A History of Kitchen Gardening

Susan Campbell

CHAPTER ONE

LOCATION

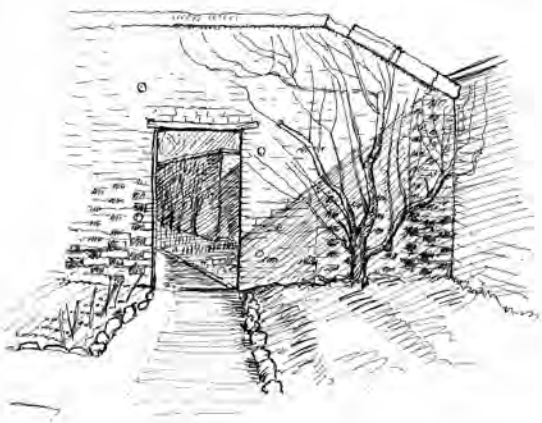
I had visited Billy in his house at Pylewell many times before I found out where the kitchen garden was. It cannot be seen from the long ilex avenue which runs from the north lodge at the main gates to the north front of the house, nor from the house itself, nor from any parts of the garden surrounding the house, nor from any vantage point in the 200 acre park surrounding the pleasure grounds. The few places from which it can be seen are all on the service road. This runs past the kitchen garden and the mill, connecting the stables beside the mansion to the little thatched lodge which was once the head gardener's cottage. This concealment is quite deliberate. The kitchen garden was moved to its present secluded position by Joseph Weld because the walls of Ascanius Senior's eighteenth-century kitchen garden, like those of countless others across the country, were not only so high as to be unsightly but also obstructed views from the house.

There was also the constant to-ing and fro-ing of gardeners, the picking and cutting of crops, the digging of the open ground or 'quarters', the stirring of composts, the manuring of hotbeds and the smells arising from those departments, which mingled with the occasional but hefty scents of decaying cabbage leaves and bruised, wind-brushed celery or onion. None of this was welcome at close hand, and none of it made for the ornamental or restful place that a garden is supposed to be.

Seventeenth-century kitchen gardens – Pylewell's amongst them – were situated, not necessarily right under the windows of the best rooms, but as close to the house as possible, and on the best soil available, with a handy supply of water. Other considerations were an open aspect, with shelter from the worst of wind and weather.

Kitchen gardens were not thought wholly unsightly until they began to increase in size, to become almost industrial in character and to loom large in a landscape that, throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century, was changing from formal to 'natural'

door to the kitchen garden



– an English landscape in which there was no place for straight lines. Everything straight had to go; straight paths, straight beds, straight hedges, straight ornamental canals, straight avenues and, above all, straight walls. Kitchen gardens spoiled the impression of Arcadia that 'artist gardeners' were now creating with carefully planned haystacks and watering places, boathouses, bridges, temples, mausoleums, hermits' cottages and grottoes. Any of these made desirable eye-catchers; on the other hand, vast brick or stone boxes formed by fifteen-foot-high walls, enclosing dung heaps, frameyards, work sheds, bothies and primitive glasshouses (each one accompanied by a smoking chimney), did not.

In 1728, Batty Langley, landscape gardener, architect and author, directed 'That all gardens be grand, beautiful and natural', and that the main front of the house should lie open to:

> An elegant Lawn or Plain of Grass, adorn'd with beautiful Statues . . . That grand Avenues be planted from such large open Plains, . . . That Views be as extensive as possible. That such Walks, whose Views cannot be extended, terminate in Woods, Forests, misshapen Rocks, strange Precipices, Mountains, old Ruins, grand Buildings &c. [1]

If these picturesque features could not be contrived naturally, they must be put there by art – painted on canvas and placed as screens at the end of a vista that might otherwise end in a squalid bothy or greenhouse. If it were impossible for kitchen gardens to be put out of sight, they would be concealed with shrubs or belts of trees, or they might be built a little way off, with circular or oval walls and a shrubbery planted outside, so that the whole department would look like a clump of trees or a little wood within the park.

By the mid nineteenth century, when large kitchen gardens were required (as at Pylewell), the offices, workshops, storerooms and yards of the entire garden workforce were usually placed within the precincts of the kitchen garden department, and these precincts were functional rather than ornamental. A large kitchen garden complex and all its working parts should, therefore, preferably not be visible from the house.

