

Historic Fruit and Kitchen Gardens

Newsletter number 1, November 2022



©Jelle Reeder, head gardener Dordwijk, The Netherlands

New cycle 2022-2024

Dear All,

The European Symposium on the conservation of historic fruit and kitchen gardens launches its new 2022-24 cycle! The partnership between Amis du Potager du Roi and the Walled Kitchen Gardens Network is very happy to welcome a new member from the Netherlands: sKBL, the Foundation for Castles, Historic Country Houses and Estates. The 2022-24 cycle starts with the first issue of this new quarterly newsletter (see enclosed). Webinars will start in February 2023 and a great 'Chambord like' meeting will close the cycle in 2024 in the Netherlands. Let's keep in touch!

See you soon!

The organizing team.

Save the date: February 23, 2023

Our next online conference will be February 23, 2023, 10.00 – 12.00 a.m. (9.00-11.00 GMT). More information to follow in early 2023.

Please let us know your feedback and ideas!

We value your feedback on the 2022-cycle as well as your ideas for the new cycle. What did you like best? What would you like to be improved? What topics would you like to discuss? Which historic fruit and kitchen gardens would you like to be presented? We welcome your contributions to this newsletter and any suggestions you may have.

Please contact us at our new email address: contact@potagershistoriqueshistorickitchengardens.eu

Toward a renaissance of historic fruit and kitchen gardens?

On October 15 2020, when they opened the symposium, Susan Campbell and Alix de Saint Venant raised a disturbing issue: [why have so many historic fruit and kitchen gardens disappeared?](#) In June 2022, after 8 online conferences, the presentation of some 20 gardens and exchanges between more than 30 speakers and 160 participants¹, we met in Chambord, Villandry, La Bourdaisière and Valmer for the conclusion of the symposium and the mood was very different as everybody had realized that:

- A number of historic fruit and kitchen gardens are very well preserved, promote [horticultural excellence](#) and attract numerous visitors. Several restoration projects, including the one at [Burghley House](#) were also presented.
- Historic fruit and kitchen gardens offer horticulture treasures that tell us a lot about the history of horticulture and help to conserve ancient savoir-faire that can be used well beyond the walls of the fruit and kitchen gardens and that can help solve some of today's difficult challenges.

The symposium also helped us to realize that the renaissance of historic fruit and kitchen gardens probably will require that owners and gardeners fully understand that these gardens are very special gardens and that their conservation faces unique challenges. The presentations made during the first phase of the symposium are all on our [website](#).

Examples of horticultural treasures offered by our historic fruit and kitchen gardens

Sarah Wain presented the [historic glasshouses of West Dean](#) which have been restored with great care and are still used for cultivation under glass



¹ Each of the online sessions attracted 160 participants on average in 2021 and 186 on average in 2022. 119 participants met in Chambord, Villandry, La Bourdaisière and Valmer.



Ghislain d'Ursel described the [conservation caves of Château de Hex](#) in Belgium, where vegetables are still preserved in conservation caves as they were in the past

Nicola Bradley and Alasdair Moore described how pineapples are still cultivated under glass as they were in the 19th century at the Lost gardens of Heligan.



Finally, trained fruit trees were presented by [Herman Van Den Bossche and Marcel Vossen](#) –for Gaasbeek in Belgium- and by [Jim Arbury and Gerry Edwards](#) – RHS- United Kingdom

Each of these presentations reminded us that since fruit and kitchen gardens were productive gardens, their artefacts have been designed for a very specific purpose² and that they can become real cultural treasures when they are conserved in their original guise. When it is so, the artefacts of historic fruit and kitchen gardens become cultural objects aimed at explaining our horticultural – and related – heritage. Contrary to what happens in industrial heritage sites, another type of productive site, fruit and kitchen garden artefacts can continue to produce historical plants based on ancient technologies and savoir-faire and visitors can see – even taste – the fruits and vegetables that were produced in the past.

² Please refer to Susan Campbell, *A history of Kitchen Gardening*, Unicorn 2015

Heligan still cultivates pineapples under glass in the way in which it was successfully done in the UK in the 18th and 19th centuries. This is obviously a challenge; it is labour intensive, the working conditions are not easy and it requires the support of a whole ecosystem that is progressively disappearing (for example, it is very difficult today to find horse manure of the required quality).

