

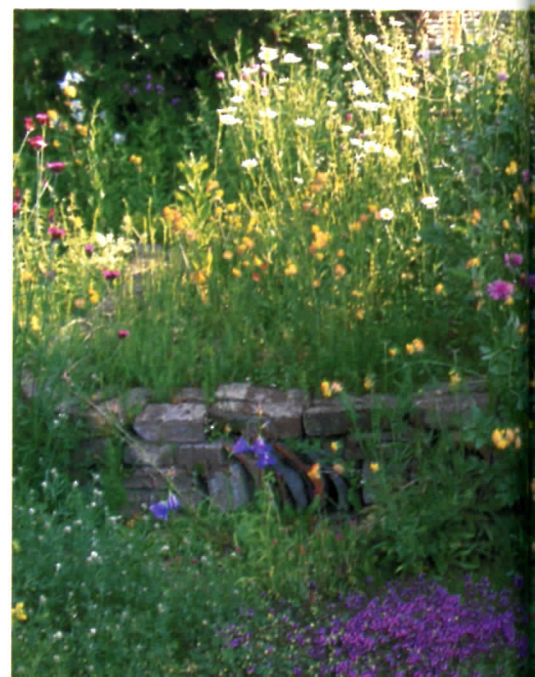


HEEM WORK

THE OASE GARDEN IN HOLLAND IS AS BEAUTIFUL AS IT IS ECOLOGICAL. NIGEL DUNNETT DISCOVERS AN URBAN OASIS. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE SEBIRE

Holland has a long tradition, stretching back to the 1920s, of gardens that bring nature into the heart of its towns and cities. These so-called heem parks and gardens (*heem* literally means home or habitat) first started out as educational gardens, providing a refuge for the wild flowers that were rapidly disappearing from the countryside, but today are valued as much for their innate beauty as their ecological value.

The Oase garden near Arnhem is a fine example of the movement. Created just ten years ago in the grounds of a 19th-century monastery, Oase is a magical place where wild flowers flourish in glorious profusion giving an air of permanence that belies its relative youth. This urban oasis is the creation of Willy Leufgen and Marianne van Lier, who live as part of a creative community of artists, writers and musicians at the monastery.

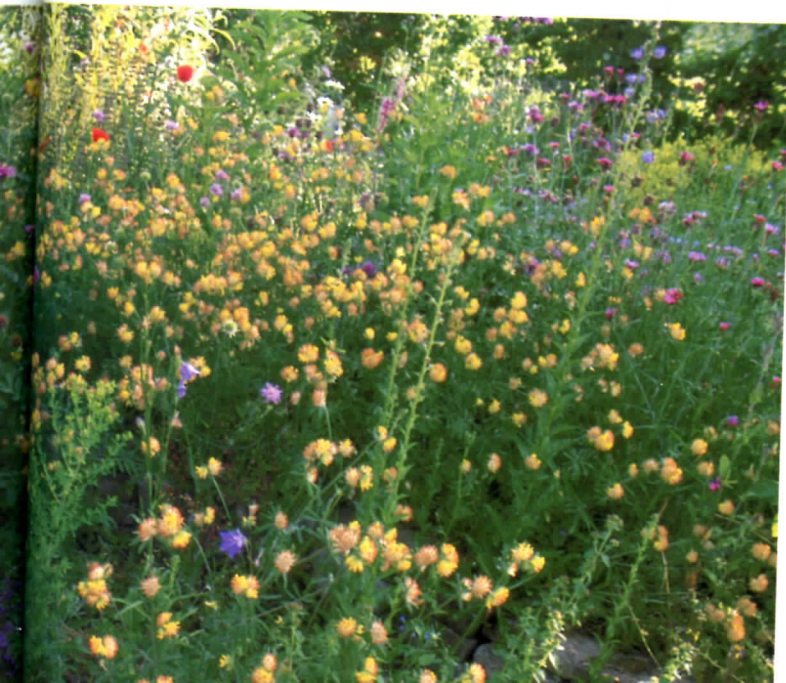




Money to fund the garden is raised from subscriptions to their magazine about their work as well as from training events and study tours. "I have always wanted to find ways of bringing nature close to people, especially children," says Marianne. "Our garden here is a valuable resource, combined with our office and library, for anyone who wants to create a community nature garden."

The first thing that strikes any visitor to Oase is how water is the essential element, as in much of the Dutch landscape. A straight, narrow canal near the entrance leads into the small lake at the heart of the garden, its formality making an effective contrast with the naturalistic character of the rest of the garden. Standing as a bold focal point is a nature garden pavilion. This building has a bold contemporary appearance, yet was made using traditional timber-frame building techniques.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: MARIANNE VAN LIER AND WILLY LEUGEN (INSET, FAR LEFT) HAVE CREATED A GREEN SPACE THAT EPITOMISES THE MIX OF ART AND ECOLOGY IN DUTCH NATURE GARDENS.



