

community **GARDENING**



(main) The narrow but long strip of land Alex Smith cultivates adjoins an industrial estate, where he runs an organic muesli company. (above) Alex picking apples from dwarf trees which sit alongside cane fruit and are cropping remarkably well, considering the weeds below

Inner city

salvation

Turning a tip into a productive plot would try the most dedicated gardener's patience, but doing it under the restrictive rules that permaculture dictates, sounds impossible. Yet Alex Smith has done it – and in the middle of London. **Martyn Cox** speaks to him



Martyn Cox

(below) It took six months to dig out the invasive Japanese knotweed before the site could be cultivated



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BEHIND A warehouse, on an industrial estate close to King's Cross station in the heart of London, is a narrow strip of land that until two years ago was an overgrown and rubbish-filled eyesore frequented by prostitutes, drug addicts and fly tipplers.

Today, following many months of hard work, the uncompromising site that sits next to a busy railway line connecting the capital to The North, has become the ultimate

environmentally friendly garden.

Measuring 200ft. by 26ft. (60m by 8m), the sliver of ground has been planted with masses of fruit trees, berry-bearing bushes and cane fruit, along with herbs and ornamental plants, whose purpose is to attract beneficial insects.

into a garden, using a self-sustaining technique called permaculture to grow masses of edible crops.

"I walked around this piece of derelict wasteland and thought I could turn it into a productive garden. It seemed a natural thing to do as I'm so intimately involved

"I cut the tips off of Japanese knotweed and stir fry them!"

Everything is grown organically, rainwater is captured from a nearby roof for irrigation and any plant waste is consigned to compost bins. Wherever possible, rubbish that was found on the site has been recycled in the construction of the garden.

The garden is the brainchild of Alex Smith, a businessman whose organic muesli company, Alara, has been based on the industrial estate for over 20 years. However, it was only when he took on a new warehouse a few years ago that he thought about turning the unsightly plot bordering it

with food," says Alex, who invited the local community to help him clear the site. We spent six months digging out Japanese knotweed and removed over 50 tonnes of rubbish from the site," he adds.

South-facing

Left with a blank canvas, Alex could then plan the garden. The swathe of south-facing land, which is shaded in parts due to two tall buildings, sloped sharply downwards.

To make the bank useable he created two terraces using coppiced sweet chestnut from a wood in Hampshire as a retaining wall and improved the soil with plenty of compost bought from a city farm – larger lengths of sweet chestnut have been erected vertically to make an





(inset) The Japanese wineberry, *Rubus phoenicolasius*, produces its sweet, red fruit on climbing canes – and is best grown against a fence or wall with wire supports (left) The local community has taken charge of the raised beds that sit on what was waste ground. They use them to grow a wide variety of herbs, veg and flowers

What is permaculture?



ASK A seasoned gardener what permaculture is and the chances are they will either shrug their shoulders or suggest it might have something to do with growing plants hydroponically. Well, that's what I would have done until my recent visit to Alex Smith's garden.

In fact, permaculture is a portmanteau of permanent agriculture, a term first coined by Australian ecologists Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in their 1978 book, *Permaculture One*. In this influential guide they set out their green philosophies, while including plenty of practical advice for creating plots where the owner can become self sufficient.

Permaculture gardens mainly consist of perennial

edible crops that provide yields year after year, rather than high-maintenance annuals. Ornamental plants are generally only included if they have another use; if their flowers can be eaten or if they attract pollinators, beneficial insects or have a strong smell to deter pests. Apart from edible crops, many permaculturists keep hens (above) or other livestock to reduce the amount of food they need to buy.

Gardens are run on organic principles, with no artificial fertilisers or reliance on an armoury of pesticides, which means these plots often contain more weeds than a typical garden. The aim is to become sustainable, to create the minimum amount of waste and to recycle as much as you can.

◀ eye-catching fence that separates the garden from a factory car park.

The terraces are planted with a mouth-watering selection of edible crops, many of which I've never seen or tasted before. There are raspberries, apricots, blackcurrants, Sharon fruit, red and white gooseberries, apples, pears, tangy Chinese pears (*Pyrus pyrifolia*) and Chilean guava (*Ugni molinae*), an evergreen shrub from Chile that is covered with dark red berries.

carpets of weeds that still need clearing. It must difficult to keep on top of the weeds without herbicides.

