



trend setting GARDENS

What Suffolk starts – the rest of rural England follows – or so it seems when it comes to whole villages opening their gardens. **Anne Gould** reports

Chelsworth is very probably the prettiest of Suffolk villages with its old timbered properties, babbling brook, humpback bridge and twisting tree-lined byways. Unless you've happened to need to take the direct route over the hill from Bildeston to Monks Eleigh you might never have been there. But if you are a serious gardener you can't fail to have missed the famous Chelsworth Open Gardens phenomenon.

The village might only have 150 or so residents but according to Edwina Brash, from the organising committee, on the last Sunday of June thousands and thousands of people from all over the UK arrive to bask in this peaceful idyll alongside the River Brett.

This year on June 25, the village is celebrating its 50th Open Gardens and Edwina says they believe they were the first village in the country ever to organise such an event.

The first Chelsworth Open Gardens was in 1967 organised by a group of villagers including one of General Montgomery's commanders, Sir Drummond English the army's Chief Engineer and one of the masterminds behind the D-Day landings. Joining him on the committee was Richard Britten a world renowned specialist in alpinines who has a *Fritillaria pudica* named after him along with three other villagers.

The idea then, as it has remained to this day, is to raise funds to repair All Saints

church. Edwina says back then admission was half-a-crown (12.5 pence) and a total of £150 was raised (equal to about £1,690 today), helped by plant sales and, of course, teas. Water for the teas served in the village Victory Hall, was drawn from a standpipe and the washing-up was in bowls on trestle tables.

Today, with coach loads of garden clubs descending on the village from across the country, the organisation needs to be planned rather more like a military campaign. Edwina says that it's not just getting the gardens looking in tip top condition but with thousands coming to tea the dark days of January and February are when the cake baking strategy gets underway.



“We even have a cake workshop , which is put on by Janet Gooding, a fantastic baker, who shows us how to make lots of easy cakes.” The thing is, she explained, although the event has always been on the last Sunday of June, sometimes it rains and contingencies have to be catered for too.

There have been other changes as well. “Over the last half-century, the gardens have changed in subtle ways. There used to be more vegetable gardens with their proud owners as proficient as Chelsea exhibitors: in 1967 some of them were still farmworkers.

“An art-school principal showed her students’ work in an outhouse, and an Old Etonian potter produced hefty

bowls and dishes singing hymns as the potter’s wheel turned. He also made a mean Cullen Skink. Formal garden design is now more noticeable than in the days of fruit and veg: there are gardens with beautiful statues and Monet bridges to cross to watch the swans.”

And Open Gardens always come with a surprise – one year there was a family from Darlington who came for the day: two hundred miles each way. “Or the rally of VW Beetles who happened to pass by, dozens of them.” For this year’s event, there are 23 gardens opening with Morris men dancing in the street and visitors can buy from specialist nurserymen, local food specialists, artisan crafts and

French brocante. “The aim of it all is to raise funds not only to support our church but also the wider gardening community through Thrive, a national gardening charity who provide therapeutic support to those living with ill health or disabilities.”

Kicking off the weekend this year is a concert ‘For A Summer Evening’ on June 24 at All Saints by Hadleigh Choral Society. This year villagers have also worked together to create a faux stained glass window to display in All Saints Church for the 50th celebrations.

INFORMATION

www.chelsworth.org.uk/gardens/2017

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