

GARDENING

Nursery with heart of glass

Francine Raymond



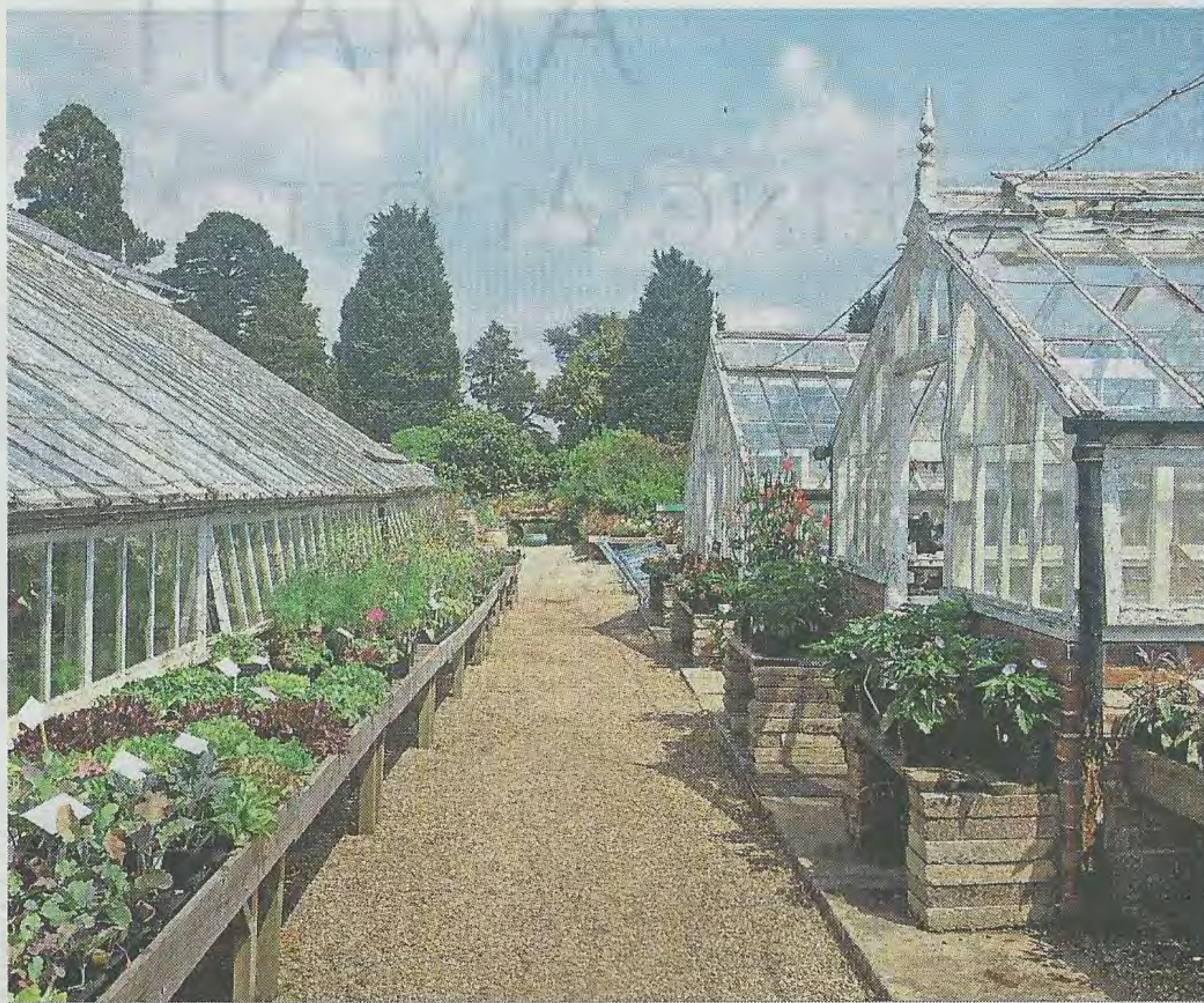
An Edwardian walled garden is brought back to life in its precious old glasshouses

The Weald of Kent is gorgeous at this time of the year. The lanes are green and frothy, offering a floriferous hors d'oeuvre

to the source of this week's inspiration – The Walled Nursery at Tongwood, near Hawkhurst.

