

Creating a 21st Century Role for the Lower Garden

by Tom Price

2009 heralds the beginning of the new developments to the Lower Triangle at the Botanic Garden. Kim Wilkie Associates, the landscape architects responsible for designing Palmer's Leys, were commissioned to produce a concept for the Lower Garden for the 21st century. The aim was to link the area more appropriately to the Walled Garden and allow the collections to be developed to provide a more aesthetic and educational setting and experience.

The next few years will be an interesting time for the Botanic Garden and the first stage of this new development involves an increase in our vegetable growing areas. The four, comparatively small beds, we have been cultivating since 2003 have proved to be a huge success. They are used extensively throughout our education

programmes, at both formal and informal level, and are enjoyed immensely by visitors to the Garden. As a result, this year our vegetable growing area has quadrupled in size. The old rose beds and existing vegetable beds have been extended and an entirely new bed has been installed in the location of the old Buddleja bed.



Work on the new vegetable beds



Altogether, providing three 38 metre long, 5 metre wide plots. Work began in November with the removal of the roses. These plants were too old to move well, however we plan to include some of the varieties within the family beds. Turf was then lifted to extend existing beds and to create the new bed. After they have flowered, the irises will be lifted, divided and moved into the Walled Garden, giving us our fourth and final vegetable bed. In this first season the bed will remain fallow so that we may eradicate that most persistent of pernicious weeds, *Nothoscordum fragrans*, that has for years avoided removal, hiding in between and below the iris rhizomes.

Since the middle of January we have been double digging the new bed. This was necessary as the majority of this area was lawn and had not been cultivated for some time. Double digging was the only remedy, allowing deep cultivation to break up the compacted soil. Trenches were dug two spits wide and one spit deep. Manure was then added, kindly provided by the cattle that graze the wildflower meadow at the Arboretum. This was then forked in to another spits depth, thus improving the soil's humus content and breaking up sub-surface pans. It sounds like hard work, but actually it took much less time than we had anticipated, even with the unexpected interruption of snow for two weeks. The beds are now receiving their final levelling in preparation for the first sowings in early March.

The beds will operate on a four year rotation, with one bed being manured each year. Our crops will be split into the traditional categories: Brassicas, Legumes, Alliaceae and Roots. All occupying one bed and each moving round each year to



prevent pest and disease accumulation. Seed has been ordered, plans drawn up and sowing schedules completed. We are all very excited and eagerly anticipating burgeoning vegetable plots. Not just because we are greedy, (of course we enjoy the supply of fresh veg, but more because we believe in this project). But it is about so much more than just the Garden staff, this is about everyone. We want this to appeal to the widest audience possible, and for people to get involved. The new beds will be used more extensively throughout our education programmes, primary schools will see more of them during their visits and we hope be inspired to grow veg at school or at home. The beds will be productive, more so than our

previous beds, which were predominantly ornamental. There will be large groups of crops grown in traditional allotment style rows. Good succession and catch cropping will be practiced to optimise the use of ground and in doing so increase productivity.

Reliable but interesting and tasty varieties have been selected so that our palates may be stimulated as well as our eyes, whilst ensuring we guarantee a decent yield. Organic growing will be practiced wherever possible. We will however be unleashing biological warfare in the form of lacewings and a naturally occurring parasitic bacterium to reduce aphid, whitefly and cabbage white butterfly populations. Direct sowing in-situ will be practiced wherever possible and no crops will be sown under artificial heat. We want these beds to be an example of sustainable practice and something that everyone can achieve in their own back yard, if not on more of a modest scale.

What will happen to all that extra veg I hear you saying? Well, we hope school groups will have the opportunity to harvest and take some away with them. We are also investigating donating our produce to local charities, and perhaps encouraging

further community involvement in the future.

It is rather fitting that a large proportion of the Lower Garden has now been turned over to the growing of fruit and vegetables. Not only was this land used as allotments by ChristChurch before being taken over by the Botanic Garden in 1947, but our first curator, Jacob Bobart was cultivating edible crops in those early days to help fund further plantings at the Garden. So whilst promoting the important messages for the future, we are also paying a rather respectful nod to the past. We hope these changes will make sense to our visitors as an example of the Botanic Garden's role in education, community outreach and sustainability. It is an example of where change is necessary for improvements sake; at individual, community and environmental levels; not just for the sake of change... And finally this project is about people. As we so often say, the Botanic Garden is for everyone and we believe that this project will appeal to everyone who visits.

Tom Price is the Curator of the Hardy Collection at the University of Oxford Botanic Garden



2009 Seed Collection

The 2009 Friends Seed Collection is now available. The collection consists of a selection of six good garden plants selected by the Hardy Collection Staff. To receive your free seed collection please send a stamped addressed envelope to the University of Oxford Botanic Garden, Rose Lane, Oxford OX1 4AZ.