

Lord Heathfield donated land to the village in 1873 and its allotments are equally valued today by members of Lympstone WI, Devon Federation (from left): Joan Dunkley, Norma Exelby, Diana de la Rue and Sue Wadhams

A photograph of four elderly women standing in an allotment. They are all smiling and holding garden tools like spades and forks. The woman on the far left is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved top and dark trousers. The woman next to her is wearing a colorful patterned top and blue trousers. The woman in the middle is wearing a white top and a white hat. The woman on the far right is wearing a white patterned top, blue trousers, and a blue necklace. They are standing in front of a green hedge and a tree in the background.

# Reap what you sow

**Allotments have never been more popular, and these members in Devon are at the forefront of fruitful cultivation**

Words by LUCY COLLINS Photography ROB COUSINS



Set against the glorious backdrop of the river Exe estuary, Heathfield Allotments are enthusiastically gardened by 80 plot-holders. Below: with an immaculate grassy path and well-tended beds, Diana de la Rue, president of Lympstone WI, Devon Federation, sets the standard high for her fellow gardeners



If there's a lovelier spot in the British Isles to grow vegetables then I've yet to discover it. For Norma Exelby and her three fellow Lympstone WI, Devon Federation members, who are lucky enough to cultivate crops here, the fantastic views over the River Exe make it 'one of the prettiest allotments in the country'.

Norma has had a plot for 40 years but the site in Lympstone, Devon, has been used to grow fruit and veg since Lord Heathfield donated the land to villagers in 1873 and The Heathfield Allotment Trust was born.

Lympstone WI President Diana de la Rue is secretary of the Trust and the site, which is sandwiched between the estuary washing in from the English Channel and the Exeter to Exmouth railway line, is tended by 80 plot-holders who pay £30 a year, or pro-rata for a half plot, a popular option for the time-poor.

Diana says: 'When I took over seven years ago we had a waiting list of 26 people and we only have one person waiting now thanks to offering half plots.'

The Trust is a registered charity and the rules are simple – applicants must live within the parish and should keep their plot in a good state of cultivation. 'It's a use it or lose it policy,' says Diana. Site

inspections are carried out four times a year 'because we don't want people having a lawn and two chairs but, otherwise, we're not overly strict.'

All four WI members are united in their love of growing produce that the supermarkets can't match for quality and freshness. Joan Dunkley says: 'There's a great deal of satisfaction to be had in producing your own and I love having space and taking time out in such a stunning environment.'

Diana reveals she took her plot 'in desperation' to escape from her three teenage children playing music 'very loudly' and her husband also taught clarinet and saxophone at home. She planned to keep it up until they left home but, 30 years later, she's still here.

For Diana it's an opportunity to realise a thwarted career choice. As a teenager she wanted to go to a horticultural college after being influenced by *The Archers* character Carol Tregorran, who ran a market garden – but the college principal told her father that with several hundred male pupils, women would be a distraction. Diana says: 'My fate was sealed. I went to secretarial college and became a medical secretary.'

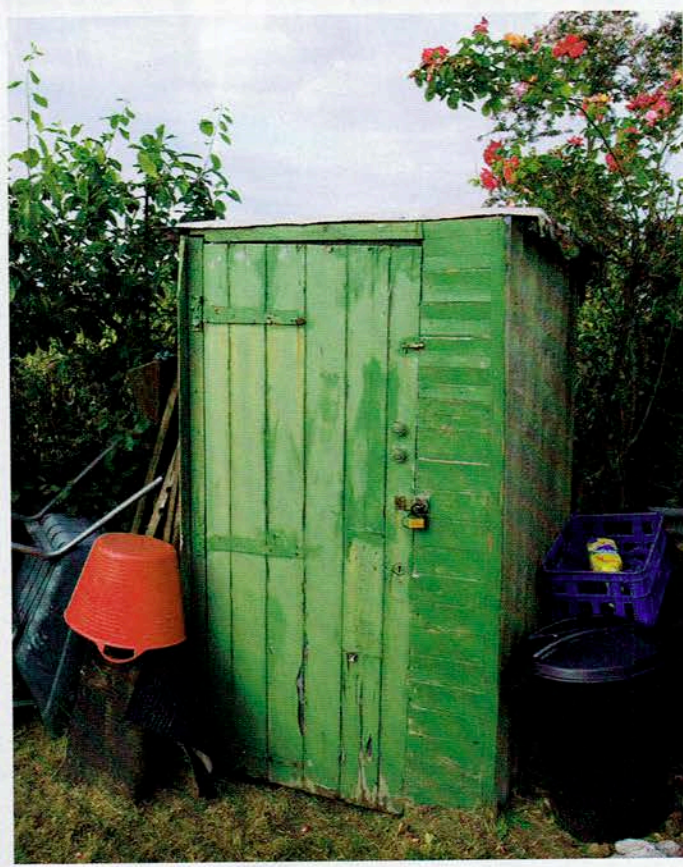
Today, she gardens organically '95% of the time' and belongs to the charity Garden Organic. She uses barrier methods instead of pesticides to repel pests. Her carrots are surrounded by a fleece box, which







Left: Simon the scarecrow takes a break from official duties on Sue Wadhams' plot  
Below left: Sue grows so much soft fruit, such as these gooseberries, that she bought a freezer to cope with the glut; versatile comfrey makes perfect compost  
Bottom: every plot has a shed and Norma Exelby grows roses round hers





is raised high enough to prevent carrot flies from invading. 'They can only fly to a height of about 35cm so the theory is that if you erect a structure around them they can't hop over. It does work – it's not 100% but it's a big improvement. But if there's a strong southerly wind it gives the flies a helping hand.'

