

Taste the World

Bhupinder Sohanpal samples some of the exotic delights growing in the newly opened World Food Garden at RHS Garden Wisley in Surrey



Viewed from above, the unusual curvaceous shape of the beds in this unique kitchen garden becomes apparent.



The spectacular views from the rooftop of the new RHS Hilltop – The Home of Gardening Science, based at RHS Garden Wisley in Surrey – are fringed by three beautiful garden spaces.

From this vantage point, you get a bird's eye view of each of the uniquely designed gardens: the Wildlife Garden, the Wellbeing Garden (laid out as garden rooms) and the World Food Garden.

With curiosity akin to that of Alice when she set off into Wonderland, follow the boundary of planting panels that envelop the World Food Garden, adorned with newly planted fruit trees of pears, plums and apricots, full of promise. Surprise openings in these panels draw you in: follow the golden gravelled pathways and they lead you to the World Food Maze, filled with exotic and unusual vegetables of all colours, shapes and sizes. It is easy to get lost in this cornucopia of produce and lose all sense of time in this stunning garden.

Above RHS Hilltop, the new home of gardening science, forms the backdrop to the World Food Garden at Wisley.

Below Not all the crops are exotic; here, runner beans, asparagus and Swiss chard share a bed.



The creative talent behind the World Food Garden is award-winning garden designer Ann-Marie Powell. Rather than traditional straight lines, her planting beds take fluid circular shapes to represent plant cells. This unique design lets Wisley's gardeners adopt an innovative way of growing fruit and vegetables in the form of 'matrix planting' – a tiered and natural-looking planting system – and inspires and encourages gardeners to experiment with how they could grow edibles in different ways to harmonise seamlessly in gardens of any size.

As a volunteer visitor experience guide at RHS

Hilltop, I'm often asked about the unusual varieties of vegetables and fruit that grow here. Volunteering has given me the opportunity to see crops grow and watch them flourish in their first season. For the World Food Garden's gardeners, this new venture is also an opportunity to learn what will grow successfully in our British climate and on the garden's sandy soil.

Take inspiration from Wisley and bring some fresh flavours and an exotic accent to your garden with this selection of unusual fruit and vegetables. These edibles will offer a



flush of excitement to gardeners seeking a new challenge, while capturing the essence of this unique garden.

Amaranth

This crop (*Amaranthus viridis* 'Lotus Purple') is a statuesque beauty, standing tall at almost 2m, with tassel-like

