

Martineau Gardens, Edgbaston, Birmingham

'Our garden has a volunteer waiting list!'

Birmingham may be Britain's second largest city but it has lots of gorgeous green spaces, from the famous Botanic Gardens to Winterbourne House and Garden. Yet few realise there's also a fabulous community garden, Martineau Gardens in Edgbaston, which has its own unique style.

Although it's two-and-a-half acres in size, the full glory of this long, thin garden is hidden from outside. "If you look through the fence you just see a car park," says garden director, Caroline Hutton. "But once you come in through the gates, it's a magical experience."

The first part of the garden is devoted to growing food, then there's a formal garden, trees and shrubs from around the world, including a collection of eucalyptus, followed by wildflower meadows, an orchard and woodland. "The wonderful thing is that there's every kind of habitat," says Caroline. "We've got everything from a scree bed to woodland, but all in a Midlands garden."

The site has had a long history of community use. In the 1970s it was run by the local authority as an environmental study centre for local junior schools. But lack of funds led to its closure in 1997 and there was a risk that the space would be built on with the garden lost.

To stop this, a group of locals campaigned to keep it as a vital 'green lung' for the city. With two major public gardens nearby the locals were challenged to come up with an alternative use for the space, and they knew they'd have to come up with something completely new.

"We noticed that among the volunteers who came to the garden were people recovering from head injuries. We realised that the garden could be used for therapeutic horticulture," says Caroline.

The idea caught on, gained momentum and eventually led to the creation of Martineau Gardens in 2003. It's now a popular city garden that serves the community and reaches out to a broad range of visitors and volunteers. In fact it has proved so popular that there's a waiting list for volunteers – something many community gardens can only dream of.

"For people who are currently out of work, volunteering here keeps them actively involved in something important in the community," says Caroline. "We work with people who struggle with their health too. It doesn't matter if they don't know a lot about gardening to start with – we'll work with them and provide supervision."

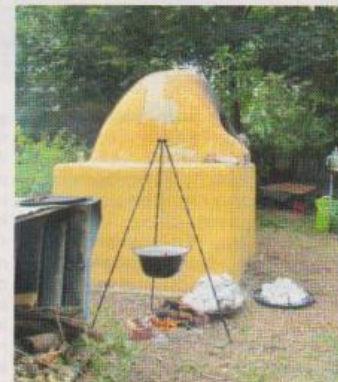
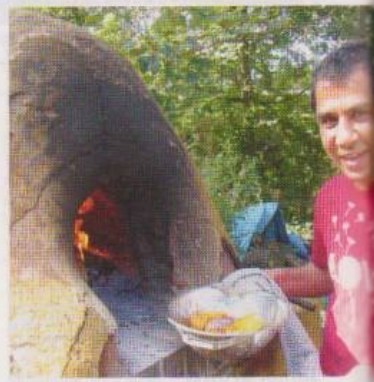
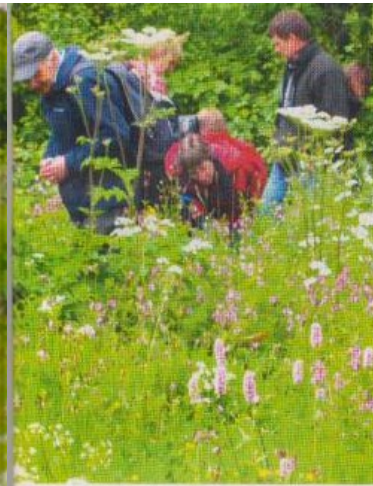
Encouraging wild animals to visit is high on the garden's priority list. "We want the garden to be good for wildlife as well as humans," Caroline explains. "The woodland area is home to pipistrelle bats, badgers and lots of fungi species. As a result it's been classified as a Site of Local Importance for Nature Conservation."

The formal garden is filled with unusual trees and shrubs, including a *Lyonothamnus floribundus* (Catalina ironwood) a medium size tree with reddish peeling bark, and the unusual Uruguayan *Colletia cruciata* which has cross-shaped spikey stems and white fragrant flowers.

Other highlights include the orchard, where figs, mulberries, grapes and apples grow, an organic vegetable plot and herb beds, ponds and beehives, wildflower meadows, a new nature trail and children's play area. Plants and other produce are sold on site to raise money for the gardens.

The garden is used for a broad curriculum of education and learning, too. Events run throughout the year, including storytelling days, bee-keeping courses, advice on cultivating edible mushrooms and many other activities linked to local schools.

Former Gardeners' World presenter, Alys Fowler who lives nearby is a patron. Who knows, if there's an event at Martineau, you may even bump into her there!



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Volunteers, parents and children get out into the meadows on a bug hunt; the garden provides a tranquil site for bee hives in the heart of an urban area; this year the garden hosted a special Bee Activity Day with experts to talk about helping bees in the garden; even in winter the garden looks beautiful, with frost-covered seedheads; autumn leaves in the woodland area; teasels, with volunteers busy in the background; when the garden hosts events, food is cooked outdoors at the earth oven built by volunteers. RIGHT: food is also cooked over an open fire.



Factfile

- The garden is at 27 Priory Road Edgbaston, Birmingham B5 7UG
- 6,000 people visit each year
- It's open Monday to Saturday 10am-4pm except public holidays
- Admission is free
- For details visit www.martineau-gardens.org.uk or call 0121 440 7430. Search Facebook for them or follow the Twitter feed @martineau27