

AN ALLOTMENT IN HOLLAND

Organic, ornamental, and gardened for wildlife – Caroline Foley reports on a Dutch allotment site with features which UK plot-holders can only dream about.

Amstelglorie is nothing like a British allotment. Lying behind impressive wrought-iron gates merrily decorated with ladybirds it is a small city of chalets with ornamental gardens.

In the UK allotments have utilitarian rules, and food growing is required. In Holland the opposite is the case and a minimum of 10 per cent must be set aside for ornamental plants. In fact most of the allotment gardens are overflowing with flowers. This large site lies in a suburb of Amsterdam, and has 434 plots over 200,000 square metres, with a clubhouse, offices, capacious greenhouses, neat nursery beds edged in timber, a magnificent composting area, a children's playground and communal areas including wild woodland, natural ponds and criss-crossing duck-filled canals.

Amstelglorie, the Dutch for 'glory of the River Amstel', has lived up to its name and has won two top awards for organic gardening. The ladybirds on its gates are a recognition that it has achieved the highest prize given by the Dutch national allotment

association, the AVVN, (Algemeen Verbond van Volkstuinders Verenigingen in Nederland). Last summer the International Congress in Luxemburg chose it for their premier ecological prize.

Both Joop Moes, Treasurer and former Chairman, and Wim Hemker, who organises plot-holders to maintain the site, came to Amstelglorie with their families as teenagers when it moved to its present site in 1953. The young Joop, finding that the only pastime was to join 'old' people playing cards' started a vibrant recreation committee while Wim signed up to the gardening group.

Wim later became a professional gardener, maintaining some of Amsterdam's most prestigious public spaces including Rijksmuseum, Rembrandt Square and the Lord Mayor's garden. 'I was an old-fashioned, traditional gardener at the time,' says Wim with a characteristic twinkle. 'It took me quite a while to come round to the idea of organic gardening. The first person to introduce me to the concept was a plotholder, Josie Dobbledam. She believed in growing native flora for biodiversity and divided her plot into dry, sandy and marshy habitats. She was quite evangelical and fierce about it. We all thought she was mad!

'I finally saw the light when I went

to a talk and exhibition on butterflies.' He was so inspired that he went straight to the Committee to ask if he could put in some butterfly-friendly plants.

Clearly the Committee weren't hard to persuade. 'We felt like pioneers in the beginning and learnt by trial and error,' continues Joop. 'The next thing we did was to leave the grass unmown for about a metre width along the water edges. The first year or two we got some beautiful grass species and wild flowers but then in the following years the weeds took over – particularly nettles. Now we cut back the verges twice a year in June and September.'

The 'hedges' built out of twiggy prunings, sometimes held in by upright stakes, look as neat as box hedging with clipped ivy grown over them, and they make good nesting sites for birds, hedgehogs and mice.

Wim, who is a great handyman as well as a gardener, carries his 65 years with ease. Now retired, he works at Amstelglorie full-time, enthusiastically helping everyone and organising the workforce. Each plotholder is committed to putting in 18 hours' work a year, in three-hour stints on a Sunday, to maintain the general areas of the site – along the water, by the ponds, woodlands, in the greenhouses, the playground, the entrance, the hanging baskets, ornamental tubs, the paths and so on. One of Wim's many self-imposed tasks is to make nests for hibernating wasps, hoverflies and other useful flying insects by binding hollow sticks or drilling holes through solid ones and tying them in bundles.

The 'amphibian hill' was another brainwave. 'We had a lot of builders' rubble around the place,' Wim says, 'and I thought we could use it to make a home for reptiles in a quiet spot by the water. It was quite a large project and the National Committee helped us. We dug down a metre for



Wim Hemker (L) and Joop Moes. The ladybirds are awards for environmental excellence.