



HOW GREEN IS YOUR GARDEN?

A move to the Breton countryside allowed Daniel and H el ene Deniaud-Powell to turn their passion for gardening into a thriving business. **Catriona Burns** found out how moving to France has allowed the couple to flourish

They say good things come to those who wait but when it came to getting their dreams of running an edible garden off the ground, gardeners Daniel and H el ene Deniaud-Powell could see no point in putting a pause on their plans.

“I thought about what people did when they retire,” explains Daniel, 32. “They tend to eat well, drink wine and garden. Only, I could see no reason why you had to work your whole life before doing that and I thought ‘actually, we can do that right now.’”

The three-part plan for living the good life began when Daniel was working on environmental projects in the UK, in his hometown of Bristol. It was here that he met French-born H el ene who had arrived in south-west England via Scotland and Wales after a career change from a cartographer to a more environmentally

conscious lifestyle. When they both became involved in a scheme called The Open Platform, their great minds came together.

“The Open Platform was somewhere people could express themselves, especially if they were changing careers,” explains Daniel. “Here people were encouraged to look at the world holistically, to put their hands back into the soil and we touched upon the idea of setting up an edible garden.” But it wasn’t long before H el ene’s thoughts started to return to her native Nantes and the possibility of relocating to France arose. “H el ene had lived away from home for eight years by that stage and she felt like the time was right to go back to France,” Daniel says before adding, “I fell in love with her, so I decided to go too and set up a garden project of our own.”

However, Daniel’s decision to make the move to

France was not fuelled by romantic reasons alone. Finding himself constantly stuck for space in the city started to become a thorn in his side and he started to think that France could afford him the freedom to flourish. "It became obvious that we were going to have to fight exceptionally hard to have space to garden," he says. "I know everyone has to make sacrifices, but spending 10 years just to save enough money for somewhere to practice your hobby... it didn't seem quite right to me. In France you can buy a house with some space for nowhere near the price that you'd spend in the UK."

So, in January 2012, after three months relentlessly searching, they found just what they were looking for - something not too big, relatively affordable and with lots of good land - in Ploërmel, Morbihan. But while most people see the kitchen as the heart of the house, Daniel and H el ene have always felt most at home outside in the garden. So a prairie dotted with ancient oaks and lots of lush green land took priority over any bricks and mortar property. "We started on the garden, not the house," Daniel smiles. "We liked the fact that the kitchen sits at the bottom of the garden and naturally integrates into the heart of the home," he says of the inside-out set-up.

The couple's plan for an edible garden was primarily a way to enjoy a back-to-basics lifestyle; a romantically rustic way to live out their rural countryside dreams. But once others had got a taste of the pair's home-grown produce, they realised that their personal project had potential to grow. "We always had the intention



of setting up an edible garden to reduce our overheads and so that we could eat fresh, healthy and grow ingredients that you can't find in the supermarket," Daniel explains. "Yet as we did this, we started to have good feedback. Family and friends would come by and say, 'That's amazing. We've never tasted anything like it.' " Rave reviews they received for things like a simple salad sprinkled with wild flowers that they would bring to dinner parties prompted the pair to look into how the venture would hold commercially, and after some rooting around, they found a similar business in the UK selling garden produce to restaurants. "The proof was in the pudding," says Daniel. "It worked."

Deciding to start the business in France has proven to be a wise choice. "Where we are in north-west France is renowned for its quality of produce and for its restaurants. France is the home of gastronomy," he states. Yet even for its esteemed culinary reputation the couple discovered that, although local eateries supported and promoted locally sourced food, the vegetables were shipped from abroad, often from as far away as places like Israel. "You can't justify a flower travelling thousands of miles. It doesn't make any sense," he says.

Confident they had found their niche, the couple increased the garden's production before inviting local restaurants to a tasting session, sampling the fresh hand-picked produce from their ever-growing garden. "They were blown away," recalls Daniel. "They said that not only was the produce fantastic but that it

Facing page: Daniel and H el ene at home in their edible garden

This page: Fresh edible flowers give a cheerful splash of colour to dishes, as well as providing a fusion of flavours





was one of a kind. They couldn't find anything else like it."

And so the garden's first venture began by supplying local gourmet restaurants with an assortment of edible flowers and vegetables that not only prettify plates but add another dimension to the dish. "Some are purely decorative and have no flavour," Daniel says of the produce. "Some are explosive and peppery, some have a taste of lemon, others have a taste of mint... there's something for every plate essentially." The couple's promise of perfection for the meal's finishing touch is on par with the first-rate excellence served up by the renowned restaurants. "We give them the best and nothing else. If there's a blemish on a leaf or a flower, we won't give it to them. It's what they want, and it's what they pay for," Daniel insists.

Since then, the garden has grown beyond gastronomy and their business. Some Time Outside runs additional projects, such as setting up edible and sustainable spaces for companies and individuals plus workshops, designed to help others get to grips with their green fingers by inviting groups to take a tour around the grounds. "We take groups, like the local college, around the garden and we talk about absolutely everything, from growing mushrooms in the soil to what you can and can't eat. We're trying to get people to fall back in love with gardening again."

Although H el ene tends to run the tours due to her native French, the born and bred Bristolian has come a long way with learning the language since GCSE level. "It reaches a certain moment when, it doesn't necessarily click, but certain words jump out at you.



Of course, it absolutely helps when you have a French wife," he laughs.

The language is not the only thing that has fallen into place for the young couple. The move to Brittany has seemingly afforded them the chance to blossom and fulfil their plans of enjoying life now, rather than putting it off until later on. "You can express yourself here," enthuses Daniel. "It's a true liberty to have a passion in life and to exercise that passion on a daily basis is another thing entirely."

At the moment, the couple are focused on continuing to strengthen their relationship with the local restaurants and have plans for more garden workshops, and nurturing a space of learning is most definitely a priority. But after that, who knows? "We try not to plan too much, because the more rigid your plans, the weaker they are," says Daniel. So far, their go-with-the-flow itinerary of eating well, drinking wine and gardening has exceeded their expectations, and in some ways, they have proved the unthinkable: that sometimes money *can* grow on trees. They definitely shouldn't retire from the day job just yet. **LF**

desheuresdehors.fr

Clockwise from top: Blue cornflowers are tossed in salads, adding a subtly sweet taste; in their French garden, the couple can enjoy a slower pace of life; a basket full of freshly plucked wild yarrow, ready for delivery