

The New Garden

– where every plant is edible



Edible flowers and leaves on a raw piece of slate

On Vancouver Island in British Columbia, a quiet revolution is going on that will change our garden and food habits for the next century. Joy Larkcom, a pre-eminent authority on vegetables, couldn't contain her excitement when she visited the beautiful Sooke Harbour House garden, 'where every plant is edible'. For the Digger's Club, it is the restaurant for the 21st Century!

The vision of the creators of Sooke Harbour House, Sinclair and Frederique Philip, is that food must be local, seasonal and organic. The fact that they are growing at least 600 edible plants just a short stroll from the kitchen gives a whole new meaning to this vision. For 'local' at Sooke Harbour House restricts the distance to within 40 kilometres, which means citrus, mangoes, avocados, and out-of-season fresh tomatoes will never appear on the menu.

Because the source of food has to be local, Sooke Harbour House has devised lots of novel replacements for citrus, which will not grow in British Columbia's cool summers. Chefs choose from Lemon Verbena, Bergamot, Lemon Grass, Lemon Thyme and Lemon Balm to provide tartness and acidity, but the most surprising and original replacement are the needle tips of the



A Sooke Harbour House chef going through the garden for inspiration

grand fir tree, *Abies grandis*. Great food comes from great ingredients and it is the interaction between the garden and kitchen that is the signature of a Sooke Harbour House meal.

'Does the garden drive the menu, or the kitchen direct the garden?' I asked Byron, who was in his eleventh year of managing the garden. The answer, of course, was, 'A bit of both.' When a chef is going stale, Frederique tells them to go out into the garden for inspiration—perhaps this is how the distinctive sauce from tuberous begonias came to be developed. Such a visit is not without risks, particularly when the cutting greens are decapitated by inexperienced cooks rather than trimmed by gardeners.

Imposing such strident conditions on their 12 chefs generates such creative energy that an evening meal will include such surprises as seaweed bread, Idiot fish with a red tuberous begonia sauce, followed by ice cream made from the roots of Sweet Cecily, and garnished with edible blue *Salvia patens* flowers. The food offered is deliciously healthy, being largely Sooke vegetables and harbour fish. Out of the 10 courses presented over two days, the only meat served was white meat, namely fish, chicken, and occasionally veal, and I counted more than 40 different vegetables and herbs on the menu.

It must have been all the organic vitamins and fat-free fish that kept us on a high for over two weeks. (Or was it the absence of chemicals?) Sinclair's commitment to organics is such that in the early days he traded meals for farmyard manure, which was essential as the soil was so poor. Fifteen years later the search for new vegetables is still vital, so they were willing to trade seeds for meals!

Modern industrial food uses enormous amounts of energy in its production and transport and this

energy will eventually run out, so a restaurant that is so stridently local is clearly at the cutting edge of our needs for the 21st Century.

Frederique is passionate about what is wrong with American food. 'American taste buds are dead. People here have no reference for good food because so much of the food chain is industrialised. American food is so commercial, nothing smells.' It wasn't until she returned to her native Provence that her sense of smell was excited again by the local cheeses, olives and melons. 'Nothing is fresh here [in America]; you can go into a supermarket and choose ten yoghurts, but they are all the same' (pasteurised and sanitised).

Innovative approaches to food are guaranteed. There is no head chef and the menu changes every day, because it all starts from the garden when Sooke's chefs explore what is tasty and fresh. Often the menu is not ready until 5.00 p.m. and sometimes Sinclair and Frederique don't know what is on it. 'Isn't it difficult to get the dish right when every dish is a new creation?' I asked.

'Because most restaurants have the same menu for three to six months, the ingredients they use won't always be fresh, and it is this freshness that gives our menu a vitality (even if there is some suspense),' replied Sinclair.

At Sooke Harbour House the unpredictable is to be expected, as I found out when chickweed, the worst weed at Heronswood, appeared in my Sooke Harbour House salad. (One visitor gave the gardeners days of entertainment by wanting to buy the seeds of even this weed.)

The nearby harbour is also the source of seaweed, which is used to enhance soil fertility, and inspired the morning pastry chef to create a delicious seaweed bread to add to Calendula and sour dough choices. It is the dual element of plants, as ornaments or objects to eat—flowers for hotel vases as well as garnishes—that can make a visit so memorable.

It is this 'dare-to-be-creative' philosophy that attracts innovative and emerging chefs to Sooke Harbour House. No doubt this is the reason Sooke Harbour House was recently voted Canada's best restaurant, and in another magazine Sooke was rated as one of the best 25 hotels in the world.

Asked to nominate his most troublesome problem, Byron will say, out of hearing of the kitchen, 'The worst pest in our garden is the chef!' No doubt he is articulating the rivalry between the two and the supremacy that the kitchen salary has over that of the garden. But Byron, who understands the true value of talent, has the last word, 'We can always find another chef.'

The maritime climate on Vancouver Island gives the garden of Sooke Harbour House a longer growing season than almost anywhere in North America,



Head chef at Heronswood's Fork to Fork restaurant and Digger's plant trials manager inspect produce in the restaurant production garden.

making it possible to grow and offer herbs and salad greens through most of the year. The garden runs right down to the water's edge, and is overlooked by its hotel rooms, so it must always be attractive as well as productive. It is a great comfort to visitors to be able to stroll around the garden and to talk to a gardener or a chef about the forthcoming meal.

Outside our dining room window was a pleached fig, a passionfruit vine and white strawberry plants. Borage, Calendula, Nasturtiums and Marigolds provide colourful edging to Lemon Verbena and artichokes, proving that a cook's garden, in the right hands, can be as ornamental as it is edible. The meals are remarkably light and healthy with little fat, because there is so little red meat. The garden makes a picture as exceptional and healthy as the food that has been picked and prepared before your eyes—and any gardener can do it!

C.R. Blazey



Edible plant gardens can be just as beautiful as practical