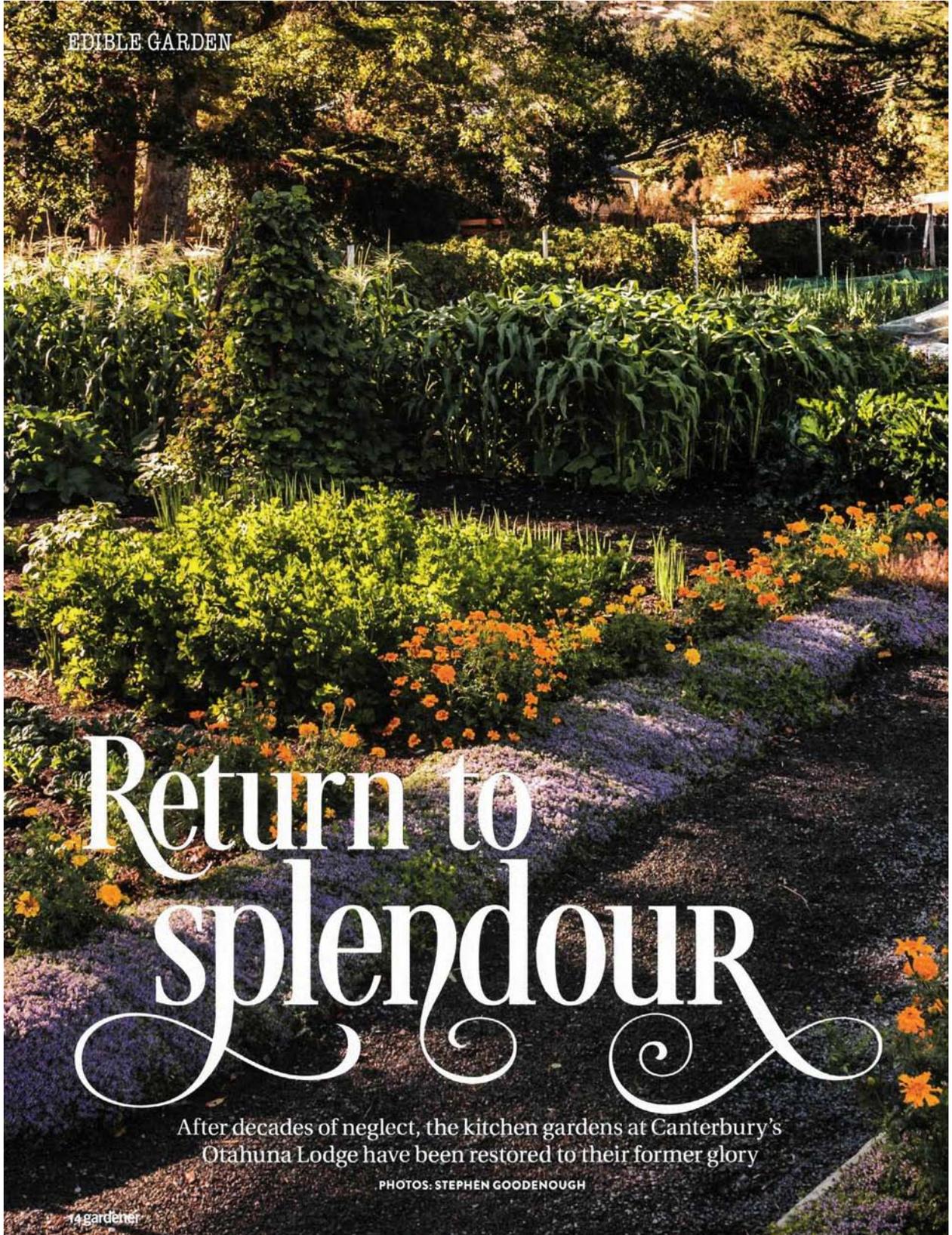


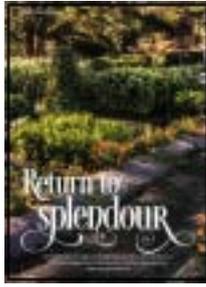
EDIBLE GARDEN



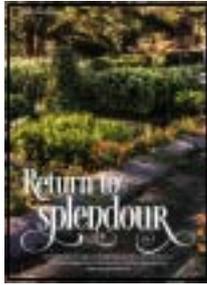
Return to splendour

After decades of neglect, the kitchen gardens at Canterbury's Otahuna Lodge have been restored to their former glory

