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A BLANC CANVAS

From next issue, we'll be joining the team at Raymond Blanc's working kitchen garden in Oxfordshire every month. But before our new series begins, editor Tamsin Westhorpe talks to the man from Le Manoir about the influence he has had on all our plots

PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM



OPPOSITE Raymond values the time he spends in the seven-acre gardens of Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, especially the 1.5-acre certified-organic kitchen garden. ABOVE The hotel and two Michelin-star restaurant were opened in 1984, offering incredible food and 32 individually designed guest rooms. BELOW Raymond checks a specimen from his successful lemon grass crop.

Raymond Blanc is a chef, but he is also a gardener. The story of how this incredibly passionate man has quietly revolutionised gardening in the UK is really something that we should celebrate. Until meeting him on a chilly autumn day, I had not realised how he has been one of the main driving forces behind the re-emergence in the 'grow your own' movement. Sitting by the open fire on a comfy sofa at his hotel and restaurant, Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, I waited for him to arrive. It's hard to feel on edge in such a homely setting - although this is a place we all strive to visit, it is not exclusive. His aim to fill this wonderful space with laughter, love and celebration has been achieved.

Raymond arrives, and I am instantly put at ease. His first thought is food, and he orders me one of his croissants to try. My carefully put-together questions are soon thrown to one side - he is far too generous with his stories to be restricted to my check list.

After a few minutes of chatting, a hotel guest materialises and thanks him for their stay. Raymond clearly values each and every one of his guests, and jumps up to bid them farewell,

but not before asking if everything was to their satisfaction - which of course it was.

When he returns to the sofa, he tells me the story of how he found the property. 'I spotted the house 28 years ago after a long 18-hour shift, while flicking through the pages of *Country Life*,' he explains. 'I was a young, tired man, but after looking for a property for three years, something happened when I saw this house.'

Having met him, I can see how his enthusiasm and passion would not allow him to wait for an estate agent appointment. Instead, he jumped on his Honda 70 and drove straight to the house. 'I'd assumed that the lady who opened the door was the cleaner, but I

was soon to discover that it was the owner, Lady Cromwell,' he explains. She knew of Raymond, as she had enjoyed a memorable evening in his small Oxford restaurant. In a panic to impress this chef of great standing, she welcomed him in for tea.

'She was so nervous that she left the tea bags in the cups,' he laughs. The thought of a chef turning what Raymond describes as a small manor house into a hotel delighted her, and she quickly harnessed her horse and paraded Raymond around the area in her trap to drum up support for his great plans.

This romantic tale is just one part of the story of his incredible journey to two Michelin-starred fame. Since growing up in France, where food is linked to every area of life, he has always made the most of the gift of knowledge that his parents and grandparents bestowed on him. 'Thanks to my childhood, I learned that food connects to everything - it defines what type of society we have. The table is very symbolic to me, as it is where the family meet, where we argue, we love and we celebrate,' he explains.

Unlike the gardens he discovered when he came to England, the gardens in France were ►



NEW SERIES

RAYMOND BLANC

95% productive. 'Coming from a poor family, the garden was not a hobby but a necessity. It had to feed the family throughout the whole year,' he explains.

