

# Jekka goes LOCAL

There's a change of direction at Jekka's, the Cotswolds' best known herb farm. Mandy Bradshaw has a tour

PHOTOS: Jekka's

As she talks about the changes to her herb business, I can't help wondering if Jekka McVicar is once again ahead of the field. The woman who raised eyebrows by being organic and peat-free more than 30 years ago and who grew French tarragon when it was considered exotic is turning her back on the national stage for something far more local.

Rather than the usual appearances at big shows, such as Chelsea, the herb farm is concentrating on smaller venues, including Bath market, that are closer to its South Gloucestershire base.

It's quite a change of direction for the vice-president of the RHS, the first woman to chair the Great Pavilion judges at Chelsea, a former member of the RHS Council and a holder of

Photo: Jason Ingram



Jekka McVicar

the Victoria Medal of Honour, one of horticulture's highest awards. Long before the world famous show was cancelled, Jekka had decided not to take part – the first time in 27 years.

"It was a big decision," she says, "but really our focus has got to be much more sustainable, much more focussed on our local community."

As part of this drive to be more local, the farm, now rebranded as Jekka's, is launching a herb festival in July. With the theme of 'Cultivating Flavour', it will have talks, workshops and demonstrations, including from top chef Nathan Outlaw.

The business has also been broadened from growing herbs to include everything from seeds and masterclasses in photography to greetings cards and a range of kitchen

and tableware, designed by Jekka's daughter, Hannah.

"We're all about educating and inspiring gardeners and cooks of all ages," explains Hannah, who has now joined the business with her brother,



Greenhouses and raised beds at Jekka's Herbetum



A bee enjoying Jekka's 'Rosy Carpet' thyme

Alistair. "It's all about everything we do."

Their involvement was never planned; Hannah is a botanical artist and Alistair was using his PhD in climate change in business. Indeed, their decision to join the family firm came as a surprise to their parents who had discussed retiring and selling up.

It seems fitting though as you could say the business started because of them. Jekka was looking for something she could do with her then two tiny children and an engineering husband, Mac, who worked abroad for months at a time.

She'd long grown herbs: "I'm a child of the fifties so sustainability and being able to grow your own vegetables was still very much part of my family's life."

Yet it was only when a friend called in to ask for some French tarragon from her garden for an Elizabeth David recipe



Giant fennel flower heads dominate

that Jekka spotted an opportunity.

"I thought I can grow that and in 1984 you couldn't buy fresh herbs anywhere and you certainly couldn't buy tarragon."

By the time her husband returned from abroad she'd turned wardrobes into cold frames, bought the veg man's van and started the business, selling at plant fairs, shops and garden centres. In 1987, the family moved from Filton in Bristol to the farm's current site at Alveston, transforming a derelict former blacksmith's cottage.

That she should end up working in horticulture was unsurprising: her great grandfather won gold at Chelsea for a display of rhododendrons while her great aunt got gold for auriculas.

"My family in some shape or form has been a member of the RHS for over 100 years."

Her long association with the RHS began in 1992 when she exhibited at the

London October show, winning a silver medal, and it was suggested that she apply for Chelsea.

However, the first show nearly ended in disaster as she and Mac had taken the plants to Chelsea in a horsebox, not realising there wouldn't be room on the crowded showground to let down the ramp.

"For a whole day we sat waiting to unload and we couldn't."

Unexpectedly, the Queen stopped to look at the display when she visited the show, something she did every year bar one for the 16 years that Jekka exhibited in the Great Pavilion.

She went on to win many medals, including the coveted Lawrence Medal for the best RHS floral exhibit in a year, a first for herbs and for organic plants.

Today, the farm is heaven for any

Photo: Jekka's



*Plectranthus amboinicus* (Cuban oregano)

herb enthusiast, packed with plants ranging from the commonly seen parsley and thyme to more unusual things, such as Szechuan pepper, *Zanthoxylum piperitum*, or the caper

plant, *Capparis spinose*.

Some are rare enough to draw people from across the world – one man planned to drive from Spain to buy *Plectranthus amboinicus*, which is used to treat coughs.

Exactly how many medicinal and culinary herbs the farm stocks is not absolutely clear – Jekka estimates it's somewhere around the 600 mark but Alistair, who has put together the website's Jekkapedia, keeps discovering more in the polytunnels and outside collection of potted plants.

"I ask Mum 'What's that?' and she says 'Someone gave me that and we're now propagating and it's growing really well.'"

Among the 72 different types of thymes are some that Jekka has raised, including the pink-flowered 'Jekka's

Rosy Carpet and 'Jekka's Autumn Spice', which flowers in September and October.

New introductions come from what she calls 'natural selection', a case of spotting something different among seedlings and trialling it to see if it comes true from propagation and then putting it to the 'taste test'.

"It takes me anywhere between seven and 10 years from seedling to sale."

In summer, the beds are a mass of colour from dozens of lavenders in shades of mauve, pink and white, and annual *Salvia viridis*.

Many of the herbs have long histories. Valerian has been used for thousands of years as a sedative, the Greeks and Romans used oregano as a disinfectant and borage was believed to give courage and a stirrup cup given to Crusaders had borage flowers floating in it.

She has read widely on the subject from Socrates to Culpepper but says you never stop learning about herbs.

"It's unlike any other group of plants. It is totally and utterly fascinating and what's being discovered even today is still fascinating."