Once part of the Oxo heir's estate, this working walled garden, with its full complement of 13 glasshouses, is home to Emma and Monty Davies, and their two small sons, who live in the bothy. Emma started her working life at Great Dixter and Sissinghurst, Monty is a landscape designer, and together they have set up an exceptionally good nursery.

The whole site is surrounded by tall Edwardian conifers and sounds of children's voices – the "big house" is now a school –



Sad state: the glasshouses may be in disrepair but The Walled Nursery grows 90 per cent of its plants

come over the walls. The walls themselves are fine and high, but the various Foster and Pearson glasshouses, built in the late 19th century, are in a sad state of repair. The 100ft-long Melon House is clinging on, the Carnation

House is closed and the Peach Case that houses abundant cropping fruit is sliding off the wall. The Cucumber House, however, where crops were once grown in long, straight glass jars, is in reasonable order and is now home to

unusual bedding plants. These (including an interesting deep burgundy cosmos 'Rubenza', a vanilla-scented nemesia and brightly hued zinnias) are waiting for frosts to pass. Elsewhere, the Pelargonium House shelters

scented leaf geraniums (the nursery still sells a good selection), while the Hot House, where the lady of the house once had her heated stock benches, is used by the nursery's head of propagation, Jacqui Ruthven.

After retiring from Sissinghurst, Jacqui wasn't quite ready to hang up her secateurs so, thanks to her, The Walled Nursery now grows 90 per cent of its own plants. The selection is mouth-watering, with healthy plants beautifully

They undertook guardianship with their eyes wide open

grown in decent compost. The main glasshouse is the rare 55ft long L-shaped Vinery, festooned with an ancient muscat vine. Ending in a derelict Fernery, this structure is in such poor condition that it needs to be totally replaced. Emma and Monty undertook guardianship of these glass buildings with their eyes wide open. They knew that these structures would need constant restoration, much

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of which has been carried out, although the damage caused by the past few years' winter storms means yet more rebuilding.

They have been working with English Heritage and specialist architects to see how the Vinery could be restored and have had quotes of £130,000. They have realised that the only option is to rebuild to exactly the same design, but with cheaper modern materials: powder-coated white aluminium, like new structures at Chiswick, at National Trust Dyffryn and at the Little Priory in Surrey, to reduce maintenance while battling the British weather.

The pair's vision is to create a 21st-century glasshouse as an educational centre and café that will help generate income to keep the other glasshouses in good repair and save the whole garden from falling into disuse. Susan Campbell of The Walled Kitchen Garden Network believes that "the significant range of glasshouses at Tongwood should be preserved for continued horticultural use".