PHOTOS: STEPHEN GOODENOUGH



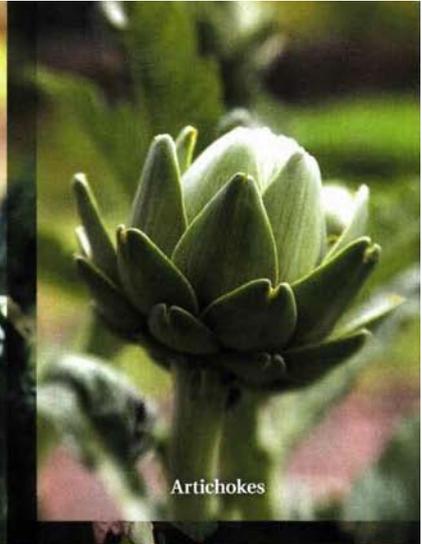
A sumptuous new book, *For the Love of a Place*, charts the restoration of the gardens at this historic property, including the productive potager



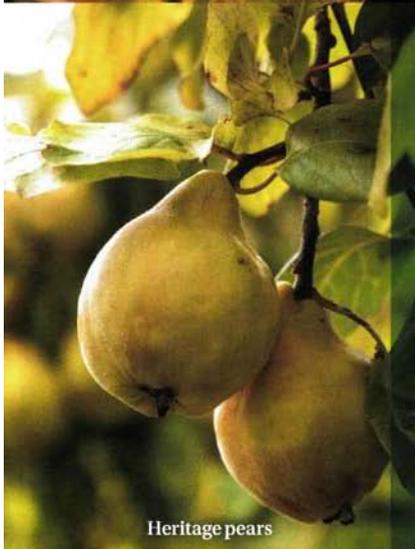
Pumpkins



Cavolo nero



Artichokes

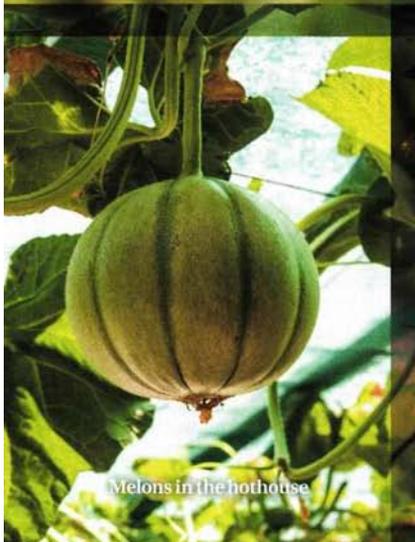


Heritage pears

Back when Otahuna was a private estate, the orchard spread over more than an acre. A century on, the surviving fruit trees – including a giant ‘Uvedale’s St Germain’ pear – need a lot of attention but are still productive




Quinces



Melons in the hothouse



Heritage apples



Red pineapple in the hothouse



From potager to plate is the approach to food at Otahuna Lodge

“Gardens change, they evolve, tastes evolve,” says Miles, “and what was fashionable 110 years ago is not necessarily fashionable now”

The gracious country house Otahuna, just outside of Christchurch, was built by Sir Heaton Rhodes in 1895 as a wedding present for his wife, Jessie. At the same time Sir Heaton, a distinguished plantsman and president of the Canterbury Horticultural Society for more than 50 years, established park-like gardens there, and planted hundreds of daffodil bulbs. The resulting display of more than one million bulbs in the Daffodil Paddock still attracts visitors every September.

Back then, there would have been six gardeners at Otahuna, working six days a week for £2 a month. Irrigation came from springs on nearby hills and the lawn was mowed by horses, whose hooves were covered with leather overshoes so as not to damage the turf.

After Sir Heaton died in 1956, Otahuna passed through many hands, including a Catholic order and a group who used it as a commune. Unsurprisingly, there was very little maintenance done over this period, the irrigation was lost and trees became overgrown. When current owners Hall Cannon and Miles Refo purchased Otahuna in 2006, some areas of the garden had not been tended for over 50 years.

“The garden was a major part of the story here,” Miles says. “In its 1930s heyday the garden was arguably more famous than the house. There’s a lot of history in the gardens, which you can almost palpably feel as you walk around.”

If plans for the gardens ever existed, they certainly hadn’t survived. Hints might include a line of box hedging here, say, or a specimen tree there – but very often, there was no clue as to what might have grown in a particular spot. Head gardener Steve Marcham, along with Hall and Miles, worked out an approach that was sympathetic to those historical clues yet in a modern context.