The first kitchen garden at Pylewell was just outside the kitchens of the Worsleys' old hunting lodge, and there it remained when the new house was built at the end of the seventeenth century. It looks as if it was Ascanius Senior who took it a step or two to the east of the original site in the 1780s, and finally, in 1814, just one year before the battle of Waterloo, Joseph Weld moved it to its present position about a quarter of a mile

further to the east of the house. The kitchen garden is so well hidden that without the guidance of its owner I might never have found it. A walk round the park and pleasure grounds proves that it is well and truly screened by strategic clumps, by the lie of the land and, closer to its tall brick walls, by shrubs and a shelterbelt of large trees.

On my first visit I approached the kitchen garden from the lawn below the south front of the house, as would any of the guests of the Welds or the Whitakers in the old days.

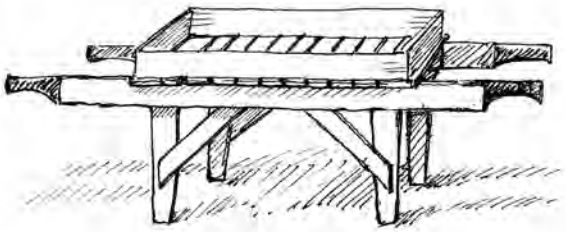
THE APPROACH

The nineteenth-century kitchen gardens of very large establishments such as Windsor Castle in Berkshire, Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire or Chatsworth in Derbyshire might be a mile or more from the houses they served. If they were to be visited by their owners a longish walk would be necessary; the ladies would go by pony-chaise along a specially made carriage drive. However, for most owners, like the Welds, the kitchen garden was within easy walking distance.

The walk itself had to be enjoyable too. And Pylewell's is delightful: we walk through the pleasure grounds along a wide, level gravel path, lined with camellias and ancient oaks, which leads us from the lawns and parterres on the south side of the house. A swimming bath, shrubberies and the remains of a flower garden lie to the left of the path, and on our right the park stretches almost a mile southwards, until it reaches the sparkling sea.

Our path, which is known as the Camellia Walk, was planted by Billy, and leads eventually to the wild garden and an arboretum beside the lake, but an inviting fork to the left takes us to an opening between two brick pillars. Through it we can, at last, see the kitchen-garden walls, with a wrought-iron gate directly ahead. The gate, which replaces the wooden door that was originally here, was a gift from Billy and his four sisters to celebrate their parents' silver wedding in 1923. Although the Whitakers prefer to use this gate, it was not Joseph Weld's original entrance to the kitchen garden. To find that, we must continue to the right, along a walk bordered until recently by wide herbaceous beds. A further turn to the left brings us to the hothouses which stand in front of and against the south face of the kitchen-garden wall. This wall is almost entirely taken up with two forty-foot vineries; the space in front of them is occupied by four more glasshouses, some with frames attached.

doorway between vineries



Weld's entrance to the kitchen garden stands between the vineries, in the centre of the wall. This is exactly as it should be, for a northern approach, via the service road, would have led visitors through the farm, and their first view of the garden would have been of the offices and workshops at the back of the vineries. The visitor was never allowed to make the mistake of approaching the kitchen garden from behind, an approach that was even more inappropriate in gardens where the hothouses were sited on the south side of the north wall. The workers, on the other hand, always approached the garden from the service road, because gardeners, like kitchen gardens, were supposed to be invisible.

THE SERVICE ROAD

Until recently the Camellia Walk was never under any circumstances used by the gardeners and garden boys. All the produce that went to the kitchens, the conservatory and the flower-arranging room had to be taken along the service road in carts, wheelbarrows and handbarrows – stretcher-like boards used especially for pot plants, baskets of fruit and bunches of cut flowers. Head gardeners would insist on hand-barrows for the more delicate produce; it was liable to be jolted and bruised if it went by cart or wheelbarrow.

