

## Welcome, Britain – you're finally learning the joy of veg, says Raymond Blanc

ROSIE KINCHEN



For gardeners, it is one of the most exclusive trips of the year – when the best floral displays go on show in a corner of west London.

Lockdown means the RHS Chelsea flower show, which was due to start tomorrow, has been cancelled. But being stuck at home has one big advantage, according to the chef Raymond Blanc.

Britons are finally coming round to the joy of growing their own vegetables, he says (even if we continue to “murder them” in the way we cook them). Internet searches for vegetable-growing have tripled during the lockdown and there are waiting lists for seeds.

“The vegetable was viewed as a lowly cousin of the very grand plants and flowers,” said Blanc, 70, who is asthmatic and is self-isolating alone in his flat in west London. He is delighted that the prejudice that growing flowers was better than growing vegetables has finally started to change.

“Have you ever seen a beautiful angelica? Have you ever seen the beauty of the bronze fennel? There is so much beauty in vegetables. To me, they are as beautiful as any flower.”

At Le Manoir aux Quat’ Saisons, his two-Michelin-starred restaurant in Oxfordshire, he has 12 gardens and an orchard with 2,000 rare varieties of fruit. The sample menus at Le Manoir include many delicious treats, such as roasted duck with pickled turnips; Cornish crab with coconut and passionfruit; and apricot almondine with caramel croustillant for pudding. A prominent photograph on the website

shows new potatoes with asparagus heads.

In London Blanc has only a “micro garden”, which measures roughly 11ft by 12ft. It gets only 2½ hours of sun a day, but he has packed it with more than 20 crops, including chard and red leaf kale, selected for their taste and their ability to cope with little sun.

Newcomers to vegetable-growing should “choose things that are easy”, such as herbs and spinach, which grow in most conditions. “Make sure you have good compost, rich soil, and don’t over-water,” Blanc advises.

He hates to see vegetable flowers going to waste and urges people to eat them rather than bin them. “Pea shoots have flowers. Broad beans have flowers. Rocket has flowers, which are delicious. Courgettes have beautiful orange flowers.”

He is cooking for himself during lockdown and eating a mainly vegan diet: “I eat vegetables every night, maybe starch like lentils or broad beans or peas with spinach. Always a bit of garlic. I eat well – let’s put it that way.”

While he is enjoying a delicious cuisine, there is one thing he is really missing – and that is kissing.

“Normally I would be kissing at least 80 people a day [at Le Manoir], because the French hug, you know.”

Even more kissing takes place at Chelsea, he says. For the past 25 years he has hosted a pop-up restaurant at the flower show, where he would typically have about 5,000 guests to embrace.

This year’s show has moved online to the RHS website, with five days of demonstrations, Q&As and garden tours from gardeners and growers. Blanc is one of the first.

Though he grew up

RAY WELLS



Raymond Blanc’s ‘micro-garden’ at his west London flat does not get much sun, but he is still able to grow more than 20 crops, including chard and kale

**“Gardeners are the least celebrated people. I don’t know why**

gardening at the family home in Besançon, eastern France, Blanc claims he is still an amateur. “I cannot claim to be a gardener – I have too much respect for gardeners,” he said. “They are the least celebrated people and yet they have such depth of knowledge. They are underpaid and I don’t understand why.”

His best tip is one he learnt from his mother – that is, to use coffee grounds to keep

away slugs. “We use it on our vegetables, and that seems to work quite well.”

Lockdown has been the longest spell Blanc has been away from Le Manoir and he speaks to the gardeners every day. All the produce that would usually go to the restaurant he plans to start giving to local hospitals and hospices when it is ripe.

With more people growing their own vegetables, he hopes that they will be

persuaded to cook them properly. “Please don’t murder it by boiling it in water where you take all the nutrients, all the colours, all the flavours,” he begs.

Resist the very British urge to start cooking vegetables almost as soon as you have put the meat in to roast for an hour, he advises. The best way to cook them is to put a bit of water in the bottom of a pan, perhaps with a dash of garlic or

tarragon and a few grains of salt but definitely no stock. Add a dash of pepper. Wait until the rest of the meal is cooked before you start.

Once the water is boiling, cook the vegetables. Carrots will take about five minutes, beans about three and spinach just two.

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### CHELSEA FLOWERS ONLINE

**Monday**  
Get a glimpse of Monty Don’s garden and visit the Guernsey nursery of clematis specialist Raymond Evison. Unlike the rest of the week, Monday is open only for members of the Royal Horticultural Society.

