

# Spring greens

*Philippa Pearson visits the historic kitchen garden at Audley End to find out how the garden has been restored and is now maintained to organic principles*

**T**HE Victorians were masters at growing their own vegetables and the historic kitchen garden at Audley End near Saffron Walden has been sympathetically restored to this period. The magnificent walled garden nestles in the grounds of the glorious Jacobean house at Audley End.

Created in the 18th century, this nine-acre garden provided fresh fruit and flowers for the household and reached its peak of productivity in the Victorian era. In the 20th century, it gradually fell into decline as demand for produce diminished, but horticultural links were maintained after the war when a wholesale market garden business worked the land. In 1999, Garden Organic, previously called HDRA, teamed up with English Heritage who own the estate to restore this historic garden back to its Victorian splendour. Today the garden is maintained by Garden Organic and is bursting with a staggering collection of fruit and vegetables using heritage varieties appropriate for the Victorian period, all cultivated organically.

Nothing remained of the original kitchen garden when restoration began, except the surrounding walls and the vinehouse, one of the earliest and largest surviving ones in the country. Excavation work revealed the original path layout, now gravelled and lined with more than one mile of box plants.

Separate vegetable and fruit-growing areas intermingle with rows of cultivated flowers and more than 250 iris plants created a spectacular Iris Day last summer. Most of the vegetable seed used is either generated on site, supplied from the Garden Organic Heritage Seed Library or donated by enthusiastic gardeners who still grow tried and tested varieties, many of which are still very reliable and garden-worthy today.

The vinehouse was originally built in



**Above** Entrance to the kitchen garden



**Above** Brassicas  
**Left** Fan-trained damson  
**Below** Foliage from spring flowers



1804 and this once overgrown area has recently been restored to full working order. Original vines are trained inside two separate growing areas, one heated for early crops, the other unheated for a later harvest. Tender fruit-like peaches and nectarines share the space while a central showhouse provides a display of citrus fruit during the summer.

All the citrus and many other fruit are Thomas Rivers introductions, a notable nurseryman from Sawbridgeworth in Hertfordshire, who developed many fruit cultivars during the 19th century.

Another tribute to the Rivers' fruit growing heritage is the Orchard House, which is dedicated to the efficient production of stone fruit. Here, dwarf trees are grown in pots which have large holes in the bottom allowing roots to spread into raised beds. The original Orchard House at Audley End was built in the mid

1800s but only the brick base survived. The replica house was built in 2001 and fruit trees once more grow on the Rivers' system, a rare example of a once common sight.

Further help with the garden's

*The friendly gardeners are always pleased to offer help*



**Above** Flowers and fruit growing together  
**Left** Rhubarb forcing pots

restoration came from a diary written by former Audley End gardener William Cresswell who worked at the estate in 1874. The detailed commentary written by the young gardener observed the gardening year here and Mike Thurlow, current head gardener, finds the diary fascinating. 'It's really interesting to see how the garden was managed in Victorian times and to have a record of what crops were harvested throughout the year,' he says. Gardening organically means not using chemicals for fertilisers or pest and disease control. The main ethos is having healthy soil which produces healthy plants and Mike also advocates leaving plenty of space between plants to allow air to circulate freely to help with pest and disease control.

Victorian gardeners at Audley End were dedicated to producing earlier, larger, juicier, more tender and later crops. The whole garden stretched the gardener's calendar so that produce was available all year round. This gardening

practice still continues today. Chicory is forced in the Mushroom House, peaches flower in mid-February, strawberries ripen in May and grapes are picked in November.

It's good to see all the plants clearly and beautifully labelled in the garden. Many of the fruit trees and soft fruit bushes are trained into cordons and espaliers which is an ideal way to grow fruit in smaller gardens. In fact, you'll get lots of ideas and inspiration for your own plot at home whether you are new to vegetable and fruit growing or more experienced. The friendly gardeners are always pleased to offer help and advice, too, and you can buy produce at the shop on the estate. If you've never grown your own produce before, be warned, you'll probably be hooked on one just one visit.

Philippa Pearson is a garden designer and professional horticulturalist and has won RHS medal awards for her show gardens. ☎ 01767 651253 or email Philippa at [gardens@essexlife.co.uk](mailto:gardens@essexlife.co.uk)

*The garden is bursting with a staggering collection of fruit and vegetables*

**Visit the garden**

**Audley End House and Gardens**  
Saffron Walden CB11 4JF  
☎ 01799 522399  
[www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)  
[www.gardenorganic.org.uk](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk)

**OPENING TIMES AND ADMISSION:**  
March 1 to 31, 10am to 5pm, Saturday and Sunday. April 1 to September 31 and Bank Holidays, 10am to 6pm, Wednesday to Sunday. October 1 to 31, 10am to 5pm, Saturday and Sunday. Admission to garden only is £5 for adults, £3.80 for concessions, £2.50 for children and £12.50 for a family ticket.

**Special events**  
**May 5 to 7** The Audley End Garden Show  
**August 25 to 27** The Country Show  
**September 30** Apple Day

Mike Thurlow, head gardener at the Audley End Organic Walled Kitchen Garden is running a series of practical and informative half-day courses in the garden. Cost for each course is £20 for Garden Organic members and £25 for non-members. Booking essential, telephone Garden Organic on ☎ 024 7630 8215 for more information.

**March 13** Growing vegetables from seed  
**June 12** Summer pruning  
**August 7** Summer pruning of Top Fruit  
**September 18** Seed saving