

When cookery writer Elizabeth David extolled the virtues of fresh tarragon in a chicken recipe, Jekka and Mac decided to start growing herbs as, at that time, fresh herbs weren't available in supermarkets (and very few in garden centres). Together with Mac, the couple transformed the back of their suburban garden to start an embryonic business. By the end of their first year, they were selling to Fortnum & Mason. Needing more ground to grow a wider range of plants, the couple found a suitable plot of land along with a ramshackle cottage in Alveston, south Gloucestershire. With more space to grow their organic herbs, the business grew alongside the British interest in food and new culinary experiences.

Leading British chefs were interested to learn more about the wide range of herbs Jekka was growing on the farm. Jamie Oliver had met Jekka at the end of the 90s at an exhibition, she explains: "I was on my way to fill up my watering can, and I went over to him saying 'You know absolutely nothing about herbs, and I'm an herb farmer.' He came over to my stand and was blown away. It was not long before he, together with a group of people, turned up at my herb farm. Photographs were taken and I

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The Herbetum in 2021



The Herbetum, 2020

ended up in one of his books. We have remained firm friends and I have designed his herb garden at his home in Essex, together with a vegetable garden which appeared in the 'Jamie at Home' series in 2007."

Other chefs who have sought advice from Jekka on how to grow and use herbs include Heston Blumenthal and Raymond Blanc. Raymond has gained a great understanding of how herbs aid digestion and he has worked with Jekka to develop an herb garden at Le Manoir, incorporating the herbs his mother used when he was a child.

Whilst many years ago, people would have perceived Jekka McVicar as a witch – she knows the medical properties of many of the plants she grows – she is, however, an herb grower and not an herbalist. Her Herb Farm, comprising of three acres of land, is not planted like an RHS exhibit. Instead, the plot resembles a giant aromatic patchwork quilt with herbs of varying sizes, leaf textures, colours, flowers and fragrance growing companionably together. Jekka has amassed the largest collection of popular edible herb varieties in the UK, selling over 35 different varieties of mint, 30 types of rosemary, 20 of oregano and 50 of thyme to name but a few. Both the public and the catering industry are her customers. "I desperately try to make herbs real, not twee or folksy," Jekka explains. "They look good, smell good, taste good and do you good. The plants are grown on a working nursery where we get our hands dirty. My mission is to widen the use and understanding of herbs beyond the kitchen garden. I have written eight books, both horticultural and culinary and I personally love cooking – although I tend to be a lob-it-in type of cook. I am adventurous, experiment with flavours, occasionally have a total disaster but among my favourites are bay ice cream and basil panna cotta." ▶



RHS Chelsea, 2016