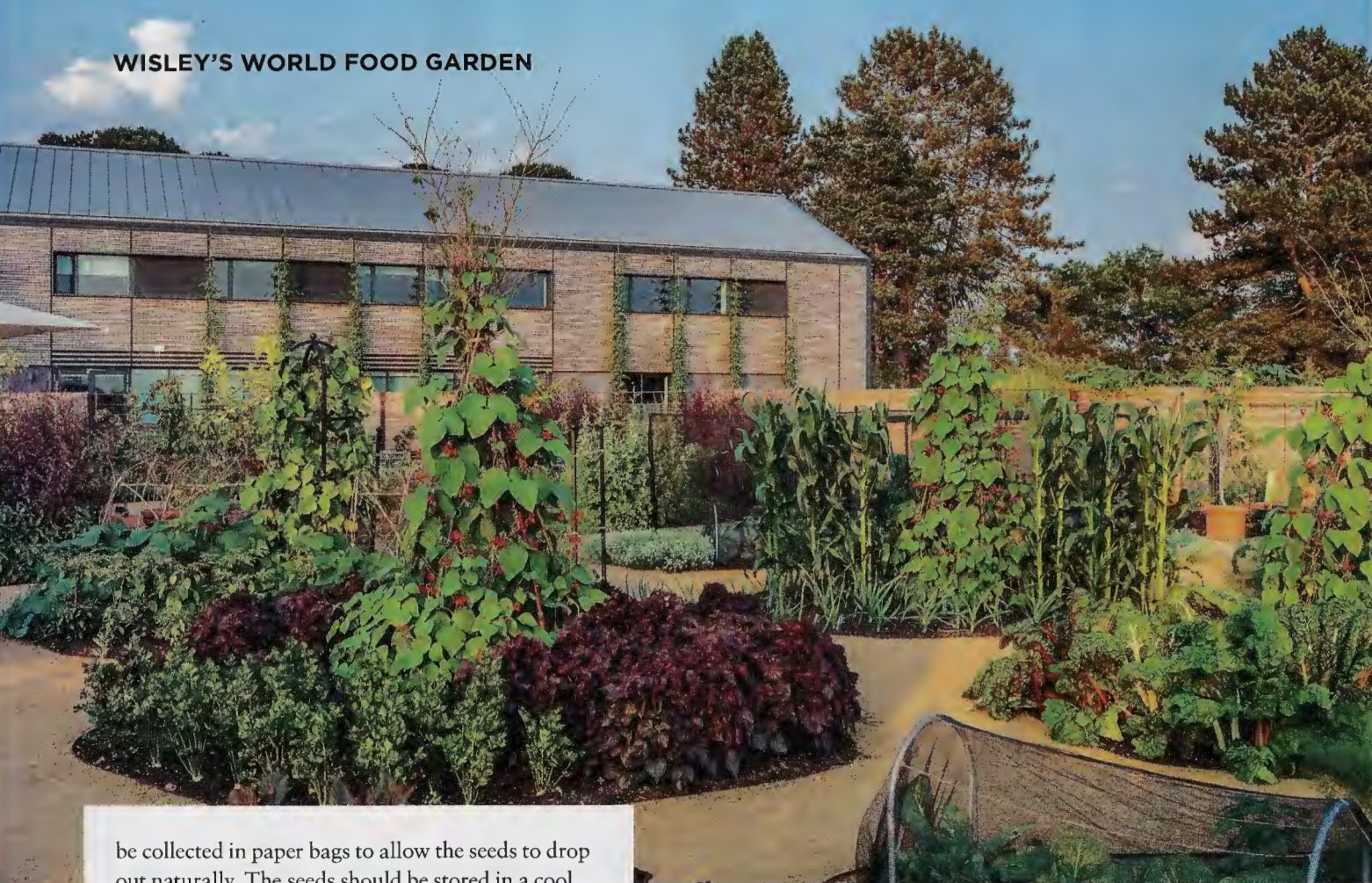
flowers and crimson, purple and green foliage. Also known as Joseph's coat for its brilliant colouring, it attracts visitors with its dramatic appearance. Despite its exotic splendour, this sun-loving, half-hardy annual is easy enough to grow from seed. Amaranth works perfectly as an ornamental plant at the back of a herbaceous border, and it is also ideal both as a cut flower and a dried flower.

The plant is probably best known as the ancient grain and staple food of the Aztec civilisation. For the Aztecs it was a sacred crop, and they built statues of their deity Huitzilopochtli using amaranth seeds and honey. The plant's soft, mild-tasting, edible leaves are rich in vitamin C and its seeds are gluten free. Amaranth seed is usually ready to harvest within three months of planting – give the tassel a gentle shake and if the tiny white, pink and black grains start to fall out, the flowerheads are ready to

Above Plump mounds of Greek basil with chard and young purple-leaved sweet potato plants.

Middle Pots of lettuce, chillies, herbs and citrus show what can be grown even when space is tight.

Bottom from left Mingled matrix planting includes French marigolds, a good companion plant for edibles; *Amaranthus viridis* 'Lotus Purple'.



be collected in paper bags to allow the seeds to drop out naturally. The seeds should be stored in a cool, dry place prior to being used for cooking.

