



A thatched home in Oxfordshire is surrounded by productive beds of flowers and vegetables, has a fruitful orchard, and provides a peaceful haven for a couple aiming to live sustainably

## THE HARDWORKING COTTAGE GARDEN



Framed by their handcrafted, rustic arch, Piers Newth and Louise Allen ready for work in the productive garden.

**T**HE INCREDIBLY QUIANT village of Little Haseley nestles deep in the South Oxfordshire countryside; an off-the-beaten-track, estate village beyond the grander Haseley Court estate, which it once served. Many of its charming, rose-strewn, thatched cottages date back to the 17th century. Now private, these well-maintained dwellings, with their cared-for gardens, are set on or just back from the single-track road, which swings through the village, culminating in the village green. Agricultural land and pasture lay beyond – flat or furrowed – as far as the eye can see.

What cannot be seen here are any overhead cables or wires. They were buried underground in the 1970s by the local estate owner, adding to the yesteryear charm of this village.

Pinned to the skirts of the village green is Dreamers Cottage. Built in the 1600s – a quintessentially English, thatched-roofed, stone cottage, with tile and timber additions – it is home to Louise Allen and Piers Newth, who moved here almost 20 years ago, smitten by the location as much as the house itself.

The former gamekeeper’s cottage had previously been tenanted, and the interior cried out for renovation, while the overgrown grounds were a mishmash of pens, long grass, old fruit trees, and a row of 27 leylandii conifers. Yet, the third-of-an-acre plot had the potential to yield the couple’s yearned-for self-sufficiency. “Our ideal was to live more in tune with nature; to grow our own fruit and vegetables; to make, mend, restore, reuse, and live more sustainably,” explains Louise.

The couple met as horticultural students, training at RHS Wisely in the late 1980s. Louise went on to Oxford Botanic Garden; Piers dabbled in landscaping before pursuing a career at Harcourt Arboretum. Here, helping out a colleague running a hurdle-making course, Piers borrowed the craftsman’s old, hand-worn spar hook, used for splitting hazel. Despite an old elbow injury, the tool was a joy to use. Piers bought it and went on to hunt down other specialist, garden-related tools, recognising their unique properties. “They were made ages ago, by real craftsmen, and for specific jobs, in a range of sizes,” he says.

Piers’ curiosity was piqued, and he and Louise decided to leave their horticultural jobs to create a business sourcing, restoring and selling antique and old tools. “Garden and Wood combines our passion for gardening and sustainability with our love of antiques,” explains Piers. And Dreamers Cottage facilitated this lifestyle change.

#### Blending together

“The garden is intrinsic to our way of life, providing almost 80 per cent of the fruit, herbs and vegetables we need to be self-sufficient,” explains Louise. “We grow flowers for picking and sharing; hazel wood for climbing supports, and we make our own compost and keep chickens for eggs. I feel >



The leafy boughs of the old plum tree, informally underplanted with flowers for cutting. Pompom heads of allium ‘Purple Sensation’ pop up through a hazel wood frame, surrounded by peonies, *Gladiolus communis byzantinus* and Jerusalem artichokes growing by a willow hurdle fence.



Left to right: A fruitful corner of the garden, with rhubarb beds and a vintage terracotta forcer in front of a berried holly screen; delicate mauve flounces of *Iris sibirica*; tubular flowers of broad bean, *Vicia faba*.

Dominating the hazel copse is a large, twisted, gnarled trunk of a now-pollarded, pre-existing willow. Newer plantings of hazel are coppiced for garden pea sticks.



Piers renovating tools in the shed devoted to garden implements and paraphernalia, for the couple's business selling restored horticultural antiques.

"In this sequestered nook how sweet  
To sit upon my orchard-seat!  
And birds and flowers once more to greet"

William Wordsworth, 'The Green Linnet'

satisfyingly removed from contemporary, consumer society and relish the tasty, fresh produce we eat and preserve." It took a year to settle on the garden's design. "We devised a layout determined by usage, with a third being a productive fruit, flower and vegetable garden; a third a combined orchard and chicken enclosure, and the remainder as a calm, green and peaceful space, where we can simply sit."

The productive area claimed the most open, sunniest, south-west-facing area of the garden. "Overall, we're in a deceptively cold spot," explains Piers. "The heavy clay soil is slow to drain and warm up. We can't be in a rush to get spring crops in, so patience is a must," adds Louise. Neither had gardened on clay before. The productive beds claim prime, tillable locations, while flowers gather, cottage-garden-style, beneath trees by windows and doorways, where it is less suitable for rotational beds.