**Tuesday**  
A garden tour with Sarah Eberle, the most decorated female designer in Chelsea history, is followed by a lockdown tour of some of London’s parks. Visitors also meet the team at David Austin Roses.

**Wednesday**  
BBC presenter and gold medal-winning designer Adam Frost will explain how he keeps plant health in mind, followed by a tour with Japanese designer Ishihara Kazuyuki.

**Thursday**  
A tour with cut-flower expert Sarah Raven, followed by the Chelsea pensioners displaying what they have grown during lockdown and tips on growing veg at home.

**Friday**  
Tom Massey will demonstrate how to create an organic wildlife haven on a small scale.

**Saturday**  
Last year’s Best Show Garden winner, Andy Sturgeon, will be giving a tour of his garden before visitors see the UK’s oldest orchid nursery.

To watch, go to [rhs.org.uk/chelsea](https://rhs.org.uk/chelsea)

# Scottish island idyll scarred by dead and dying sheep abandoned in fields

An animal cruelty investigation has begun into a farm owned by directors of a collapsed London property group

Jonathan Leake and Chris White

It is home to about 60 people, used to leading the quietest of lives in a beauty spot renowned mainly among bird-watchers who want to catch a glimpse of a red-necked phalarope. But the remote Scottish island of Fetlar, known as “the garden of Shetland”, is no longer the paradise that it seemed.

An investigation has begun into animal cruelty involving the deaths of hundreds of sheep on a farm owned by the former directors of Erinaceous, a London property services company that collapsed owing more than £200m to creditors.

Neil Bellis, 66, his wife, Juliet, 64, and her sister Lucy Cummings, 59, uprooted themselves hundreds of miles from Isfield Place, their grade II listed mansion in Uckfield, East Sussex (sold in 2016 for £6.5m) to an austere former convent

located close to the northernmost tip of the Shetland Islands. Since moving to the island in October 2016, they have reportedly invested more than £2m, buying a number of crofts to create an 844-acre landholding with 848 sheep, 60 cattle and 23 pigs grazing an island that is known locally as Fetlar Farm.

However, neighbours say the rural idyll has turned into a nightmare, with starving sheep dying in the fields, carcasses left to rot for weeks and others buried in poorly concealed pits.

The Scottish government confirmed last week that it was investigating “allegations of animal cruelty on the island of Fetlar”. A separate investigation is being carried out by the Shetland Islands council environmental health team into “animal welfare issues”.

James Rendall, chairman of Fetlar community council, confirmed that there were concerns over carcasses decaying in fields on Fetlar Farm but said he was not in a position to comment publicly. A confidential meeting of the council discussed the issue in February. When Murray Cooper, a councillor, suggested writing to all the island’s 13 livestock farmers, asking them to remove dead animals, the proposal was rejected as “too

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inflammatory” and the discussion was excluded from the minutes.

“Leaving dead livestock in the open is illegal,” Cooper said. “I thought writing to every farmer and not personalising it would be a tactful way of resolving the situation... However, it was considered by the majority of the other councillors that this was inflammatory and my suggestion was rejected.”

Neil Bellis, who trained as a barrister, and his sister-in-law have a colourful history in finance. They were the founders and directors of Erinaceous, which had more than 2,500 staff in 2006.

However, the Serious Fraud Office

launched an inquiry that year into one of the company’s subsidiaries. Erinaceous lost 99% of its market value in just 12 months, Bellis and Cummings left and the company collapsed in 2008.

Separately, Juliet Bellis, a lawyer, was fined £50,000 by the solicitors’ disciplinary tribunal in 2017 for behaving “in a way that was likely to diminish the trust the public placed in her or the legal profession” for incompetence and conflicts of interest in property dealings linked to Erinaceous.

On Fetlar, some locals say the family is trying to create a miniature property empire – pointing to their purchase of

Neil Bellis farms hundreds of sheep on more than 840 acres



half a dozen crofts, the island’s only shop and a guest house, plus their attempts to erect wind turbines.

The family said their farm had had problems finding experienced shepherds willing to work in such a remote spot. One stockman turned out to have served “lengthy prison sentences for several bank robberies”, they said.

The three confirmed they had been told to make improvements to their livestock management after a visit by an environmental health officer in February. They say they “carried out all of his recommendations”.

Claiming to have created 12 jobs on the island, equal to about 20% of the population, the three said: “The majority of islanders have welcomed what we have achieved but there is a small number who have actively tried to cause us harm.

Where we have seen wrongdoing we have spoken out and that has clearly offended some.”

This weekend, however, other islanders disputed the clean-up claims, offering photos of dead animals in fields around Fetlar Farm. “They have been there for weeks,” said one farmer.

