An EDIBLE EDEN

ANN-MARIE POWELL GARDENS

RHS WISLEY WORLD FOOD GARDEN

RHS Wisley has undergone an impressive transformation in recent years, the pinnacle of which is its new RHS Hilltop – The Home of Gardening Science, the UK's first dedicated gardening science hub. Surrounding the new centre are three inspirational gardens, one of two designed by Ann-Marie Powell is the World Food Garden.

It needed to combine and consolidate the fruit, vegetable and herb gardens at Wisley for the first time, to create a cohesive landscape with separate experimental compartments to welcome and encourage exploration by the visitor. The garden would provide an educational, aesthetically pleasing garden beside RHS Hilltop, but also to link with the wider landscape at Wisley. An attractive pest protection solution was requested to enclose the whole garden.

The aim of the new garden was to support the RHS in encouraging horticultural experimentation and education, whilst promoting the benefits of horticulture. Ann-Marie, along with the team at Wisley, wanted to create a new way of growing edibles to engage productive food growers no matter the size of their garden or maybe if they had no garden at all.

"We wanted the garden to inspire conversation, future food stories and diversity in what we all ultimately eat," explains Ann-Marie. "From my ▸

1

PROJECT DETAILS

Project value
Confidential
Build
7 months
Size of project
3,700m²
(nearly 1 acre)
Awards
- SGD Award 2022: The People's Choice Award
- SGD Award 2022: UK Commercial or Community Landscapes & Gardens Award

perspective, the food garden had to be a creative and energetic, inspiring outdoor space which not only pleased aesthetically, but informed visitors in an approachable, accessible way - no matter their culture, age, horticultural interest or experience."

From the initial concept ideas, it was hoped the garden would provide a valuable tool for allowing the RHS to share its expert knowledge in preserving and progressing the science, art and practice of horticulture, and for the garden to be enjoyed by future generations both urban and rural, to enhance our shared global environment.

Tasty trio

Broadly split into three sections, the garden was inspired by the unusual oval site – which Ann-Marie says moved her thinking away from the neatly aligned beds of the traditional walled kitchen garden – and it had to connect to the new RHS Hilltop.

"Having spent my evenings reading scientific textbooks, my layout design was influenced by the science by the vascular bundles in a monocot stem, allowing the beds to be small and free form, emulating how many of us garden today whilst creating intimate spaces surrounded by plants where visitors felt comfortable enough to take time to study the plants.

"Regarding the presentation of the plants, we wanted the garden to present edibles in a united fashion where fruit, vegetables, and companion plantings could be enjoyed in a harmonious, celebratory, contemporary environment."

The Edible Flower & Herb Garden was designed to ease visitors into edible planting. Tables are surrounded by mixed borders of culinary herbs and edible flowers, which are grown for taste but also their ornamental properties.

The central Good to Grow beds comprise the champions of the RHS vegetable trials, AGM selections and favourites of the RHS Edibles Team, highlighting not only what to grow but how to grow it. Finished simply with steel edging strips, "exciting" communities of vegetables are grown at ground level in experimental 'dig' vs 'no dig' beds. The garden can be enjoyed as a whole, but the small beds with mixed plantings can individually be copied once back home. A mix of steel and pea stick plant supports provide structure and height, against the backdrop of a new glasshouse filled with tender produce.

In a series of raised beds, more 'exotic' and tender edibles that are increasingly viable to grow in the UKs increasingly warm climate encourages the more adventurous grower to experiment with what they grow.

"The World Food Maze Garden is a space where one can literally get lost in the diversity and beauty of food with overflowing beds of edibles and pergolas of climbing produce linking all together. A labyrinth of mixed height raised beds (steel not timber, to minimise slugs) allows visitors to get lost within a world of flavour. Contemporary overhead steel arch plant supports link the kitchen garden compartments to create a cohesive whole, symbolising the linking of culinary communities worldwide, whilst framing the decorative nature of more unusual vegetable and fruit varieties.