The service road leads from the back of the kitchen gardens to the kitchens and stables which still occupy the eastern end of the house, and parallel to, but at a distance from, our walk. This road – really no more than a lane – is sufficiently secluded for it to run openly into the kitchen yard, but there are several examples – including Claremont in Surrey and Farnborough Hall in Warwickshire – where the kitchen approach takes the form of a tunnel, so objectionable to the sight of the stiffer type of family was any member of the gardening fraternity, other than the head gardener.

THE SLIP GARDENS

At Pylewell the hothouses and frames stand in a portion of land lying outside, and encircling, the kitchen garden walls. This piece of land is known as 'the slip' or 'slip garden' (see page 11). Slip gardens were originally created in the mid eighteenth century to take advantage of the outer sides of kitchen garden walls (especially those facing east, west and south) and of the ground below and beyond. The space encompassed was usually about thirty feet wide – as it is here – and it was used for growing hardy fruits and vegetables that needed space, but not much shelter or cosseting. In smaller gardens the slip would be planted with a mixture of ornamental shrubs and hardy fruit trees.

Mr Hamilton grew cherries, plums and late pears on north and east-facing walls, and decorative climbers on west-facing ones. Rhubarb, currants and gooseberries grew in beds in the northern part of the slip. The north-western portion accommodated the compost

and fuel yards, and in the south-western part there had always been a flower garden. The southern slip was once a melon ground and a reserve, or nursery garden. In the 1920s Billy's mother turned the flower garden into a little rose garden, which is still there though very overgrown. It lies to the left of the wrought-iron gate leading into the kitchen garden.

Two borders were made in the slips; one against the walls, the other against the 'ring' or outer fence. A broad path made a circuit of the slips, between the borders. The path was wide enough for a horse and cart, so that dung, fuel and other bulky materials could be delivered to smaller doorways in the kitchen-garden walls and wheeled from there to where they were needed. The horse and cart entered at the north-west corner, the one most convenient for access to the stables, the farmyard and the mill-pond.

The slip gardens are now invisible (and impenetrable) under a tangle of brambles and nettles. Above the tangle, here and there, we can see the strangled remains of some old soft-fruit bushes, a wayward fig tree and a few enormous, leaning, unpruned cherry trees.

Beyond the western and northern slips are the nuttery and an orchard, both replanted several times since Weld first laid them out. To the east lie the garden boys' bothy and the head gardener's cottage. The bothy has not been occupied since the last war, but Hamilton lived in the gardener's cottage until he finally retired.

THE LIE OF THE LAND

The vineries and glasshouses are in a slightly unusual position in relation to the rest of the kitchen garden. Vineries were usually built on the south-facing wall within the garden, so that the work sheds and furnaces - the back sheds behind them - lay inside the slips to the north. But much of the ground between the farm and this kitchen garden is on the site of an old gravel pit, and the rest was taken up by farm buildings, so the land to the south was used instead. Nevertheless, Joseph Weld chose a good place for his kitchen garden. Apart from its seclusion, this site offers all the attributes that the kitchen garden planner would look for. The garden's aspect, its shape, size, drainage and soil, and its proximity to supplies of dung and water, can be appreciated by walking round the outside of the walls.

The advantages of a slope in a kitchen garden had long been recognized, for, especially in colder climates, better crops were achieved if the ground lay open to the sun. The garden at Pylewell is at the top of quite a steep slope, high above the farm and mill-pond, but once inside the walls it seems almost flat; this is deceptive as the incline towards the south is so gentle as to be hardly noticeable.

Apart from the fact that a south-facing slope gives a boost to growth and ripening, it also helps to dispel frost. In some gardens, to prevent the creation of a frost pocket and to help frost escape, the boundary at the bottom of the slope consisted of an open fence or a hedge, rather than a wall. If there were a wall it might have *clair-voyées* cut into it, which as their name implies, allowed a view from the garden into the park or gardens beyond, as well as letting the frost out.

