. Yet just over 20 years ago most of the produce for the house kitchen was grown at a completely different

site in the river valley below. The Dowager Duchess of Devonshire, Deborah Cavendish, had the kitchen garden relocated up the hillside, onto this west-facing, sunny slope that is a good few degrees warmer and less prone to frost and flooding than the previous site.

As well as wanting to produce enough fruit and vegetables for use in the house kitchen, the Dowager Duchess was keen for the garden to offer inspiration for others wanting to grow their own. It was carefully designed to maximise production in the most attractive way possible – the result being nearly three acres of growing space that is packed with interest and beauty.

Raised beds

Much of the produce is grown in four large brick-built raised beds. In the centre of each bed stands a standard apple tree, with vegetables growing in rows that radiate out from each tree, like the spokes of a wheel.

The centrepiece of the garden is the Rotary Diamond, a sculpture presented by local Rotary groups to celebrate the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire's diamond wedding in 2001. This spins gracefully in the slightest breeze, reflecting the rainbow of vegetables – chard 'Bright Lights', amaranthus 'Red Army' and kale 'Redbor' – that jostle for space in the raised beds.

At the top of the garden are more vegetable beds for space-loving plants such as asparagus, potatoes and sweetcorn. Here, too, is the wonderful pumpkin patch, where squash 'Crown Prince' and pumpkin 'Hundredweight' romp freely across the rich, fertile soil (this area was once used for grazing horses). There are also fruit beds with rows of raspberries, blackberries and rhubarb, along with espalier-grown apples and pears.

A stream bubbles soothingly through the middle of the garden, feeding tanks where the gardening team can fill up their watering cans. Four Victorian greenhouses provide ideal growing conditions for tomatoes, melons and peppers, while a series of cold frames constructed from old bed frames are used to harden off plants and drying onions.



Above: The willow arch sculpture is a fittingly organic welcome to the kitchen garden beyond



Top right: Fennel lends feathery structure while the greenhouse in the background plays host to tender crops such as tomato, melon and peppers. Above: Vegetables radiate out from a central standard apple at the heart of each raised bed



The Victorian brick raised beds command a fine view



Gardener Adrian Brocklebank checks on the progress on one of his pumpkins

substitute in dishes like nettle and ricotta flan. "It's probably the only place you'll find nettles growing in the gardens at Chatsworth!" says Adrian. "But they're actually a useful food source in early spring, when there's not much else available."

The vegetables grown here are primarily used in the house. The family are self-sufficient in seasonal vegetables, with enough food produced to allow for entertaining (there are often as many as 40 guests dining at Chatsworth). Ensuring this steady supply of vegetables is not without its challenges.

Adapt to survive

"The garden evolves every year," explains Adrian. "If something isn't working, I'll change it. With our climate and weather changing from year to year, gardeners have to be prepared to adapt. For example, last year we had just eight weeks frost-free. And cold and rain cause problems most years."

Adrian adapts to these conditions by carefully selecting varieties that are able to cope with the often-harsh Peak District climate. With a short summer season, some vegetables, such as sweetcorn and squash, don't have time to grow to maturity. So Adrian grows crops that are early to ripen and succeed well in cooler weather. "'Uchiki Kuri' is one of my favourite squashes," he says. "But 'Bon Bon', 'Crown Prince' and 'Hundredweight' do well here, too."

Pumpkins and squashes are left to ripen in situ for as long as possible, but during autumn Adrian keeps a keen eye on the weather, bringing the crops into shelter for storing before the first frosts. Chard is one of Adrian's favourite vegetables and all sorts of varieties can be found growing throughout the kitchen garden. "As the garden is constantly on show to the public, we try to grow vegetables that are attractive as well as edible," he says.

The edible flower bed is a great example of this: cardoons, sunflowers and marigolds rub shoulders with nasturtiums, fuchsias and snapdragons to create a blaze of colour that is teeming with bees and butterflies.

Five Chatsworth favourites to try

'Mummy' peas are off the menu for most of us but there are many unusual vegetables in the Chatsworth kitchen garden that can be grown at home.

- **Sea kale:** Can be forced like rhubarb by covering in autumn. In early spring new, tender shoots grow quickly and are delicious raw in salads or steamed as a hot vegetable.
- **Oca:** Grown in the same way as new potatoes but unrelated to the potato family, so it isn't affected by blight. Has a sweet, slightly citrus flavour.
- **Cucamelon:** Much easier to grow than normal cucumbers and can be planted outside after the last frost. These tiny cucumber-like vegetables are harvested when they are the size of a large grape. They have a delightful lemony flavour.



- **Amaranthus 'Red Army':** A fast-growing plant that is wonderfully architectural and perfect for potagers. Young, tender leaves can be used in a salad. Older foliage can be cooked like spinach.

- **Melon pear 'Pepino':** Best grown in a greenhouse or conservatory, as they need warmth to successfully flower and fruit. Produces small, sweet fruits that taste of honeydew melon.

Traditional methods

Although Adrian has fun experimenting with new and unusual varieties, there are some traditions he likes to stick to every year. Onion sets are always planted out on 1st March. Adrian believes this is the optimal time to perform this task, as the increasing light levels on this date ensure a bumper harvest – and judging from the massive onion crop spread out to dry in the cold frames, he's probably right.

Feeding the plants features strongly in Adrian's routines. "So many gardeners underfeed and overwater," he explains. At Chatsworth, extra water is only given during prolonged dry spells, ensuring vegetable plants develop healthy, deep-growing root systems.

Comfrey tea is Adrian's fertiliser of choice. A bed of comfrey is grown at the edge of the kitchen garden to ensure a ready supply of young, tender leaves. He finds comfrey tea useful for deterring carrot fly, too: "The smell deters the flies, while the carrots get a boost of nutrients at the same time!"

Another task that Adrian needs to carry out each year is seed saving. The most important is seed from the 'Mummy' pea, said by some to be a descendant from peas found at the Egyptian Pyramids. 'Mummy' pea seeds are not commercially available – the Chatsworth peas were a gift to the Duke some years ago – so Adrian makes sure that seeds are gathered each summer to provide a new crop for the following year.

It's fitting that this little piece of history is being kept alive in this fantastic historical setting. It is just one of the many sources of inspiration to be found at Chatsworth – just remember to turn left.

1. Looking right across the vegetable garden 2. Adrian checks to see if the sweetcorn's ready to pick 3. Glorious golden chard 4. Amaranthus 'Red Army' 5. The vegetable garden supplies all the house's needs 6. Double whammy: Bees and butterflies love the dahlias