“Gardens change, they evolve, tastes evolve,” says Miles, “and what was fashionable 110 years ago is not necessarily fashionable now. So our approach is to honour the spirit of what was here in order to evoke the same impression you would have had 100 years ago.”

Steve was one of the first people they hired on buying Otahuna. He grew up in the Cotswolds, before working for a landscaping firm in London. It was a frenetic, hard pace of life. Seeking a change, he and his partner took off to New Zealand, where he answered an ad for a gardener at a large old house just outside Christchurch. He was hired. “It was a good move,” he says.

At Otahuna, Steve is able to put his previous work and extensive plant knowledge to good use. The garden changes month by month. In spring the grounds burst forth with life, thousands of daffodils bloom and the preparation of the Potager Garden begins. In summer the garden is in full cry, and Steve and his team are kept busy supplying the kitchen with produce, raising livestock and mowing vast swathes of lawns. Autumn heralds a time to design and plan long-term restoration projects that will be undertaken during the quieter winter months.

While Otahuna was a private estate, the kitchen gardens were enormous and it was mostly self-sufficient. The vegetable garden was where the pig pen is now. The orchard spread over more than an acre. A century on, the surviving fruit trees, such as a giant ‘Uvedale’s St Germain’ pear tree, require a lot of attention but are still productive. Newly planted specimens such as cherry, peach, almond, walnut, fig, plum and quince are flourishing. “We produce our own food not only to preserve that tradition of doing so,” Miles says, “but also because of the flavours and freshness it brings to the food we serve our guests. We are not growing for size and durability; we are growing for flavour.”





Soon after his appointment Steve re-established the vegetable plot, now known as the Potager Garden, in Heaton's old stallion paddock and conveniently next to the orchard. It is sited on gently sloping land surrounded by a beautiful stone wall, which helps to create a sheltered microclimate. The garden is entered through a pretty wooden gate, ahead of which row upon row of vegetables are planted across four beds. The earth is dark brown and rich, thanks to compost made on the property. Spring brings asparagus, broad beans and artichokes, whose prehistoric leaves sprout in several places. Through summer, the team grows kilo upon kilo of every colour of tomatoes. Even in the depths of winter the

kitchen is able to harvest 'Purple Dragon' carrots, cavolo nero, parsnips and other hardy vegetables. All are grown from seed in the hothouse before being hardened off in the nursery then planted into the Potager Garden. The precise types change from year to year, but there is a particular interest in heritage varieties. These are harder to grow, but the reward is in the flavour.

In the old melon house – now beautifully restored – herbs and lettuce are grown through the winter months; coriander, flat-leafed parsley and basil thrive here. Over summer the gardeners raise green and rock melons, using the Victorian method of trussing the vines to the ceiling. The melons sit in nets suspended from the beams, which lifts them off the wet soil, and keep them in the building's warmest spot where they quickly ripen.

Nearby is a lovely little brick building with a sunken floor, originally an apple store. Here, any produce that didn't require refrigeration – such as apples and potatoes – was stored in the cool, dark interior. Now, its earthy dampness is perfect for the year-round growth of oyster mushrooms in large, cylindrical bags of straw, and it has also been used to brew cider from the orchard's vast apple crops.

In the autumn, wild porcini mushrooms appear at the base of mature oak trees around the property. When the conditions



Otahuna's executive chef Jimmy McIntyre harvests fresh veges

The Potager Garden is on gently sloping land surrounded by a stone wall, which helps to create a sheltered microclimate

are right, they produce beautiful specimens up to 1kg in weight. They are only a recent discovery, and were happened upon quite by chance. One day, executive chef Jimmy McIntyre spotted what he thought was a stray paper bag. On closer inspection, Jimmy found a large specimen of this delicious treat. The gardeners forage daily in season, and the porcinis find their way onto Otahuna's menus, used fresh or frozen and dried to make stock for the next year.

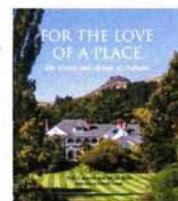
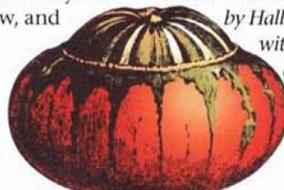
There is livestock, too. Otahuna raises Wessex Saddleback pigs, the meat from which is turned into sausages, bacon, prosciutto, ham, coppas and salamis to supply the kitchen.