To a classical, Mediterranean gardener a slope acted primarily as an aid to drainage, but it must not be too steep. Stephen Switzer, the eighteenth-century landscape gardener and horticultural writer, advocated a fall of not more than six inches in ten feet, though a fall of as little as two or three inches in ten feet would do. A steep slope of more than one foot in ten was bad: it would mean 'A constant Uneasiness in being always ascending and descending', and would also cause the topsoil to wash off in the rain. A terraced slope, though beautiful, was expensive both to lay out and to maintain, but if terracing could be had, it should be on three levels. The lowest level would be the dampest and coolest, with the richest soil; it would therefore be best suited for moisture-loving things such as cauliflowers and cabbages, late peas and beans, quince stocks and anything that the gardener wished to retard in summer (the shade cast by the south wall was useful here); the middle level was best for plants needing lighter soil, like asparagus; the upper level, airy and 'most perflatile', with the lightest, warmest soil, was best for root crops and early peas and beans. [2]

SHELTERBELTS

The only disadvantage of an open slope on a rise is that it is vulnerable to the wind. The prevailing winds at Pylewell are strong, sometimes tempestuous, salty sou'westerlies, breezing in straight off the sea. Biting frosts and chill winds come from the opposite side of the compass; the kitchen garden here is therefore protected by two stout shelterbelts of trees, mainly tall conifers and oaks, which were planted when Weld first put the kitchen garden on its present site. Storms have recently taken their toll, but several fine oaks, Scots pines and ilexes still stand guard.

Unless the lie of the land provided natural protection, a screen of forest trees (usually a mixture of deciduous and evergreen) was planted to shelter the kitchen garden. It would lie some 50 to 100 yards to the windward of the most exposed walls; not too close, or the trees' roots would rob the garden crops of nourishment and their leaves would fall on the beds. A 'wood or skreen of shrubs enveloping the whole', [3] and productive trees such as crab and cider apples, perry pears and wild cherries (which would, it was hoped, attract the birds

away from the better fruits in the kitchen garden), were also planted outside the slips which encircled the walls, to provide shelter and secluded walks as well as acting as screens against any unsightly view of the walls. These too, are still to be seen at Pylewell, although they are somewhat overgrown and ragged now.

damson 'Merryweather'

CONVENTIONAL SHAPES

Apart from its productiveness (which included a supply of herbs for medicinal, household, brewery and kitchen use) and a supply of water, the chief requirement of a medieval, Elizabethan or even Caroline kitchen garden was that it should be sited conveniently near the house, preferably closer to the kitchens and the stables than to the best rooms. Its shape was not so important. Its soil and situation were taken into account, but (possibly because the plants grown then were less demanding than the tender, introduced salads, vegetables and fruits of later gardens) these considerations were of less consequence then than they were to become from the end of the seventeenth century onwards.

From the evidence of old estate maps and views, it can be seen that until about the end of the seventeenth century, a kitchen garden was square, as often as not. If it were rectangular, this tended to be because the space dictated it, with little or no regard to the direction of the sun's rays. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, with the realization that the warmth of the sun was an advantage, especially for growing fruit, new kitchen gardens usually had the longer axis running more or less east and west, so that the south-facing walls were the longest. There was also a vogue for separate fruit gardens, which came from France. (The Worsleys' twin fruit and vegetable gardens in front of the house were very *à la mode*.) The kitchen garden made by Ascanius Senior combined fruit and vegetables, and had one innovatory feature: a semicircular 'projection' on the north side. According to Charles M'Intosh, a mid-nineteenth century gardener and writer, this type of curved, south-facing fruit wall, was added by Walter Nicol (a slightly earlier gardener and writer) to most of the gardens he designed. [4] It was supposed to take maximum advantage of the sun and is found in many kitchen gardens of the period.

The present Pylewell garden appears rectangular, but this is deceptive; it is actually more of a parallelogram, with each of the four corners snipped off, giving it eight sides in all: two long, two middling and four short. Once again, the object was to provide as much sun-warmed wall space as possible for fruit;

indeed, the open, south-facing walls within the garden here were once devoted entirely to peaches and nectarines.

ADAPTABLE SIZES

I have to admit that the first time I saw the one and a half acres enclosed by the walls at Pylewell, I wondered how any household could need a kitchen garden so large. But as we have already seen, the Whitakers had large families; so did Williams-Freeman and the Welds; the census of 1841 shows that the Welds' household consisted of thirty-four people. This figure included a resident priest, Wood the steward, and twenty-two servants.