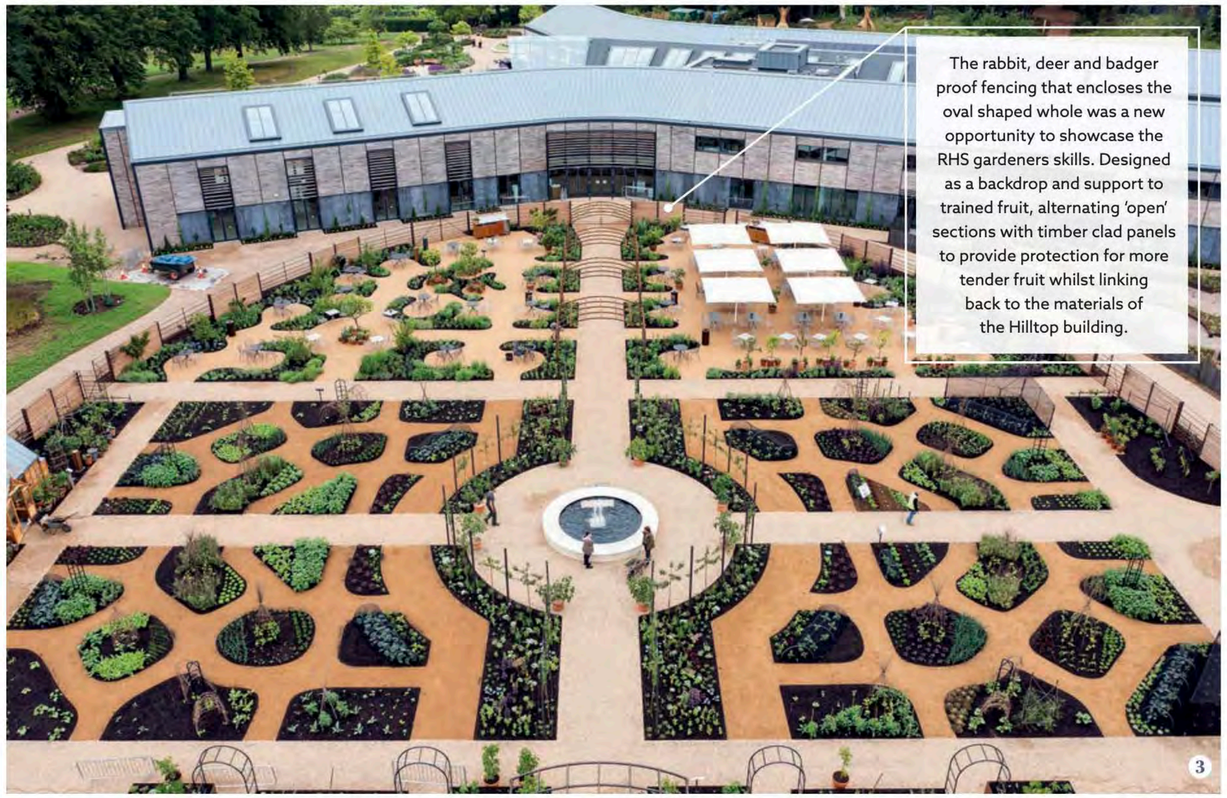
"Plant selections relate to global cuisines to help encourage inclusivity through ethnically diverse ingredients. These areas begin new food conversations and the community groups are continuing the learning culture by advising the RHS on what they grow in their own gardens or allotments so they can be included within this ever-developing space."

The main avenue of the World Food Garden provides an exuberant welcome to visitors. Contemporary Corten pergolas overflow with edible climbers, leading to a central water feature which is encircled by pleached fruit trees and paths to glasshouses filled with fruit, vegetables and herbs. Flanked by beds filled with edible annuals and perennials, the avenue provides a colourful and pollinator filled habitat which allows for greater pollination of all the crops and also natural pest control.

"This garden will celebrate the diversity of food and people who grow. It will share inspiration and expertise, and demonstrate the benefits of growing, cooking and eating, emphasising their importance in physical and mental health."

Edible planting scheme

In the Flower and Herb Garden, burgeoning beds of herbs and edible flowers include hemerocallis, *Salvia elegans* 'Scarlet Pineapple' and 'Tangerine', hostas, lavender, mallow and mint. The Good to Grow area is filled with recommendations and growing tips, highlighting easy-to-grow crops to inspire beginners. It includes AGM blight resistant tomatoes 'Crimson Crush', and 'Mountain Magic'.



1 The Edible Flower and Herb garden allows visitors to eat lunch surrounded by plants
2 The curving design allows seating compartments amongst inspiring edible blooms
3 Weeks after opening in June 2021, the World Food Garden was brimming with new ideas ©RHS/Oliver Dixon

The World Maze features exotic crops that are staples of multicultural Britain, spilling from beds and clambering over arches. Look out for minutina (*Plantago coronopus* from Italy), ahocha (*Cyclanthera pedata*, enjoyed in South America) and ajmud (*Carum roxburghianum* from India).

There's also the oyster plant (*Mertensia maritima*) from Greenland and northern Canada which is a coastal plant, as its name suggests. It is growing amongst the sweet tea vine (*Gynostemma pentaphyllum*), known as Jiaogulan in China.

The boundary panels support 75 selections of trained fruit, including apples, pears, gages, nectarines and peaches. Here, the team can display their creative skills in the spirit of friendly competition, inspired by intricate forms found in the Potager du Roi near the Palace of Versailles and the 'Encyclopedie des forms fruitieres' by Jacques Beccaletto (2010).

That's not forgetting that many edible crops can be decorative. "We considered the structure of plants to create a texturally pleasing plantscape and made sure that winter wouldn't be a barren season within the garden – the growth may be slower but the garden is still full, and ready to go when spring arrives."

The edible plantings are layered with pollinator attracting companion plants to encourage better crop pollination and so greater yields as insects gather nectar and pollinating as they go.

"The planting is all about global cuisine and the plant selections will constantly evolve and become a collaboration with community groups from different cultures. It's beyond exciting to think that new introductions will be added each year as community gardeners, allotmenteers, chefs and writers inform future seed selections."

Sustainable site

Before construction began, much of the existing soil was harvested from the site and then reused within the world food planting beds with very little imported soil brough to site. "As Sheila Das, the garden manager, once said to me: 'Better the soil you know.'"