"Weeds don't really bother me and they don't really seem to affect the plants," he says, telling me about his novel use for the tips of Japanese knotweed that sometimes pop their heads above the soil.

"I cut them off and stir fry them. They're a very nourishing little shoot," he says, admitting to another unusual delicacy – squirrels. 'After catching them, I skin them and cook

"I hope to be able to produce 200 bottles of 'Château King's Cross'"

Unusual fruits

On the lower terraces I spot a handful of scrambling plants with light green leaves, whose spiny red stems terminate with a cluster of tiny glossy red berries. I've no idea what they are, so Alex jumps down to the lower terrace and quickly gathers up the berries until most of the plants are left bare. "They're Japanese wineberries. They're so sweet and sticky. Don't you think they are absolutely delicious?" asks Alex, who continues to pick at everything we walk past that bears ripe fruit. "I've always eaten a lot of fruit and it's great to have these plants here as I never have to buy any now," he says, popping an alpine strawberry into his mouth.

Wandering through the garden I spot some patches of bare soil, but these are vastly outnumbered by

them over a fire in a stew. You can get a good meal out of a squirrel as they've got such muscular hind legs," he says. Fortunately, he doesn't have any leftovers for me to tuck into.

While the garden produces masses of fruit, there are other edibles to be harvested. In a corner of the garden near the railway line are three beehives tended by a local beekeeper, while a bed of asparagus planted this year will provide tasty, tender spears in the future.

"My plan is to keep chickens here eventually and I've got a big pile of old car tyres that I found on the estate that I'll grow potatoes in next year," says Alex, who tells me that another future project is to build a pond to attract more wildlife onto the strip of land.

Apart from the main garden, there are a few other patches of weed-



(above) The three beehives sit at the edge of the plot. The bees do a great job of pollinating the crops

infested, redundant land around the factory that Alex is attempting to make productive. At the back of the loading bay is a south-facing bank, where 30 black 'Rondo' grapevines were planted in March by 60 local residents. To prevent weeds from germinating in the vineyard, sheets of wet cardboard were laid over the ground and then covered with compost.

"In three or four years from now I hope this vineyard will be productive. I expect to be able to produce about 200 bottles of 'Château King's Cross,'" says Alex, who encourages his employees to help out in the gardens. While I'm there, two workers in white overalls, blue gloves and hairnets come outside to pick off annual weeds that have managed to defy the cardboard mulch and self seed themselves in the vineyard.

Community action

In front of the factory, next to the main road, was another unsightly plot that until recently was a blanket of weeds and a place where dog owners would let their pets go to the toilet. Now it's home to five large raised beds used by Bengali, Irish and Chinese community groups to grow flowers and vegetables.



(top right) Chinese pears are among the more unusual fruits Alex grows



The gardens created by Alex at Alara will certainly not be to everyone's taste, especially those who aspire for a manicured lawn and well-tended perennial borders. But despite the weeds and the shabby look I admire how he has tackled such an uncompromising site.

"There are millions of litter-filled, redundant spaces like this around the country. I hope what I've done here helps to inspire others and bring those areas into use," says Alex.

Alex's top five permaculture tips

1 "IT'S IMPORTANT to understand your soil and grow plants that are suitable for it, while appreciating any bit of land you have, even those areas that are currently redundant because you don't think anything would grow there – the chances are they can become part of the garden".

2 "We often take food for granted, but it's central to our lives, so make sure you grow plants you can eat. Food growing is incredibly ornamental as many plants have beautiful flowers and berries".

3 "You've probably got lots of other things to do in your life apart from gardening, so grow edibles that need a minimum amount of maintenance. Permaculture is designed for minimum maintenance, so I would recommend covering all the ground you've got in permanent, food-growing crops. Avoid high maintenance annuals that need putting in and taking out every year".

4 "Stratify or plant in layers to make the most of the space. Use ground-covering crops, such as alpine strawberries, to smother weeds, then plant bushes above them. Behind these you could have apple trees or other fruit trees, with grapevines or similar climbers trained into their branches".

5 "Make the most of rainwater. Huge amounts of it fall every year, so capture all that you can to enable you to irrigate your garden with this free, valuable resource".