Chickpeas

The chickpea (*Cicer arietinum* 'Principe') is a first for the RHS Garden at Wisley. Visitors are astonished to learn that it is possible to cultivate chickpeas in the UK and are excited by the idea of attempting to grow them in their own gardens – not to mention the prospect of being able to make home-grown hummus with their harvest. Chickpeas are easy to grow, favouring raised beds and no-dig cultivation. They prefer poor soil, which is an advantage for those with low-nutrient soil, but they are not a high-yield crop. Each plant tends to produce around three pods, with each containing only one or two seeds, so it's advisable to grow at least a couple of rows. Once your plants are established, they will require little aftercare.

Sea kale

Sea kale (*Crambe maritima*) grows at the front of the raised beds. It's hard to resist reaching out to touch its waxy, blue-green, coarsely toothed leaves as you walk by. This is one of the few truly native vegetables in this country, and it can be seen growing wild on the coast just above the high-tide mark on shingle beaches. It was popular during Victorian times, and locals would pile the shingle up around the crowns in early spring to produce tender, blanched stems; gardeners

Above Eschewing traditional rows gives the garden a decorative, contemporary feel.

Middle Force sea kale in spring for tender shoots.

Bottom Chickpeas can be grown in UK gardens.

today use those wonderful sea kale-forcing pots. It's a perennial plant that is best grown from root cuttings called 'thongs', which are usually planted in late spring. Once established, force the young shoots like rhubarb – and be on guard for slugs at this time. Cook the stems briefly or steam them until tender and serve as a spring delicacy, with butter, just as you might asparagus.



Chilean guava

The exhilarating perfume of small, decorative, evergreen Chilean Guava (*Ugni molinae*), make it well worth finding a home for close to a door or near garden seating. In the World Food Garden, this shrub produces a profusion of cranberry-sized red berries in late autumn, while the intoxicating fragrance of its flowers is quite unique, making it a real late-season treat.

The flavour of the berries lives up to the promise of the scent – best described as a strawberry dipped in sherbet. It's easy to understand why this was a favourite fruit of Queen Victoria: it was grown for her in the mild climate of Cornwall, and she attempted to popularise it. Specialist nurseries sell it as a low-maintenance shrub that grows to about a metre tall: little or no pruning is needed and it is happy to be left untamed. The shrub is hardy to around -10°C and can be grown





Six more exotic vegetables to try

YACON

Forms clumps of underground tubers, resembling those of dahlias, with a crunchy taste and a sweet flavour. It can be used to make a low-calorie, sugar-free syrup.

ACHOCHA

This vine needs netting to clamber across and produces fruits with a fresh flavour like a cross between cucumber and green pepper.

FIGS

These succulent fruits are grown in pots in the World Food Garden; restricting their root run in this way tends to produce a heavier crop.

RED-VEINED SORREL

Harvest the attractive leaves while young and tender for salads. Don't let the plant run to seed because it will soon spread around.

CALLALOO

This type of amaranth is grown for its plentiful leaves, which are used in a similar way to spinach in West Indian cooking.

PEPINO MELON

A shrubby plant, best grown in a pot in a greenhouse, it will produce lots of small, stripy fruits that taste like a cross between honeydew melon and cucumber.



in most conditions, but prefers moist, well-drained soil in full or partial sun. It also does well in pots.

Lemon verbena

The wonderfully sweet perfume of lemon verbena (*Aloysia citrodora*) plants will envelop you as you pass by. This is a tender perennial, whose roots must not be exposed to frost, which reaches almost 2m tall. Its intense zestiness sets it apart from other lemon flavours and its leaves and flowers can be used to make a refreshing herbal tisane. Buy it from garden nurseries or herb specialists; once planted it grows quickly and makes an ideal container plant. ■

Top The garden also incorporates flowers and seating areas so visitors can take in the planting.

Above right Lemon verbena is a great container shrub, but needs overwintering in frost-free conditions.

Above left Chilean guava berries: like a strawberry dipped in sherbet.

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