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## Foreword

#### by

### Mark Diacono

If you're new to growing food, relax and enjoy this book: It brings together the many spokes of growing edibles into one hub, drawing together techniques, processes and concepts, pleasures and possibilities, experiences and insights without sparing the failures. This is gardening as a whole and as it should be. If you are already converted, rest assured that this stream of thoughts and experiences, exciting ideas and fascinating facts make *The Alternative Kitchen Garden* a book to grow with, in all senses.

There's a lot of talk at the moment that this, now, is the time to grow your own, but what we are seeing is a more enduring reconnection and fascination with what we eat. Since the 1950s, we have seen the wider population who used to grow at least a little of what they ate fall by the wayside (though allotmenteers and kitchen gardeners have never gone away). Undoubtedly our obsession with 'saving time' and the availability of cheap food has played a key part in this, but the tendency of some garden writers to cloak the pleasure of growing in endless jargon, to dress up complex techniques as critical and create an expert/novice divide has done little to encourage and inspire. Happily Emma is helping to put this to rights.

It is one thing to 'do', quite another, as Emma does, to multiply the value of doing by enthusing, inspiring, encouraging and enabling.

Through her website, blogging, podcasts and now this book, Emma beautifully conveys the simultaneous inconsequentiality and enormity of growing: Planting a tree, while a matter of hole-digging and backfilling, engages us with our cultural heritage and becomes an opportunity for creativity and expression, as well as offering a gift to the future. And as you'd expect if you're familiar with Emma's work, it's a generous book, linking people, organisations and the reader throughout, joining the dots as it goes.

Many books present the reader with what feels like a mountain to climb. Emma's gift is in breaking down barriers, inviting us into the resulting space and presenting numerous ingenious opportunities to fill it. What and how we do this is up to each individual.

Now I'm off to sow some quinoa.

Mark Diacono is head gardener at River Cottage and runs Otter Farm, the UK's only Climate Change Farm, home to experimental orchards of 'foreign' foods including almonds, pecans, persimmons and apricots – as well as the olive grove. The aim of the farm is to take advantage of global warming to grow these crops and sustainably add them to the British larder without the food miles and subsequent heavy carbon load normally associated with them – a beautifully virtuous circle of working with climate change in a way that helps arrest its acceleration.

Mark is author of Veg Patch – River Cottage Handbook No.4, recently published as part of the River Cottage Handbook series.

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# The Alternative Kitchen Garden



### Introduction

The Alternative Kitchen Garden is a philosophy, an evolving idea of what a kitchen garden could and should be in the 21st century. In the last few decades of the 20th century the Western world became more and more industrialised. Kitchen gardens, once an important part of most homes, became all but extinct as highly mechanised agriculture and cheap food imports made them seem unnecessary. But at the start of the 21st century, numerous food scares and

increasing awareness of environmental and health issues are bringing home food production back into the public eye.

Many people have not had a chance to learn the practical skills that growing edible plants requires, but the Alternative Kitchen Garden is a friendly place where all are welcome. The emphasis is on trying things out, finding what works for you and what grows well in your garden. There are only two real rules – be kind to the environment and have some fun in your garden!

The Alternative Kitchen Garden is also a very real place. It has incarnations across the globe, wherever people are trying to tread lightly on the Earth and raise some plants. But the original Alternative Kitchen Garden, my garden, is in urban Oxfordshire. It came into being in 2001, when my husband Pete and I bought our first home. It was born out of a concern for the environment, but has thrived because I have developed a profound respect and fascination for the plants themselves. Their beauty and generosity astounds me, and there is always something new to see.

Initially, the Alternative Kitchen Garden was simply a few pots on the patio. My first plants – herbs and leaf beet – grew and some of them even gave us a harvest. I was hooked, and they were soon joined by anything which might grow in a container – garlic and potatoes, then strawberries and then a patio orchard of dwarf fruit trees.

The garden itself had long been neglected and was mainly ropey old lawn with the added bonus of hidden treasure – ankle-breaking pot holes, buried lumps of concrete and the rusty remains of largely unidentifiable items. We had neither the time nor the inclination to dig, and so we covered it in black plastic sheeting weighed down with bricks. It wasn't pretty, but it was an improvement – there was now a clear path right down the garden to the enormous bramble patch at the bottom. If I had been Sleeping Beauty I would have been waiting for my Prince to hack his way through it.

On the day that Pete trod on a hedgehog that had made its way under the black plastic (a dark, damp environment being a haven for both slugs and snails and the things that eat them!), we decided that the plastic had served its purpose and needed to go. Don't worry about the hedgehog – their prickles act as shock absorbers and the hedgehog lived to see another day. By the time we removed it, the plastic had been down for a couple of years, and the grass was history. But the bindweed lived on. We replaced the plastic with woven weed-control fabric and a mulch (covering) of bark chips. Aesthetically this was much more pleasing, and gradually we reclaimed the garden. With some help from my parents we beat the brambles back but this left the garden open to an alley at the bottom. The time had come for the first major garden project – a new fence. We decided to paint it forest green, a job which took us several months as it was sandwiched

will gr

into our meagre free time. In the meantime, the brambles were making a comeback and when we were finally ready to put the fence up it was once again a battle against the blackberries. But once the fence was up the garden started to look and feel like a garden, and far fewer of the fat neighbourhood cats could muster the energy to scale a six foot fence in search of their usual toilet sites.

By 2005 the fence was in place and the first raised beds had appeared – built from large concrete blocks that give the place rather an industrial feel until they're softened by the planting. My gardening blog (internet diary) was in full swing and plant mania was starting to take hold. I became a seed hoarder, collecting plants that I wanted to grow as and when I had the time, energy and space. I saw and lusted after a Grow Dome – an enormous greenhouse with a geodesic dome. Having visited a working one, I ordered my own and it arrived in July 2005. At that time we were cash rich and time poor, a situation that many people find themselves in. It would be two more years before my flat pack Grow Dome became a proper greenhouse.

2006 was the year that Pete discovered he has an obsession with large butts – water butts, that is. And although it was a long, hot summer, for most of it we had plenty of rain water saved up with which to water the plants. For me, 2006 was the year that I grew my first really unusual plant – achocha – and from then on I was hooked. 2006 was also the year that the chickens arrived. Hen Solo and Princess Layer were delivered along with their five-star chicken accommodation, the eglu. They have added another dimension entirely to the garden, and despite the fact that they occasionally escape and munch things they shouldn't we wouldn't be without them.

In 2007 things changed abruptly. Pete and I both became self-employed, time rich and cash poor. We finally finished putting up the Grow Dome, and despite the atrocious English weather that summer the Alternative Kitchen Garden produced a crop of sweetcorn that both we and the chickens enjoyed. I started saving my own seeds, and growing things from pips.

And at the beginning of 2007 I started the Alternative Kitchen Garden podcast – an internet radio show, free to download, and covering a different gardening topic in every show. The first ever episode was on one of my favourite plants, Jerusalem artichokes, because they're so easy to grow and provide a good harvest even from containers. In its first year the Alternative Kitchen Garden show covered many topics, from compost and slugs through to chickpeas and tiger nuts.

Although it's snowing as I write this (in mid-March), I have high hopes for the Alternative Kitchen Garden this year. The Grow Dome is ready for action, I've started a Goji Garden based on forest garden principles, and a new raised bed is waiting to be planted with potatoes. There's almost no budget for the garden, but it doesn't matter. From tiny seeds an enormous glut of courgettes