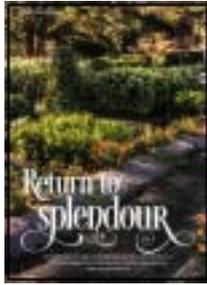
All this is part of a broader philosophy of using everything

from the land and maintaining that land sustainably for long-term use. The productive gardens are run on organic principles; there are no inorganic chemical sprays, fertilisers or insecticides used.

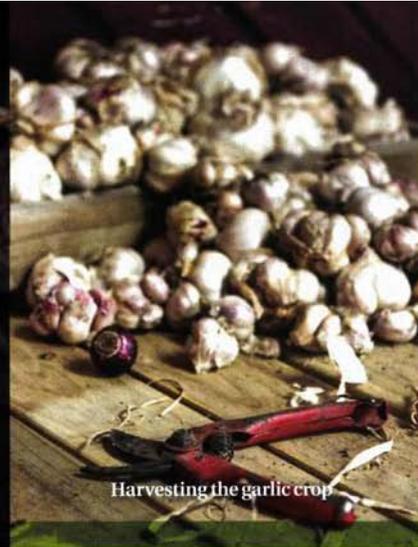
Instead, the gardeners employ heritage methods that would have been used on estates in Edwardian times. The companion planting of marigolds, for instance, not only adds visual interest to the Potager Garden but also attracts hoverflies, which are predators of destructive aphids. A thyme border provides herbs for the kitchen, but also attracts honeybees and other pollinators. After many years of searching, Steve eventually sourced some traditional forcing pots, which are placed over rhubarb to block the light, preventing sugar from being turned into starch. The resulting crop enjoys softer stems and a gentle, sweeter flavour. "It's old knowledge," says Steve. "We're just rediscovering it again." ❀

Extracted from *For the Love of a Place: The Stories and Cuisine of Otahuna*, by Hall Cannon and Miles Refo with Simon Farrell-Green and additional reporting by Jo McCarroll. RHNZ Godwit, \$80. We have two to give away; see page 103 for info.

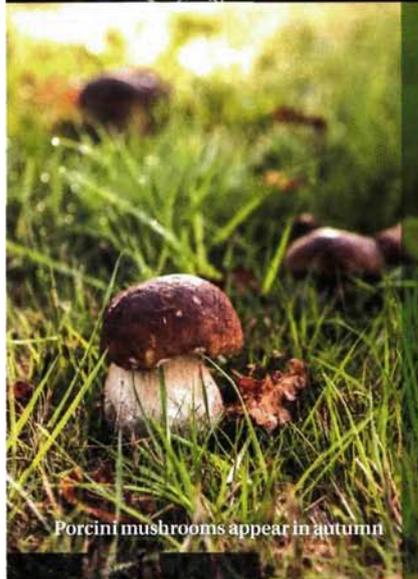




Red onions dry in a shed

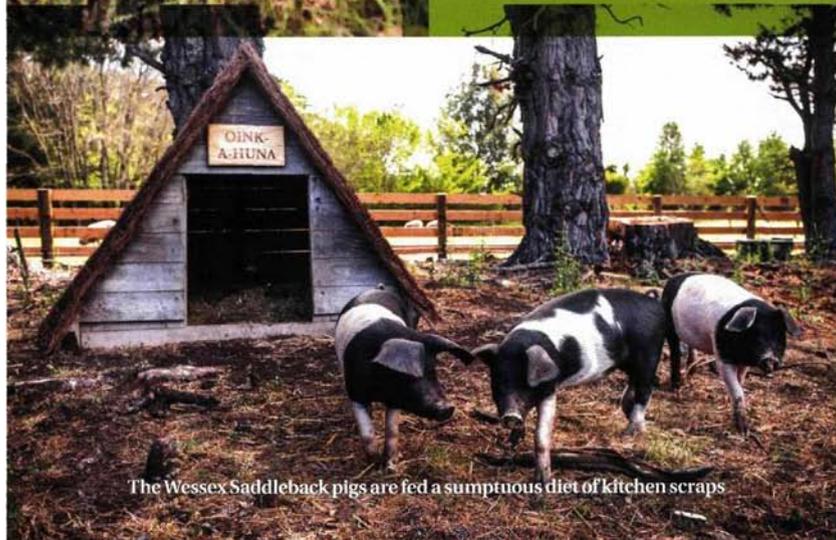


Harvesting the garlic crop



Porcini mushrooms appear in autumn

The wild porcini mushrooms were discovered one day when the executive chef spotted what he thought was a stray paper bag under some oak trees. On closer inspection, he found a large specimen of this delicious treat



The Wessex Saddleback pigs are fed a sumptuous diet of kitchen scraps