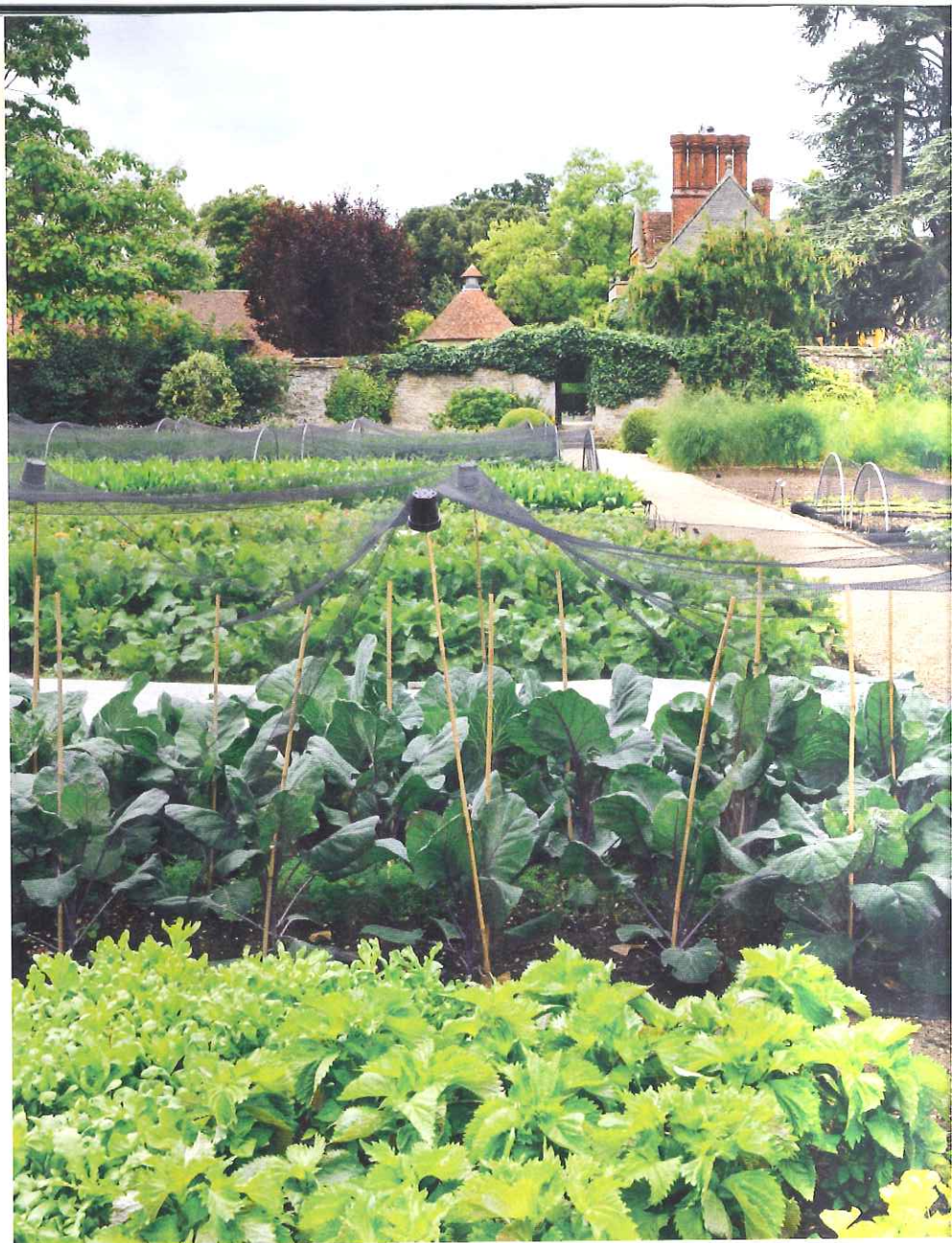
Raymond's father was a great gardener. It was he who taught Raymond to understand the soil from a very early age. 'I remember him giving me a scoop of soil and telling me to smell it, touch it and taste it,' he says, with a great fondness in his voice. 'He was teaching me that a sticky soil was clay and a red soil contained lots of iron. Later in life, I asked him: 'Papa, why did you make me taste the soil?' 'I was only joking!' came the reply.'

Happy memories he may have of the garden, but it was also hard work. While his friends played football, Raymond and his siblings would be working the two-acre family plot. His father also built the family house so Raymond grew up with an understanding of what hard work is. 'My papa also built a huge cellar under the house, where in autumn and winter you would find jars and jars of pickled and preserved crops.' This underground treasure chest of glorious food obviously affected Raymond - he speaks of the shadows cast by the single lightbulb and the smells and the colours there with almost a fond tear in his eye.

His mother was an exceptional cook, and would send him out to the garden not just for some lettuce, but for particular varieties of lettuce. From this, he learned the importance of growing the right varieties, and this is reflected in his work at Le Manoir. To find the right type of aubergine for the kitchen, his team may grown up to 25 different ones. Taste is king. 'I am the most thankful person for what my parents gave me. I learned that everything connects with the garden, as that is where gastronomy starts,' he explains.

The gardens at Le Manoir delighted him when he first came to the property. 'My heart sang when I saw the main garden, and it was here that we started work. It was overgrown with ground elder and giant old Brussels sprouts,' he reflects. To start the work here, who better to ask to help than his papa? After all, having managed Raymond and his sisters and brothers, he knew he was a good project manager.

Since those early days of clearing ground, the garden has been made into several different areas with polytunnels and sculptures, and is now also home to some individual gardens that link to the guestrooms. But more than 50% of



Every crop grown is selected by Raymond, and they win their place for taste first, before good looks. Visitors staying at the hotel can wander the grounds, where they might even meet the man himself.

it is where crops are grown for the pleasure of eating. Raymond believes in working with experts in their fields, so now has his trusted head gardener of 23 years, Anne-Marie Owens as project manager, and enjoys seeking advice from horticultural greats such as Jekka McVicar. He absorbs their advice, but ultimately enjoys putting his own spin on things.

'I remember him giving me a scoop of soil and telling me to smell it, touch it and taste it'

After an hour of chatting about everything from his love of Japanese gardens to his passion for his role as vice president of Garden Organic, and his huge appreciation of the knowledge that his gardening team have, we take a stroll around the garden. He almost dances down the paths - this is his creation, his dream come true, for which he has boundless energy. I ask if he is frustrated that in the UK we seem to

have only just taken on his philosophy that food grown as close to the home as possible is the most valuable gift a gardener can offer their family. Now knowing something of his past, I begin to understand how hard he has fought to get people to understand the link between garden and kitchen. He is too generous to claim this new passion that so many of us are adopting, but I feel strongly that he really is somewhat responsible. The little boy who once worked tirelessly in his family garden and taught himself to cook may now be a wise man with a glittering career, but he's still firmly connected to that handful of soil he was presented with as a child. To me, he is a gardener, who just happens to be a magnifique chef.

For more on Le Manoir, visit www.manoir.com or www.raymondblanc.com