John Watkins, English Heritage presented the [revival of a traditional cider and perry orchard](#).

The conservation of these ancient, horticultural treasures obviously requires the conservation and continuous adaptation and development of ancient savoir-faire. In some cases, the conservation - and the further development of ancient savoir faire - can become even more important than the conservation of the garden itself: A case in point is [Gaasbeek](#) which has become the most important centre in Europe for conserving the art of the trained fruit tree.

Historic fruit and kitchen gardens may have a significant influence beyond their walls and help solve today's challenges

It is clear that past horticultural practices don't all have the same value. Some have a historic value only: some fruit and vegetables of the 18th century have a very poor flavour, some past horticultural and technical practices were harmful to the environment and to human health, etc. On the other hand, there is traditional savoir-faire that has passed the test of time and that is not only valid today but is badly needed for helping to create more sustainable horticulture. A case in point is the art/savoir faire of trained fruit trees that now helps the planting of more fruit trees in the constrained environment of cities. In some countries, cities may become a new environment for the preservation and further development of the savoir faire of the art of the espalier and of trained fruit trees! This ensures that ancient savoir-faire is kept alive. A movement has been started in France to request that the art of the espalier [be registered on the list of intangible cultural heritage of Unesco](#).

[Fruits in the city](#), the first international symposium on edible landscapes in the city, Nantes, 7&8 September 2023



The many interactions between a historical fruit and kitchen garden and its surrounding urban environment were especially well described by Jacques Soignon, CVVS and city of Nantes in his presentation: "[From the historic kitchen garden of Grand Blottereau to the nurturing landscapes of the city of Nantes](#)":

What does it really mean to conserve these gardens?

The productive function of fruit and kitchen gardens means that their conservation fights with two strong adverse forces: creative destruction and casual restoration. Production works naturally as a process of 'creative destruction'³ that inexorably goes against conservation. Restoration when not sufficiently historically informed can lead to a poor use of the artefacts of the garden.

The continuing appearance of new plants, new horticultural techniques and new consumer tastes makes fruit and kitchen gardens evolve a bit like craftsman workshops or even industrial sites. In order for a production site to remain up to date, new features need to continuously and ruthlessly replace old features. When this is done systematically, there is the possibility that almost nothing is conserved in a fruit and kitchen garden, even if it has been cultivated for centuries. As for industrial sites, the process of creative destruction inherent to production has sometimes led owners to decide that it was best to ignore an old fruit and kitchen garden's site and to open a new, more effective one. The symposium has

³ According to an expression frequently used in economics and that tells that new innovative approaches do not add up to ancient approaches but replace or 'destroy' them.

confirmed that there is still a large potential for restoring lost gardens. However, the parallel with industrial sites should be used with care for two reasons at least. Innovation in gardens is probably slower and less destructive than in factories. It is clear also that many owners of historic gardens have decided to preserve a few historic jewels - although not always in their original functions - even if this has resulted in an increase of their production costs.

The symposium confirmed that the overall situation today is that most historic kitchen gardens practice a conservation which organizes the garden around the co-existence of a mix of historic artefacts (walls, overall design, trained fruit trees, etc.) and most up to date production features (fashionable plants, high-tech watering systems, modern equipment and machinery, etc.). There exists today an immense variety of combinations of old and new and it would be pointless to try to establish what are the most appropriate combinations. One can only enjoy the results achieved and recognize the beauty and the horticultural excellence of a number of these gardens, even if, in pure terms of conservation, we can only talk of '**selective conservation**'. But as John Dixon Hunt rightly reminds us⁴, we should probably not always focus on conservation only.



Pursuit of economic value:

[Dominique Pophin presented the garden integrated into the luxury hotel and gourmet restaurant of Château Colbert.](#)

(winner of the SNHF best garden award in 2016 and 2021)

The symposium showed that the model of selective conservation is not necessarily economically sustainable because it adds costs to the production of fruit and vegetables. This is probably why many historic fruit and kitchen gardens have decided to pursue additional or new sources of economic, social or cultural value

Pursuit of social value:

[Serge Conreur and Thierry Hay](#)

showed how the fruit and garden of the abbey of Saint Georges de Boscherville supports a project aiming at bringing jobless people back to work.



⁴ John Dixon Hunt, What is it about gardens that you want to conserve? *Gardens & Landscapes in Historic Buildings conservation*, John Wiley & Sons, 2014.

