

Seven Questions with 'Queen of herbs' Jekka McVicar



How has your business fared throughout, and following, lockdown? Did you notice an increase in demand for herbs and gardening paraphernalia? Are we gardening more now than we did before the pandemic?

The first few months of the pandemic were disastrous; we lost the prime gardening season and couldn't open back up until June, by which point it was nigh on impossible to make up for lost time. It was tough again in January when the government closed nurseries but kept garden centres open.

We started selling mail-order seeds last year which really saved us, and we had a good Christmas period. Things are looking up now; demand for herbs is up by around 75% against pre-pandemic levels, with more people cooking from home and prioritising their gardens and health post-Covid.

We've seen a great response to our new click & collect offering. With more people cooking at home than ever before during the pandemic, herbs are increasingly becoming a household staple. Furthermore, herbs can easily grow in flats and on balconies, meaning inner-city growers aren't disadvantaged.

Our first ever HerbFest, a festival celebrating herb growing and use, was an unmitigated success and we've had amazing feedback. We'll do it again next year but keep it small and intimate, as this was a key part of its success.

Now we are well into summer, do you have five top tips for planting herbs over the next few months?

There are lots of new gardeners this year, so the autumn season may pick up.

For now, don't sow. Wait until the end of August to catch the best of the autumn months. There are all kinds of herbs – parsley, coriander and dill to name but a few – which can run right through the winter. All you need to do is cut and eat the leaves.

If you're in the mood for planning ahead, you can start taking cuttings as soon as flowering is over and reserve them for the next year. You can do the same with mint by dividing your crop in half in November

You've recently partnered with Riverstone, a leading developer of exceptional retirement living in prime London locations, to curate dedicated herb gardens for residents at Riverstone's Kensington and Fulham developments. Can you tell us more about your goal for these spaces and how you're curating them to bring maximum possible benefit to residents?

The vision for the gardens at Riverstone is to create spaces which the residents can really enjoy in their entirety. I want residents, their families and their friends to be able to pick herbs and be involved in the process.

We're trying to build a space which brings the best of nature into the gardens. Sitting in a garden full of interesting scents and sounds can really lift the spirits, and just being able to sit and watch nature can be both inspiring and relaxing.

We want to attract pollinators to create a buzz in the gardens, so that's a priority when selecting which herbs we plant. Health and well-being are key, too. We want a mix of herbs which can relax, invigorate, inspire and heal.

This will also be a space which residents can make their own. We're starting a gardening club which will enable residents to get planting, and Riverstone's moving service allows residents to bring their favourite plants to their new apartments.

The past year has brought home to all of us the importance of mental health and well-being. Are there any specific herbs which can help your mood or generally bolster well-being?

Anything which smells good is going to instantly relax you – so that's the place to start. Colours are important, too, with blues and purples renowned for their soothing effect. Lavender, thyme and nepeta are all great choices.

There's nothing more uplifting than watching nature at work, so herbs which attract pollinators and other wildlife are important for bolstering well-being. We held bee walks at HerbFest this year, and just taking the time to spot and identify the different bees in the garden was both rewarding and invigorating. Lavender and thyme again are an excellent choice for a garden full of pollinators, as are rosemary, basil and mint.

Other herbs are specifically renowned for their health benefits. Rosemary, for example, is fantastic for the memory and has been shown to combat the effects of SAD.

What are the best options for herb-growers in cities and urban centres? How could you best utilise a balcony or terrace to grow plants and herbs?

If you've got a balcony and want to grow herbs, it's all about taste. You'll have less space than you would in a garden, so you have to pick plants you'll use. Remember to use pots for space management and feed on Fridays!

Some herbs are staples of the flat and balcony: I love tarragon – you can use it so easily with chicken or vinegar. Rosemary is another classic choice and goes great with tomatoes, roasted vegetables and meats. You also need an onion; chives are versatile and easy to look after.

Seasonality is an important part of planting because it gives you something to look forward to each year and lets you change up the sights, smells and flavours on offer. Basil symbolises summer for me and lemon thyme and lemon verbena are also a must for their aroma.

When designing community gardens and social spaces, such as the herb garden you designed for Riverstone, what are the most important factors to bear in mind?

Accessibility for all is key – absolutely nobody is excluded from these gardens. Raised beds, which help older residents avoid excessive bending, are just one example of inclusive design which we're implementing at Riverstone Fulham.

Communal gardens need to be family friendly, too. We want Riverstone residents to be able to enjoy the herb garden with their friends, children and grandchildren. We're hosting workshops and seed-sowing days for residents' families. This will give residents an experience they can share with loved ones, and something tangible for people to take away from the garden; that makes the whole experience more rewarding.

Riverstone residents, through your herb garden, will have the opportunity to learn all about the process of herb cultivation; how they are grown, how they are used and their history. Can you tell us some particularly interesting facts about, or benefits of, any of the herbs you've used in Riverstone's garden?

We're going to be including lemon balm in the gardens at Riverstone. It's great for attracting pollinators and smells lovely, but moreover it's got some amazing health benefits.

Researchers at Kew have found that lemon balm eases anxiety, and it can easily be turned into a calming tea: simply add five leaves of lemon balm into a mug and add boiled water.

Not only that, but it can help with cold sores, too. If you let the tea cool down and dab a cotton bud with the liquid, it makes for a cleansing and soothing ointment.

'Queen of herbs' Jekka McVicar is Britain's best known herb grower

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