A variety of fruit trees are gathered in the revitalised orchard, but trained apples and pears make use of tight spaces afforded by the work shed walls, and an excellent old Oxfordshire plum holds court in the cut-flower area. "The productive garden sits deliberately en route to the work yard and vehicular access point: you can't fail to notice, on a daily basis, what needs doing," sighs Louise.

Despite its varied functionality, the garden sits comfortably, both as an attractive whole and as an intrinsic part of the borrowed village landscape. "It was important to us that the garden blended and worked aesthetically with its surroundings. We've incorporated many native trees and shrubs; flowering plants which attract pollinators; used reclaimed local stone for the terraces and pathways; hung hand-woven rustic gates and fences, and introduced farm trough-style water dippers," says Louise. A journey through the garden reveals a rare blend of horticultural know-how and high aesthetic.

**From the green**

The front of their picture-postcard, thatched cottage is rimmed in low-lying hawthorn and rose hedging, planted, laid, and now neatly clipped by Piers as mere whips and rose suckers almost 20 years ago. Their reclaimed, rustic garden gate opens directly onto the green. Beside their door, soft, box domes, *Buxus sempervirens*, are set back from the



Piers has handwoven a giant plant archway to support clambering sweet peas, using wood stems he coppiced from the hazel patch

reclaimed pathway, which runs across the front of the house, with small swathes of lawn echoing the village green beyond. Shade-loving ferns nestle in narrow beds on this north-facing side of the house. An underground well adds to collected rainwater, used for watering the adjacent vegetable garden.

The stone pathway leads past a small, triangular hazel wood copse, hemmed in woven willow, with an old willow at its heart. The willow is pollarded every three years to keep it in check, while 40 small, native hazels, planted 18 years ago as whips, provide a small harvest of delicious nuts and an annual bumper harvest of coppiced wooden supports and pea sticks. "They're especially good for sweet peas and beans," adds Piers. Beneath the hazels is a relaxed understory of woodland plants, such as winter aconites, snowdrops and hellebores, which give way to primroses and clouds of wild garlic in May. A redundant summerhouse was relocated and is now a useful tool shed positioned towards the back of the copse, hiding the compost bins behind.

The long side of Piers' clapboard workshop, where he makes and mends, encloses one side of the hazel copse. A perfectly trained espaliered pear, *Pyrus communis* 'Doyenné du Comice', graces the taller workshop frontage, while the

A pathway winds through the productive garden leading to the fenced hazel copse beside the shed, clad with an espaliered pear 'Doyenné du Comice'. The late spring garden spills with vegetable produce, flowers and foliage, including centranthus, alliums, iris, *Euphorbia oblongata* and mounded box domes, which add more permanent structure.



shape of a French-style, goblet apple lends itself beautifully to the narrower right-hand-panel. “Trained fruits maximise space, but also provide structure and interest,” says Louise.

In the heart of the irregular-shaped productive garden, the workshop path dissects two of the four main, large, rectangular crop rotation beds, which typify the classic productive garden. In the first are legumes, such as peas, and French, broad and borlotti beans. The second holds brassicas, including kalettes, sprouts and Savoy cabbages, while the third is for alliums, with onions and Russian, red-necked garlic. Leeks were a tragedy, suffering from leek moth, so the couple have lost an important ‘hungry gap’ crop between March and May. The final bed is for root vegetables, such as potatoes, carrots, parsnips and beetroot. Flowers for cutting, salad leaves and courgettes fill in the gaps.

Despite their strict horticultural upbringings, Piers and Louise have introduced additional crop beds to accommodate a broader range of produce. They are also steadily making the switch from double to single, to no-dig. The soil is also a challenge, with some beds being very heavy clay. Years of mulching with heaps of local farmyard manure and home-made compost has helped improve structure and productivity. “We feed the hungry crops first: potatoes, interplanted with a catch crop of broad beans, followed by squash courgettes to maximise space,” says Louise.

#### Flowers for picking

With a Maytime colour palette in shades of lime, magenta and purples, softened by airy whites, the flowers mingle informally in a relaxed, cottage-garden style. Drifts of allium ‘Purple Sensation’ mingle with vibrant magenta *Gladiolus communis byzantinus*, and clouds of *Anthriscus sylvestris* ‘Ravenswing’ drift in between.

The emphasis is on transient flowers and foliage for cutting; not more permanent seasonal show beds or borders. “I never buy flowers, but I always have blooms in the house, and I love to gather and give away,” says Louise.

The neat, brick-edged, stone pathways, reclaimed from former terraces and pens, have been laid out by Piers. The junctions and edges are softened by mounded box domes,



An old, but delicious, plum stands with an array of flowers for picking at its feet, with the productive areas of the garden spreading beyond, filled with broad beans, sweet peas, peonies and box balls.

