

Visit to the Georgian kitchen garden at Oxen Hoath retreat centre, Kent 09.11.14

Head Gardener Joaquin (Joe) gave me a guided tour of the 2.2 acres of kitchen garden which is currently undergoing the Soil Association's Organic Conversion; certification should be next July. Joe with the help of Tom (part time) has taken on the mammoth task of bringing the garden back into productivity. He is well equipped, currently studying the RSH course in horticulture at Hadlow and with a background in Biology and Environmental Science.

They have 3 glasshouses and 2 polytunnels currently in use with 2 more glasshouses ready for restoration. Those in use are full of propagation material, winter salad leaves and brassicas some of which had to be re-planted as the first sowing was taken by the slugs; they don't have the luxury that we have of being able to buy in nematodes and so are relying on hand picking the slugs.

Outside the glasshouses and tunnels are more beds, some for permanent planting such as rhubarb, artichokes and asparagus; others full of leeks, carrots and baby beetroot. All the plants looked in rude health, Joe and Tom make and use lots of nettle tea, their own compost and are planning comfrey beds for next year. What could be a real problem –an extensive area of mare's tail has been turned into an asset –Joe mows it to stop it spreading and then successfully uses the clippings as a mulch (the deep tap roots are rich in minerals extracted from the soil).

The produce is primarily used in the kitchen in the retreat centre (the food was delicious thanks to chef Paul Smith) and any surplus is sold locally.

Photos top left clockwise, original entrance to the kitchen garden, Joe harvesting produce, winter salad crops, mare's tail.