## War Horse author gallops into battle to modernise Shakespeare’s plays

Sian Griffiths  
Education Editor

The author Michael Morpurgo is modernising Shakespeare – using language and images from 21st-century inner-city life, such as gangs and drugs – in a book he hopes will inspire children to love the Bard.

The former children’s laureate is retelling Shakespeare’s plays for children from “six to 16” in a book to be published this year.

He knows it is a “controversial” undertaking, as purists insist that only the original text should be used.

Morpurgo worries that children are being forced to study Shakespeare for comprehension tests and exams and many decide that

his language is too difficult to enjoy. A survey of 500 teachers for the British Library found that more than half (56%) said pupils were uninspired by Shakespeare’s work and found it hard to relate to his plays.

Morpurgo, 76, said he was switched off the classics by being made to read Charles Dickens when he was eight, but that he learnt to love the stories of novels such as *Oliver Twist* by reading retellings in an American comic strip called Classics Illustrated.

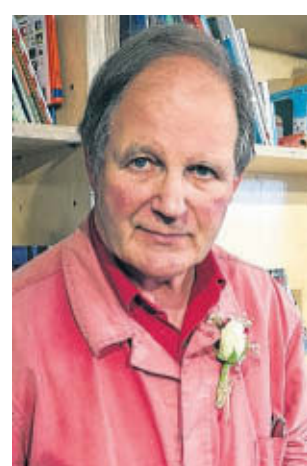
“I am retelling the stories of Shakespeare. Children always start [enjoying literature] with the stories. That is why I am writing the book. I am going to use my language to tell the stories of Shakespeare [but] I will use

the vernacular when Shakespeare uses the vernacular. I discovered a phrase in *Henry V*, ‘shog off’; I will use that in the book.”

Critics have attacked the project. Christopher McGovern, chairman of the Campaign for Real Education and a former head teacher, said: “This is failing to challenge children. We should be introducing children to Shakespearean language, not to a watered-down version. Children enjoy being challenged and get a sense of achievement from it. Why should they settle for second-best?”

The Shakespearean scholar Stanley Wells said a teacher who does not enjoy teaching the plays “will not be able to inspire their pupils”. He added that when

he was a teacher he agonised about the right age to introduce “the real texts” of Shakespeare to children but that it could be done. “When I was 11, I remember getting up



Morpurgo: retelling stories

and playing a fight scene from *Julius Caesar*, using a ruler instead of a sword. That was exciting.”

Morpurgo – whose bestselling books include *War Horse*, which was made into a hit West End play – said he was unperturbed by the scepticism.

“It will be controversial. Just as retelling Bible stories is controversial. But I do not give a monkey’s. If people don’t like it, they don’t like it. What I am sure of is it needs doing. It is really important for children to be introduced early on to this extraordinary writer, Shakespeare, in a way that helps them to love him. That’s the way it happens. You sow a seed.”

**Drama out of a crisis,**  
Home classroom, page 3

## UK vineyards feel chill after crop-killing frost

Jon Ungoed-Thomas

Some of the country’s vineyards face one of their worst years for wine production after their crops were devastated by frost.

A good spell of hot weather earlier in the month followed by freezing overnight temperatures last week has proved to be a disaster for some wine producers, one of whom described it as “absolutely heartbreaking”.

Ian Sargent, the owner of the Laurel Vines vineyard in East Yorkshire and a regional chairman of the trade association Wines of Great Britain (WineGB), said: “We have had 139 reports from vineyards across the country of frost damage, [affecting] from 10% of the crop to 100%.”

He said the most severe damage at his vineyard occurred on Wednesday night. In an attempt to save the grapes, fans were mounted on two tractors to blow away the freezing air.

“We were going to be harvesting up to 20,000 bottles and if we are lucky we might get 30% of that. I dare not go out there because it’s absolutely heartbreaking,” said Sargent.

There are more than 650 commercial vineyards in England and Wales, producing up to 13 million bottles of wine a year, most of it sparkling.

Temperatures plummeted below minus 2C on Wednesday evening and vineyard staff worked desperately through the night with large paraffin candles to

help protect the newly emerging buds.

Tim Ingram Hill, of Southcott Vineyard in Pewsey, Wiltshire, said that the timing of the frost was “probably the worst” it could have been.

Simon Robinson, the chairman of WineGB and owner of Hattingley Valley Wines in Hampshire, said frost damage was reported at vineyards in Somerset, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and East Yorkshire, but large producers in southeast England were mostly unscathed.

Robinson added that while the worst-hit might not produce any wine this year, more than half of those reporting damage had lost less than 10% of their crop. @JonUngoedThomas