

Review of Leechwell Herb Garden 2010 - 2011

The planting of the Herb Garden is now virtually complete. Perhaps we should call it a Garden of Herbs, because the beds are perennial borders, without the conventional divisions of a Herb Garden. This was a deliberate choice, partly to do with maintenance and the nature of the layout. The main planting of perennials and shrubs ensures a semi-permanent framework, allowing for renewal or changes in the annuals and biennials.

We have been faithful to the first draft plan which was approved by the LGA Committee, Alex Whish and Charlotte Rathbone in autumn 2010. The few changes are because we could not obtain or transplant particular plants. The plan was drawn up by the Herb Garden Planning Team, after much research into herbs and herb gardens, using reference books, the internet, actual visits, advice from experts, and members own considerable experience.

The team decided on certain criteria, and the plants at present in the garden conform to these. Naturally this imposed limitations on our choice. In our selection we tried to adhere to the considerations we had set out, and which had been approved by the committee. The following information shows how successfully we have managed to achieve this:

- The garden is designed for low maintenance, because of the need for continuing volunteer involvement.
- At last, after a day of rain, wood-chip mulch is to be spread this week to conserve moisture and to suppress weeds. This will save labour.
- There are no invasive plants such as comfrey and mint. Mint is grown elsewhere in the Leechwell Garden.
- Neither are there poisonous plants such as foxgloves and rue.
- All the plants have a use, culinary, medical, domestic. Some, of course, have multiple uses.
- There is variation of foliage colour, and some evergreens to give year round interest: myrtle, bay olive, rosemary and juniper hibernica. The latter, chosen for its very narrow columnar growth, was difficult to find.
- An evergreen climber, *trachelospermum jasminoides*, has been planted, and will in time clothe the wall from the fig tree to the gate.
- Very important in our plant list, were herbs such as sage, marjoram, hyssop and agastache, which will attract pollinating insects. We envisaged borders buzzing with bees and attracting butterflies. It is beginning to happen; witness the borage.
- Seeds from sunflowers, fennel and teasels will be left for the birds.

And so to people.

It is hoped that we have created a place where people can enjoy being. Here, there are not only flowers to please the eye, but a feast of different scents; the obvious being lavender, sage, thyme, and the roses on the pergola. Around the seats though, are rosemary, fennel, marjoram, camomile and lemon balm. Just put out a hand and crush.

In order to get bare-rooted plants in place while dormant, the committee looked

at options for planting climbers for the pergola. Choices were narrowed down to roses and clematis, with two ramblers, Paul's Himalayan Musk and Francis E Lester chosen for reliability and some disease resistance, few thorns, their perfume, and in the case of the latter, spectacular rose-hips. Alex Whish and Charlotte Rathbone gave their blessing. A variety of clematis, to bloom at different times, were planted to grow eventually through the roses. All the plants on the pergola have taken root.

The plan having been approved, plants had to be ordered and paid for by the end of January 2011 in order to satisfy the requirements of the Community Spaces Grant. Our main suppliers were Hill House Nursery and Memory Cross Nursery, both at Staverton. The latter agreed to raise certain less usual herbs to our requirement. We bought seeds from Suffolk Herbs. Some other plants were sourced from specialist growers.

All the nurseries agreed to look after the plants through the winter, and to advise us when they considered conditions right to plant them. Having to visualise the plan, to decide on all the plants and the numbers needed, and then to commit to buying them was rather daunting, but we managed to keep within the agreed budget.

Meanwhile an unexpected difficulty arose when we looked at the structure of the soil. Below a very thin layer of compost, there was compacted clay subsoil.

We tested the soil and fortunately the pH reading was neutral. We were advised that nothing could be planted in the autumn. This meant that only empty beds greeted the multitude at the official opening in October 2010, and this was disappointing for us.

A great deal of soil preparation was needed, and a few volunteers worked hard in early spring, digging the beds to incorporate soil conditioner and grit. Memory Cross Nursery let us bag-up spent compost to use, at no cost. There was a danger of making the soil too rich, so where woody sub-shrubs were to be planted, extra grit was used to improve drainage.

Susie Boyd gave us a fig tree, dug up with difficulty, from her garden, and transplanted against a sheltered wall near the entrance to the Leechwell Garden. It has survived the trauma, and has produced new leaves and even infant figs. It is good to have the fig tree as a tribute to Susie, who worked so hard to 'save our space'.

The fig tree bed was originally unplanned, in the hope that it would become an area for children to plan, plant and manage; that might well happen another year, but for the present it is planted mainly with late annuals: sunflower, calendula and nasturtium.

In the area at the back of the dry stone wall, around the hamamelis, we have started to plant hardy geraniums, to provide ground cover.

Committee members, volunteers and even casual visitors to the garden have helped with digging, planting, watering and weeding.

The drought during the past two months has highlighted the problem of the lack of a convenient water supply. Thanks are due to everyone who has put in effort

with watering cans and hoses, to ensure that newly planted, shallow-rooted herbs have had a chance to establish themselves. Some solutions, though not ideal, have now eased the situation.

This first season has seen the Herb Garden take shape. It will be interesting to see how it matures and develops in years to come. There is natural anxiety about how the plants will fare through the winter, trying to survive in cold, wet clay soil, but the enthusiasm and loving care given towards making this a successful and delightful garden is evident and will continue. So far the herb garden has been respected, no damage has been done to the plants; long may this continue.

In conclusion, I would like to record my thanks to Alex Whish, SHDC Landscape Officer, for his advice, encouragement and re-assurance, and Charlotte Rathbone, Landscape Architect for the Leechwell Garden, for her generous advice and support.

Jeannette Willington

Leader of the Herb Garden Planning Team

12. 06. 2011