"Though the whole site is no dig, there are no dig with two comparison beds, the garden is chemical free, and the RHS team are very thoughtful about choices of sundries and materials to leave as little mark as we can on our wider environment.

"Planting for beauty and function in the same space makes sense. As Charles Dowding says: 'It is good to mix things up. It creates different beneficial associations with mycorrhizal fungi at root level in ways we don't yet fully understand.' Monocultures tend to be susceptible to pest and disease problems. 'Even farmers find growing different varieties of wheat together has a positive effect on yield as long as they all mature at the same time,' says Dowding."

Plantings of both trees and beds were mixed to avoid a monoculture which might be susceptible to pests and disease, and mixed plantings confuses crop-damaging creatures away from the produce.

Many of the sites existing materials were recused within RHS Hilltop's Learning Garden, designed by Ben Brace, as a teaching space for visiting school groups and other communities. ▸

During the build, Landform was meticulous regarding soil, devising a method to avoid compaction and contamination of the soils as they built. Firstly, the builders' hardcore and site access were removed; they then put back subsoils to the lower levels of the metal edging. Services were then first fixed, followed by metal edging and minimal concrete haunching. Following the tarmac-first base coats allowed them to carefully dig out the placed sub soils to the specified depths, mostly 450mm but stepped to a reduced dig of -600mm for the larger fruit cordons/ espaliers etc.

Low maintenance Jura Beige Limestone from London Stone was used for the water feature and paving.
- From £84.64 including VAT when bought online.
- 900x600x25mm, 600x600x25mm, 600x400x25mm

4 Good-to-grow plants such as courgette, sweet corn and climbing beans surround garden scale glasshouses from Gabriel Ash
5 The World Food Garden offers an array of food opportunities, including from their food truck!
6 Curved beds with mixed plantings offers the opportunity to grow vegetables, fruit and herbs in a contemporary way ©RHS/Oliver Dixon
7 The skill of the RHS gardeners ensures an array of deliciously enticing produce all year round
8 Large Corten pergolas allow hops and passionfruit to flex and climb to their full extent
9 A circular water feature at the heart of the garden surrounded by benches is a perfect meeting point

Speedy delivery

Ann-Marie Powell Gardens was awarded the project after a competitive selection programme in December 2017, after undergoing several rounds of pitching to various committees and stakeholders. "Working for the greatest horticultural charity in the world is an honour and a privilege and myself and my team were proud to work through feasibilities, design reviews, cost plans, project strategies and procurement."

Landform was appointed as the landscape contractor and the team broke ground in March 2020 on the Wildlife and Wellbeing Gardens – the other gardens outside RHS Hilltop - first, working in tandem with the main building contractors who were using the World Food Garden site as a materials store. After a few delays – from COVID-19 to inclement weather, and material delays to price hikes – the site was handed over to Mark Gregory and his team at Landform in November 2020, just over six months before the site opened to the public on 24 June 2021.

"Mark and his team worked like forces of nature building an acre garden from the ground up through lockdowns, a global pandemic, and often speaking to project stakeholders and myself, the designer, via video call on any challenges and to give key updates when many had to isolate.

"Plants which were planned to be in the ground were stored until they were at bursting point within the RHS polytunnels by the edible and propagation teams who were given just a two-week window to plant. Landform passed the baton of unfeasibly long hours and breakneck speed to the RHS gardeners, who were still planting the day before the opening. But they, and we made it. I couldn't be prouder to be part of a team of such committed individuals who created the World Food Garden over the four years my studio was involved in designing and delivering this project. To see people enjoying the garden today is one of my professional life's greatest joys."

The World Food Garden will now act as a key learning tool and a source of inspiration for gardeners becoming more self-sufficient, showcasing a range of methods for growing your own food at home, regardless of garden size.

10 The scale of the pergolas was purposefully large, strong enough to support climbers, with visual weight to compete with the Hilltop building, and framing the orchards beyond

ABOUT

Ann-Marie Powell's multi-award-winning garden design practice has seen outdoor spaces as places with exciting possibilities for more than 20 years. The studio can't get enough of plants, bold colours and textural contrasts, creating garden habitats that invite an evolving ecology instead of the traditionally decorated garden. Sustainability is a fundamental value of our approach; the team strives to design naturally energetic and bold landscapes to become havens for an abundance of insects and wildlife where its clients live in harmony, up close and personal with the natural world.
ann-mariepowell.com

REFERENCES

Landscape contractor
Landform Consultants
landformconsultants.co.uk

Glasshouses
Gabriel Ash
gabrielash.com

Steelwork – including Corten pergolas and raised beds
Hot Metal Engineering
hmeng.co.uk

World food maze arches and pest protection
Harrod Horticultural
harrodhorticultural.com

Pest protection fences and gates
McVeigh Parker
mcveighparker.com

Resin bound gravel
Addagrip
addagrip.co.uk

Water feature and paving
London Stone
londonstone.co.uk

Trees
Frank P Matthews
frankpmatthews.com

Many plants grown by RHS gardeners at Wisley.