## LOUISE AND PIERS’ TIPS FOR GROWING GARDEN PRODUCE

- Space should be maximised. Catch crops are a great way of doing this: we pop a row of broad beans in between rows of potatoes.
- It is essential to be patient, rather than rushing to get things in early or planting out too soon, when it is still too cold.
- Mixing produce with flowers for cutting makes the garden more interesting and attracts essential pollinators.
- Collecting rainwater in dipping troughs, instead of water butts, means watering can be done much quicker, and the birds love it too.
- Planting a hazel coppice does not require much space and is inexpensive. Planting a few whips in a small pocket of the garden will provide a ready supply of pea sticks.
- Gardening gently is recommended, such as using beer traps for slugs; netting cabbages to deter cabbage whites; applying an oily foliar feed to deter aphids, and nipping the tops of broad beans to avoid black spot.

*Buxus sempervirens*. These complement the low-lying internal yew hedging, *Taxus baccata*, which further divides the garden, bringing year-round structure and interest.

The yew was knee-high when Piers planted the hedging 20 years ago. “I prefer to slow-grow rather than buy ready-made hedging,” he explains.

#### Peaceful retreat

Leaving the productive garden, an *Alchemilla mollis*-lined pathway cuts through the house-end of the hedge and opens onto a stone-set, moss-clad dining terrace. “Piers laid each tiny, reclaimed stone, end-on-end, night after night, and it feels like it’s been here for centuries,” says Louise. Fringed in scented catmint, nepeta ‘Six Hills Giant’, the terrace is loosely divided from a surprising, open and uncluttered area of lawn, save for a standard yew dome which is the centrepiece of the Quiet Room. “This whole area is an >



A feathered border of catmint, nepeta ‘Six Hills Giant’, divides the stone-clad terrace from the lawned area.



Left to right: A bolt of colour from the thistle head of *Cirsium rivulare* ‘Atropurpureum’; nepeta ‘Six Hills Giant’ attracts pollinators and adds a gentle touch; magenta Byzantine gladiolus.

The small wooden glasshouse is used to bring on seedlings ready for the flower patch and vegetables for the productive areas. By summer, it spills with tomatoes, chillies and basil. Water for both the garden and the birds is collected from the adjoining dipping trough.



oasis: a restful counterfoil to the working areas,” adds Louise.

Towards the back, a gap in the parallel yew hedge leads to the orchard. The original fruit trees here produced little and poor-tasting fruit, so were quickly replaced with an assortment of vigorous and delicious greengages, quinces, apples and plums. An old hazel in the middle of the area remains, providing shelter to the chickens roaming here.

### Bearing fruit

Through the hedge and across the lawn, a second gap leads to the glasshouse and soft-fruit beds, which run along the productive garden’s southern perimeter. “We raise flower and vegetable seedlings in the glasshouse before giving it over to tomatoes, chilli and basil,” says Louise.

Rainwater collects in the former farmyard ‘dipping’ trough, which replaces a water butt. “It’s so much quicker to fill up the watering cans, and the birds love splashing about in it,” adds Louise. Beyond, soft fruit, loganberries, redcurrants, blackcurrants and raspberry canes sprawl, hemmed in with strawberries. Nestling among the leafy rhubarb foliage, towards the yard end of the bed, peep old terracotta rhubarb forcers, which, like almost everything else in the garden, including the neatly stacked terracotta pots in the yard, are for sale.

The couple are absorbed with Garden and Wood: hunting down, restoring, marketing, displaying and selling fine old tools. Their garden is hard work but, as the backdrop to their business, brings real credence to their wares. Louise does most of the growing; Piers deals with the hedges, fences and pathways. Dreamers Cottage has been instrumental in the two of them realising their ambitions, and living off the land has become their way of life. “We grow to eat: we don’t garden for leisure,” says Louise. “It’s incredibly satisfying, and the ultimate pleasure is in eating delicious, home-grown produce and giving flowers to friends.” ■

*“Let first the onion flourish there,  
Rose among roots, the maiden-fair,  
Wine-scented and poetic soul  
Of the capacious salad bowl”*

**Robert Louis Stevenson, ‘To a Gardener’**



Louise working the salad bed with a vintage hoe in the productive garden.

• Words: Jacky Hobbs • Photography: GAP Photos/Mark Bolton

---

### CONTACT

*Garden and Wood, Dreamers Cottage, Little Haseley, Oxfordshire, OX44 7LH. For more details, visit [www.gardenandwood.co.uk](http://www.gardenandwood.co.uk) Open by appointment only. Tel. 01844 279170 or email [enquiries@gardenandwood.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@gardenandwood.co.uk). Garden and Wood will be at Chelsea Flower Show from 22-27 May 2023.*