Its most eye-catching feature is the sweeping green roof, planted with sedums and dianthus. Water drains after heavy rainfall down chains suspended from the lower lip of the roof and collects in small bog gardens and pool areas that themselves overflow into the main lake, making a clear connection between building and garden.

The lake itself only comes into view when you reach the end of the canal, where it opens out to reveal the wider garden. It is hard to believe that the presence of water is entirely artificial – held in place with a synthetic liner. Willy is a little apologetic about this. "It is the only part of the garden that breaks our ecological rules," he says. "But the beauty of the water and the rich wildlife it supports means that it is the real heart of the garden."

These days, the lake's wide, shallow margins and open swampy areas support beautiful displays of orchids in

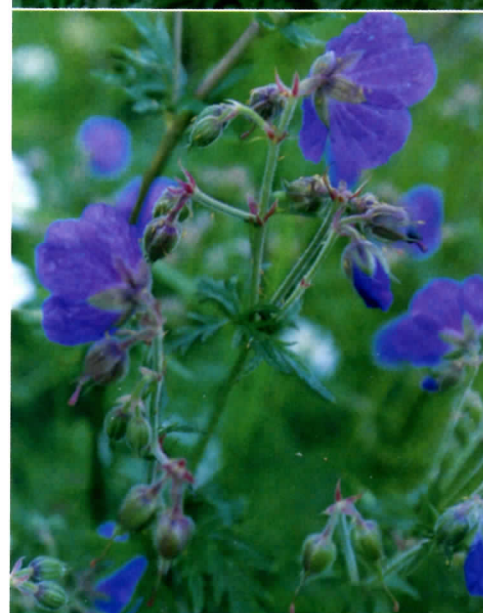
early summer. The lake also marks the divide between two areas of the garden with distinctly different characters – shady young woodlands to the north and east, and open sunny meadows to the south and west.

A 'hollow lane' leads into the woods, where the ground banks on either side to give the impression of an ancient track. It makes a convincing green tunnel even though the planted woodland is only seven years old. Coarse hedgerow plants – hogweed, cow parsley, hedge woundwort, false oat grass, cleavers and nettles – are held back from the mown grass path by tree-trunk edgings. From here the path briefly emerges from the woodland to meet the edge of the lake and then moves back into another wooded area planted with trees and shrubs that provide flower, fruit and seeds for birds. The final patch of woodland is a spring wood, richly planted with sweeping carpets of woodland wild flowers.



ABOVE: A SMALL BRIDGE. OPPOSITE: THE SUNKEN, SECLUDED SEATING AREA CONTAINED BY WALLS MADE FROM RECLAIMED BRICKS, TILES AND PIPES. RIGHT (L-R): GERANIUM PRATENSE. THE BOG GARDENS. DACTYLORHIZA MACULATA, COMMONLY KNOWN AS THE HEATH SPOTTED ORCHID. TRAGOPOGON PORRIFOLIUS.

Across the water, and completely contrasting with this shady forest, lies the Butterfly Garden. This most complex and intimate part of the whole garden is a multi-level construction made with waste bricks from a nearby brick factory, reclaimed paving slabs, clay drain pipes and flat and curved tiles, in the style of one of the pioneers of modern Dutch ecological gardening, Louis Le Roy (see issue 67). The curving walls form secluded seating areas and the changes of level move from hot open sun to damp shade. Piled up against the walls are banks of free-draining soil where sun-loving wild perennials and self-seeding annuals and biennials thrive. One of the most abundant and striking of the plants here is *Tragopogon*





porrifolius, a more robust and larger version of our native goat's beard, only this has purple-pink flower heads, beautiful conical buds, large, round seed heads and shiny grey-green foliage. Alongside grows ox-eye daisy, meadow cranesbill, hemp agrimony, yarrow, mignonette, thyme, buddleia, soapwort and goats rue, together with scattered small pruned hawthorns. In the shadier areas the walls support ferns and wood avens. There is also a front garden, the size of a typical Dutch urban garden, laid out as a demonstration plot, combining ecological ideas and naturalistic plantings within a more formal framework.

Throughout the garden, the strong principles of the heem garden movement underlie the design and management of the Oase. Firstly, only native plants are used, carefully chosen to match differing site conditions but also for their aesthetic appeal. Secondly, the garden is managed organically. "The slugs and snails have as much validity as the plants as part of the wider web of life in the garden," says Willy. Thirdly, construction materials are recycled, or at least sourced locally. And finally, there is free and open access to the garden at all times, not only for community members, but for anyone who wants to visit or to learn.

The Oase garden, like the other heem gardens in the Netherlands, is not a static entity but is deliberately dynamic, constantly evolving. It is maintained and managed with an eye to the long-term, as a developing system rather than a finished product. It is a living example of combining garden art with ecology, but also a living place for people as well as plants, providing sanctuary and inspiration for anyone who seeks it.

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