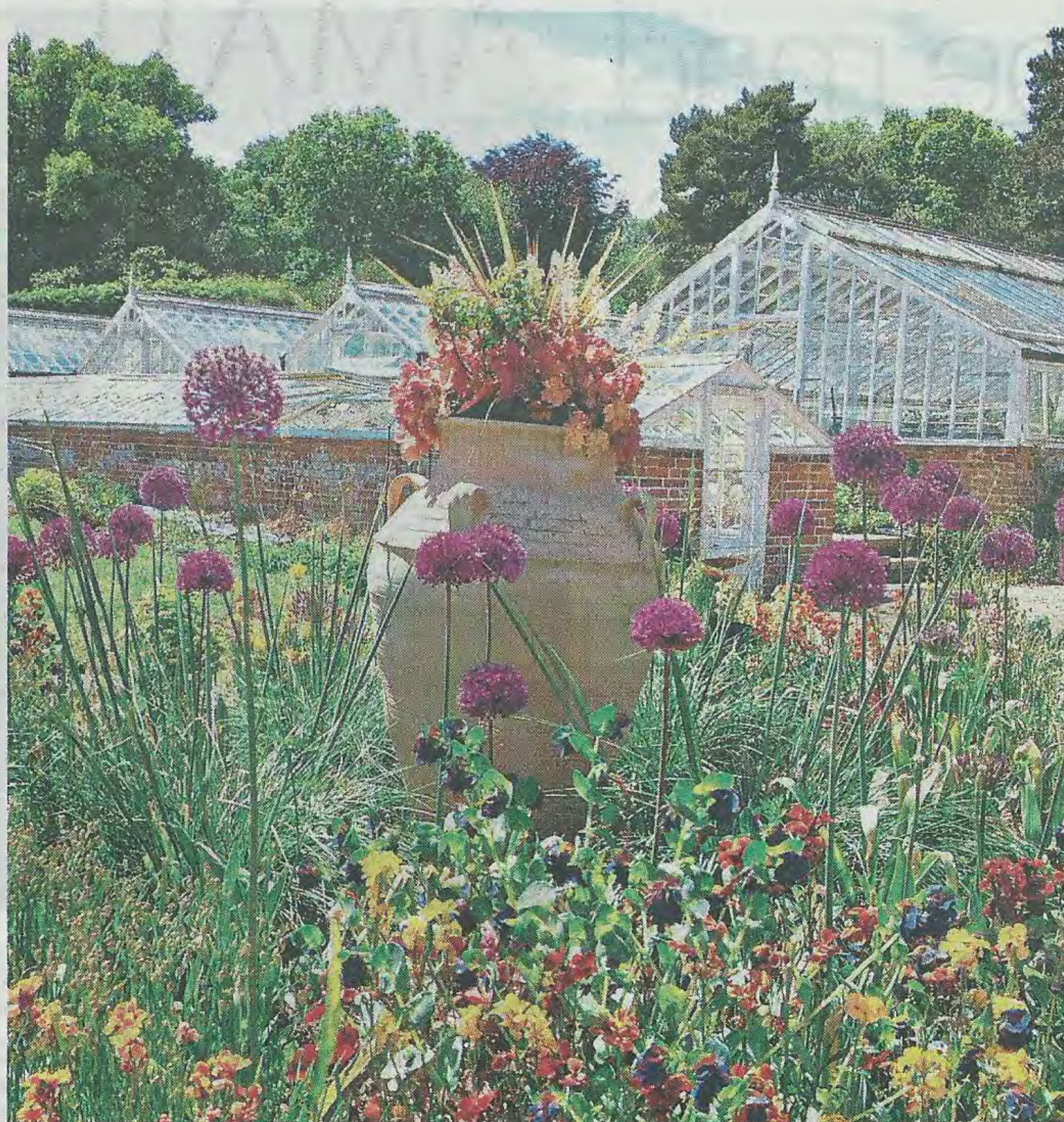
As part of this year's Chelsea Fringe celebrations, the Walled Nursery gardeners are raising awareness and funds for Gardening Leave, an organisation that provides



horticultural therapy for Armed Forces veterans with mental health issues, as well as remembering the 14 young gardeners from the bothy here who went off to war, never to return.

Emma says: "We've created a new garden with space for visitors to contemplate and think honestly about mental health problems to help reduce the stigma. We seem too ready to hail wounded servicemen as the heroes they are, but turn away from those with deeper wounds."

● The Walled Nursery, Hawkhurst, Kent (thewallednursery.com)



Battling stigma: Monty Davies, above left, and wife Emma aim to support Armed Forces veterans

OTHER CHELSEA FRINGE EVENTS MAY 16-JUNE 7

The Chelsea Fringe is a mixture of horticultural happenings and community celebrations all over the country. For further information, visit chelseafringe.com

- **Drawing the Georgian Squares of Bloomsbury** (Bedford Square Gardens, May 16 and 17, 2-5pm) A three-hour workshop with a historian and a painter.
- **Wild Food Feast** (Community Farm, Chew Magna, Somerset, May 30, 10am-2pm) A day of foraging before a chef shows you how to cook your finds.
- **Contemporary Green: How do we cultivate our gardens?** A free ebook of 100-word manifestos by garden writers (including me).
- **Chelsea Fringe in Kent** (Doddington Place Gardens, nr Sittingbourne, Kent, May 20, from 11am) A range of talks by florists.
- **Practical Pharmacy** (Cemetery Park, Tower Hamlets, London E3, May 16, 10am-1pm) Learn how to make homemade herbal remedies.