Château de Prangins. **MUSÉE NATIONAL SUISSE. SCHWEIZERISCHES NATIONALMUSEUM. MUSEO NAZIONALE SVIZZERO. MUSEUM NAZIUNAL SVIZZER.**

Centre d'interprétation du jardin potager

Le jardin dévoilé
Anciennes variétés,
enjeux actuels



Pursuit of cultural value:

[Stéphane Repas-Mendes](#) presented the fruit and kitchen garden of Château de Prangins (Switzerland) which has been turned into a 'living museum' that tells the history of plants and gardening.

In the case of a garden like Prangins, revenue comes from the many activities organised for visitors, not from the sale of fruit and vegetables⁵. Even if it is not widespread yet, this approach might be very interesting when considering the future of historic fruit and kitchen gardens.

Conservation and restoration efforts probably need to be based on a deep and broad interdisciplinary research as one needs to get a practical understanding of many dimensions of our history: what were the horticultural techniques used for producing food at that time? What knowledge or savoir-faire supported these technologies? What construction and irrigation techniques, what equipment and tools were used? What was the work and the life of gardeners and head gardeners? How were they educated? What plants were cultivated? What food was consumed? What were the eating habits? What was the interaction of people with plants? Towards nature and the environment? What was the overall societal context, etc.

The cultural function of historic fruit and kitchen gardens then supersedes its original function of producing fruit and vegetables. Historic fruit and kitchen gardens become unique places for telling visitors about the many dimensions of our history.

Preserving and further developing horticultural savoir-faire

Fruit and kitchen gardens with a history require a degree of horticultural excellence that can only be reached by a team of knowledgeable gardeners who are well led and who have both the requisite resources and room for manoeuvre. Several speakers gave participants the opportunity to discuss the functions of gardeners and their training; [Elinor Davies](#), RHS (England), [Kelly Fowler and Gemma Sturges](#), Audley End (England); and [Willem Zieleman](#), Het Loo (The Netherlands).

The role of the owner is also essential to the preservation of ancient savoir-faire. The unique role and responsibility of the owner was an important focus of the webinar presentations. The participants in the colloquium were able to discuss the role and responsibility of the private owner to persist in implementing a long-term vision with [Henri Carvallo](#), the owner of Villandry. Together with [Olivier de Lorgeril](#), owner of La Bourbonsais and president of La Demeure Historique, they were also able to reflect on the economic models that enable an owner to make his or her garden truly transmissible to future generations.

⁵ Some plants may even be allowed to go to seed, which is not the aim in a productive garden!



Meet the organizers of the 2024 conference

Les Amis du Potager du Roi were formed to support and promote the Potager du Roi. Potager du Roi was created from 1678 onwards by La Quintinie in the palace of Versailles for King Louis XIV. After difficult times, Potager du Roi was put under the responsibility of the ministry of Agriculture to become the National School of Horticulture. The school made it a showcase of all the treasures of the horticulture of the 19th century. It created in particular a unique collection of 16 000 fruit trees trained in more than 50 different shapes. Today, the École Nationale Supérieure de Paysage (ENSP) is responsible for the conservation, management and valorisation of Potager du Roi. Together with Murs à Pêches de Montreuil, les Amis du Potager du Roi have initiated, a collective for the inscription of the art of espalier and other trained fruit trees on the UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list. Find out more on the website [Amis du Potager du Roi](#)

Stichting Kastelen, historische Buitenplaatsen en Landgoederen is the Dutch national platform for castles, historic country houses and rural estates. It aims to contribute to the preservation of this valuable landscape and monumental heritage. In addition to organising promotional activities, SKBL also puts energy into strengthening the mutual bond between castles, country houses and rural estates, e.g. by organising study days and by stimulating the exchange of knowledge. Find out more on the website: [Castles, Country Houses and Rural Estates – SKBL](#)

The Walled Kitchen Gardens Network provides information and advice to individuals and organisations who are interested in the historical functions, structures and usage of these fascinating places. It does so through the internet and also through an annual Forum and workshops. Membership is free and open to all by subscribing to the newsletter “The Grapevine” on the website [Walled Kitchen Gardens Network \(walledgardens.net\)](#)

You receive this email because you participated in one of our online conferences or attended the symposium at Chambord Castle.

Our mailing address is: contact@potagershistoriqueshistorickitchengardens.eu

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