With the slip gardens, the cultivated ground is doubled to three acres; it was calculated that one acre of intensively cropped kitchen garden would do for a family of twelve, provided that potatoes, cabbages and roots were grown elsewhere. At Pylewell, a ten to twelve acre field was dedicated to these crops.

By Georgian or Victorian standards one and a half acres was an average size for a kitchen garden; larger families might need four or five acres and ducal or royal palaces would have gardens of from ten to twenty-five acres. The size of the workforce could be calculated by the size of the kitchen garden; one acre of open kitchen garden needed a man and a very hardworking boy to keep it cultivated; more gardeners would be employed to look after the glasshouses, if any; a total of six gardeners for three acres of kitchen garden, slip garden, frameyard and glasshouses was not unusual.

Kitchen gardens were much smaller before the mid seventeenth century, when the art of kitchen gardening was less sophisticated. It should also be remembered that from the earliest times pulses, onions, roots and brassicas were usually grown as field crops, while apples and pears, which were used mainly for perry and cider, were grown in orchards. Other fruits such as wild strawberries and gooseberries were collected from woods and hedgerows.

SOIL AND DRAINAGE

One of the most important factors affecting the choice of site for the kitchen garden was the quality of the soil and its subsoil. The subsequent effect on fertility and moisture were considerations frequently overlooked in even the grandest kitchen gardens. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the royal kitchen gardens were the source of repeated grief on this account to the gardeners responsible for supplying the royal tables in London. The kitchen gardens at Kensington Palace were sited on poor soil on, and adjacent to, an old gravel pit. Henry Wise and Joseph

Carpenter, gardeners to George I, found that, through no fault of their own, they were having to supplement the royal gardens with produce bought in from market gardens as well as with stuff grown in their own 100 acre gardens and nurseries at Brompton Park, just over the road. [5]

However, Wise himself (with his then partner, George London) was responsible for the position of the kitchen gardens at Longleat in Wiltshire, laid out between 1685 and 1711. Here the situation was different: the gardens were made in a valley, on 'tenacious Clay and spewy Gravel', with the result that by 1731, Switzer reported that '. . . notwithstanding all the Cost and Pains that has been laid out, there is no such thing as a good Peach, Apricock, or any thing else; though the Garden Part of that noble Seat, is said to have cost forty thousand pounds.' [6]

The cure for 'spewy Land' was to drain it. The simplest and cheapest form of drainage was to dig ditches, but unless these took an ornamental form they were not considered convenient or sightly in kitchen gardens. Next in cheapness came the covered drain, a V-shaped trench which could be either turfed over in such a way as to leave a space at the bottom for the water to flow, or filled first with rubble or pebbles and then with faggots, ferns or brambles to form a permeable watercourse. Neither of these, however, was as good as more expensive drains made with stones, bricks, tiles or pipes. From the end of the eighteenth century, the drainage system would also incorporate the overflow from rainwater tanks in the greenhouses and, where the lie of the land was suitable, they could supplement the garden's water supply by feeding water into dipping ponds, as at West Dean in Sussex, or into a canal, as at Crichel in Dorset.

The best soil for fruit trees is good, sound, slightly calcareous loam; vegetables do better on sandy loam judiciously enriched with humus and lime. In both cases the ideal kitchen garden has rich, light, friable earth reaching down to a depth of about three feet, soil which Philip Miller, gardener, writer and curator of the Apothecaries' Garden in Chelsea from 1722 until his death in 1771, described as 'not too wet, nor over-dry, but of a middling Quality; nor . . . too strong or stubborn, but of a pliable Nature, and easy to work'. [7]

If the site and aspect were suitable, and the subsoil good but the topsoil thin, more soil would be brought in from further afield, sometimes at considerable expense. (Soil from the new railways was taken to Kensington Palace for this purpose early in the nineteenth century.) If the subsoil were bad, and in particular if iron were present, it would need to be drained and dressed with lime or chalk.

At Pylewell the subsoil is of gravel lying over clay and poses no drainage problems. The topsoil is of fibrous loam lying over gravelly loam and is rather light, but the proximity of both the farm and the mill-pond meant that there were always ample supplies of manure and water. After many years of working and enrichment with composts and manures, the soil in a kitchen garden becomes dark, rich and deep. It seems wicked to allow it to be overrun with couch grass.