It's a collection that's as attractive to wildlife as it is to gardeners and cooks. The farm has beehives and is also home to a rare solitary bee.

"We actually get bee enthusiasts come to the open day not for the herbs but for the bees," says Alistair.

Being organic helps, something Jekka has followed from the beginning: "It was because the children were so small. How could I possibly have chemicals around with two toddlers?"



Visitors enjoy fragrant herbs in the raised beds before the coronavirus lockdown

She was also reluctant to use sprays on plants that were going to be used medicinally or in cooking.

Most of the stock is grown in pots with some permanent planting in raised beds. It was a decision borne out of necessity: "When we moved here I did think about a field crop but this is solid clay."

While the majority are grown in plastic pots, Jekka has always reused



*Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Jekka's Blue'

them and any that are past their best are taken to a specialist recycling plant, while the pots are transported to events in white trays that were once used to pack fish. That said, the farm is trialling a pot made from rice husks that can be fully composted.

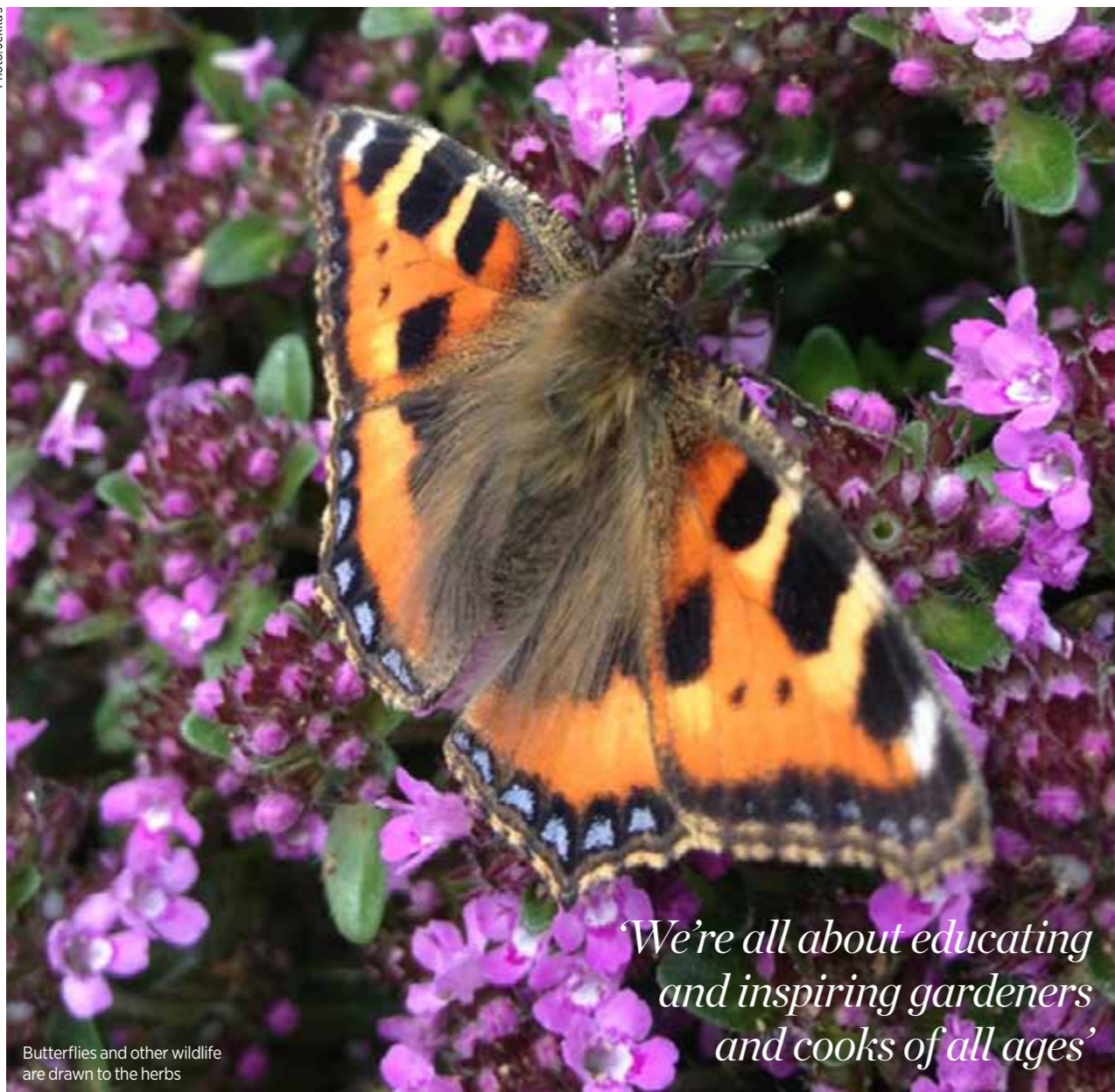
And there are still new plans: "I'm really, really excited by rewilding. I think it's hugely exciting and I'm going to be working on a project on it later this year. I find it invigorating because it is going back to what I knew anyway." ♦

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#### DIARY DATE

Jekka's HerbFest is planned to run from July 3 to July 5. For updates, following the COVID-19 closures, visit [www.jekkas.com](http://www.jekkas.com)

Photo: Jekka's



Butterflies and other wildlife are drawn to the herbs

*'We're all about educating and inspiring gardeners and cooks of all ages'*



Aromatic 'Jekka's Thyme'