



Jekka's herb nursery  
in Gloucestershire

# Meet the Queen of Herbs

This month multiple RHS Gold winning organic grower Jekka McVicar, internationally known by the moniker 'Queen of Herbs', talks with Grapevine podcast host Daniel Heighes

**J**ekka McVicar is a world-renowned herb expert, an author, designer and consultant judge. And along with her RHS Gold winning accolades she also has the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour (VMH) and won the Garden Media Guild Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012. Jekka and her family run Jekka's Herb Farm in South Gloucestershire where they cultivate more than 400 different types of herbs for culinary, medicinal and horticultural uses. As the UK's first Herbetum there is always something happening at Jekka's, from masterclasses to discovery days for businesses and families. They also supply many of their herbs by mail order.

## How have you been in these ever-changing times?

It's been a very long couple of years, especially as in January 2021 the Government decided to close nurseries but keep garden centres open. This meant all nurseries lost another Easter, which is our busiest month as it is the time everyone starts gardening.

We were lucky as we had just revamped our website, rebranded the business and improved how we were seen on Google.

This meant we were able to sell seeds, seed kits, herbal infusions and illustrated gifts online via mail order while the herb farm was closed to visitors. ➤



Jekka's knowledge of herbs is world renowned



Jekka's Chelsea 2009 exhibit



Jekka's nursery grows more than 400 different types of herbs



Jekka's Herbetum



Another view of the Herbetum in summer last year

**What basic herbs would you recommend for anyone to grow to start their own burgeoning herb patch?**

I always start with asking: "What food do you cook?" as it is important to grow what you will use. For example, if you enjoy making the classic Sunday roast, which consists of roast veg, meat and sometimes fish, then you need to grow herbs like rosemary, thyme, oregano, dill and fennel.

The reason you should grow herbs you use is firstly, it will give you pleasure to eat something you have nurtured and secondly, by using your herbs, you are maintaining them. This is because, to keep them under control, you must pick or prune them.

For example, people make the mistake of planting exotic things in their garden. One example would be hyssop, which is a wonderful underused plant, but often planted because gardeners like the idea of it. However, if they never use it, they never prune it, and as a result it will go straggly and woody, grow huge and eventually take over.

The really interesting thing about herbs is that a lot of the ones you use in your kitchen are from the same plant family. Typically, they are all the Lamiaceae family, which includes oregano, marjoram, thyme, lavender, sage, winter savory, hyssop, basil, nepeta and rosemary. Therefore, once you have grown and mastered the herbs you use, you can then branch out. For example, you can go from rosemary to hyssop and winter savory. Both these herbs I love to use in my cooking and are grown in a similar way.

**We all have a plant that grows well for us and some that don't. What is your herb heaven and herb hell?**

I hate selling dill and coriander in a pot. I would rather sell you the seed; both of them grow so much better direct from seed rather than transplanted to the garden from a pot. It also means that if you sow coriander at the



end of August or beginning of September, you will have a crop all the way through the winter (unless we go down below minus 10).

**Is it just herbs you grow or is there a fruit and veg aspect to the farm as well?**

The word vegetable is actually fairly modern and it was introduced into the vocabulary in the 16th or 17th century. Before then, vegetables were called pot herbs. This means that all your traditional vegetables are in fact

pot herbs. Therefore, I do grow vegetables but also fruit, such as pomegranate, the juice of which is very good if you are poorly with a bad stomach.

**You have become a bit of a guru to many top chefs. Did you ever think your life would take such a turn in this way?**

It's safe to say that I had no idea when I started in my back garden in Bristol that I would end up with the horticultural career I have had.

My grandmother wrote cookbooks called Food for Pleasure, Lovely Food and More Lovely Food back in the 40s and 50s. I think she would be absolutely delighted that I worked with Raymond Blanc at the Le Manoir and with young Jamie Oliver. More recently, I have worked with the wonderful Nathan Outlaw and he is just so inspiring because he really wants to grow his own vegetables as his



Jekka's Chelsea garden in 2016

own product for his restaurant. I just find that it is wonderful to have a shared enthusiasm for herbs and to introduce them to herbs that they have never tried.

**Readers may remember Borage the gnome, who magically appeared on your Chelsea Flower Show garden, until he raised eyebrows on the RHS committee! Is he enjoying his retirement?**

He has been in retirement for a long time as his brief stint of stardom was back at the 2009 RHS Chelsea Flower Show. He is here sitting in my office but he is no longer wearing shades, as not many people remember him now!

I cannot recall where he came from but someone made a little fish hook and fishing line for him as Mac, my husband, was building me a water rill for my floral exhibit. The rill was set in an ellipse which I lined with angelicas the whole length. It was one of the largest displays I did and I still have very fond memories of how it turned out.

During building, Borage was on the stand providing encouragement when a journalist from the Times spotted him. The plant I was having drudgery with at that point was borage, so I said it's called Borage, because Borage means courage.

The next thing I knew was Borage was on the front page of the Times, Express, Daily Mail and the London Metro and even had a mention on Have I Got News For You! On press day, Joanna Lumley came up to me and asked if she could save Borage. It was really good fun.

As a result the RHS had gnomes to raise money for school gardening, which was wonderful. The RHS do a lot for community gardening and potentially, Borage helped them a little bit.

**You are marooned on an island, and have one book, one song and one packet of seeds with you. What are**

**your choices for your Desert Herb Hideaway?**

The book I would take is the RHS Dictionary of Gardening and I would take the one I inherited from my father. This is a 1951 edition in which he has written masses of notes.

For the song, I would have to go with Schubert's piano concerto.

The packet of seed I would choose would be thyme. This is because I am very clumsy and I am bound to cut myself. Thyme is not only great to cook with but has antiseptic properties to heal any cuts.

If allowed, I would take one plant, which would be rosemary. I love cooking with rosemary. It makes a great herbal infusion, which is very good for your memory, so rosemary tea would be able to trigger my memory.

**HM the Queen wants you to design a herb garden at Windsor Castle! You can choose three assistants from the past or present to help you. Who is your Garden Dream Team?**

I think it's going to be an all-girl team. First, I would have Beth Chatto. This is because she was really good at choosing the right plant to put in the right place. She was my absolute heroine and I think she was the most fabulous lady. I was very lucky to meet her many times.

Next would be Penny Hobhouse because I love her planting combinations.

Then my third person would be Sarah Eberle because of her superb use of dimensions and structure as well as how things sit in the landscape.

**If you were a herb, which one would best describe you?**

I think I would be French tarragon, which is where my story started. This is because it's herbaceous, which means it's not seen for quite a lot of the time, so that's good. However, when I am around, I pack a punch in flavour and I can transform a meal into a feast.



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**What is your biggest gardening tip?**

I ask many people: "How often do you sharpen your secateurs?" to which the usual reply is "Oh... every so often when they look a bit blunt!"

This, in my opinion, is not the right answer. A chef, for instance, sharpens his knives every day before use and a gardener or horticulturist should do the same. I clean and sharpen my secateurs every day and, being organic, I do this to stop the spread of diseases. It means the cuts are clean and, if you don't have strong hands, makes it easier. Also, if you prune in the winter with blunt blades, you will damage the plant.

Cleanliness is next to godliness when it comes to your garden, pots and your greenhouse.

**Finally, what does the future hold for you?**

We are finally getting a high-speed internet line fitted so I can do online courses. This means that the skills I have developed over the last 35+ years can be taught to a lot more people. We also have a number of exciting plans to enable us to do more teaching, learning and growing.

You can read much more from Dan by visiting his website: <http://thevillagegrapevine.co.uk>