Diana's aim is to be self-sufficient. She had a glut of 48 butternut squash last year and stored them in her spare room over winter, before cooking them in soups and the lunches she prepares for the local sailing club. 'My main

love is growing soft fruits, such as strawberries, gooseberries, blackberries, currants and jostaberries, which are high in vitamin C.

'I do all my own preserves and I sold enough rhubarb last year to buy two WI aprons that we use at village events to promote the WI.' She's raised £50 for the the Save Denman Appeal by selling spare produce.

For Joan Dunkley her allotment is a means of escape. 'You can forget the world,' says the new girl on the block, who took a half plot just six months ago. 'It's a learning curve for my

husband and me – we wanted to grow veg and we just don't have enough space in our garden at home.'

They took a year's basic gardening course at Bicton College, propagating and growing from seed. 'It gave us a bit of an idea and fired us up with enthusiasm. People are very friendly here – you get advice and learn from experience.'

Some of the produce she grows was inherited from the previous tenant, such as squash, chard, gooseberries and raspberries. Joan has planted carrots, beetroot, onions, runner beans,



Canes (topped by protective bottles) support Joan Dunkley's runner beans, intermingled with flowers to attract bees

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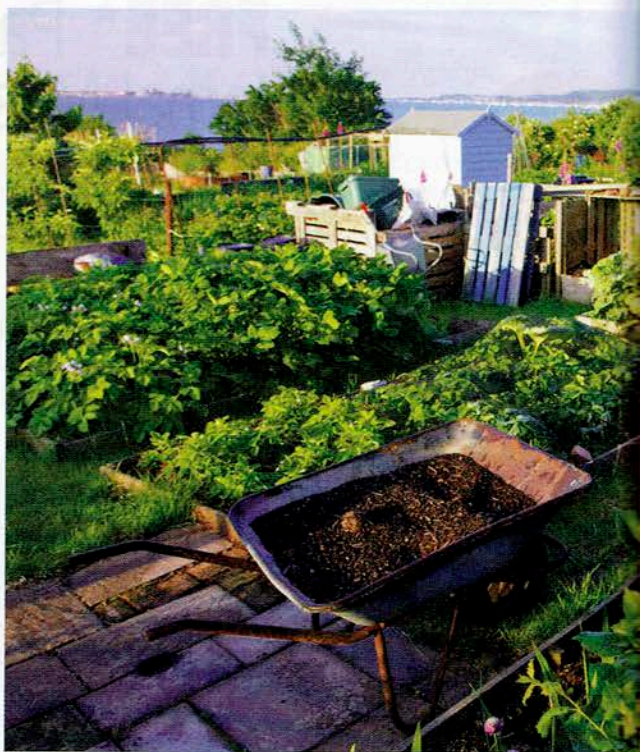
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**From top:** Diana de la Rue strives to garden organically most of the time  
**Above:** fruit, veg and flowers in a trug make a wholesome harvest  
**Right:** Diana protects her beds with barrier methods, such as this fleece box, designed to keep the enemy at bay



dwarf broad beans and purple-sprouting broccoli but, as she says: 'My peas have been a disaster.'

Norma's plot has masses of flowers sprinkled among the artichokes and the fruit trees, and the path is lined by foxgloves. 'I love flowers in my house and if you're looking to economise, it's a great way to do it by growing your own for cutting.

'I start with daffodils in February and go on to aquilegias, iris and foxgloves, Sweet Williams and dahlias, then I finish in October with chrysanthemums.' She also saves money by growing plants from seed in her conservatory at home.

Fruit is also a big favourite. Norma and her late husband Keith planted two Discovery apple trees but changed their minds about the varieties they wanted. Keith then grafted scions onto one of the trees, which is now a Spartan variety.

Norma has fruit cages full of berries and has just cultivated an empty bed that she plans to fill with Brussels sprouts and purple-sprouting broccoli. She turned the fact that the land is stony to her advantage by collecting them to make a path and uses 'tons and tons of compost' to counteract the sandy soil.

She says: 'I've had an allotment for 40 years but you learn something new every year. People will recommend varieties to try and we all look out for each other. If someone has blackfly, we tell each other so we can get spraying.'

Sue Wadhams' plot is dominated by a scarecrow called Simon, who lolls in a chair surveying his domain. He was made by her grandchildren. Since taking the allotment seven years ago she's had to buy a freezer to store soft fruit. Sue grows Concorde pears along a vine, which reminds me of a French vineyard in miniature, and provides wind cover for her vegetable beds.

The soil has benefited from her birthday present to her husband Andy of £100-worth of manure. 'You learn as you go along and some years it goes pear-shaped,' says Sue, whose plot is stuffed with beans, kale, leeks and courgettes.

'Lymstone is notorious for its wretched snails - occasionally there are rabbits too - and it gets quite windy, but we must be gardening on one of the best plots in the country with this view.' **WV**