

Market
Gardening

Extreme vegetable gardening



INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

Desire for freshly harvested veg that hasn't travelled miles to reach them spurs the gardeners on to pick up their spades and do battle with the fierce Shetland weather

With the nearest supermarket a 100 mile round trip, a group of determined Shetlanders battle gales, salt spray and waterlogged soil in order to harvest their own fresh veg. **Agnes Stevenson** discovers the secret of their triumphs

ON ITS journey around the globe the 60th parallel of latitude clips the top of New Foundland, dips its toes in the northern shores of the Gulf of Alaska and passes over St Petersburg. It also slices through Unst, the most northerly point in the British Isles.

Here, 639 miles from London and 70 miles from the Scottish mainland, a population of 530 share this flat, windswept island, just 12 miles long by five miles wide, with more than 100,000 seabirds.

In winter, icy draughts come whistling through here from Siberia, driving salt spray from the North Sea across the island.

But it is the North Westerlies that really spell trouble and these can come roaring in from the Atlantic at any time of the year, tearing at buildings and carrying off anything that isn't tied down.

Against the odds
Very few plants can withstand such conditions, but then very few can grow here in the first place, as most of the land is waterlogged peat or solid rock.

How is it then that on a three acre piece of moorland, the gardeners from Unst Regeneration Growers Enterprise (URGE) have been able to produce a bountiful harvest that is

now finding its ways onto the shelves of the island's shops and onto the plates of diners in the local hotels?

The answer is a combination of many things, including gardening know-how, resourcefulness and some very hard work.

But even with these ingredients, it is still surprising to find great stalks of crunchy

celery growing almost to show bench standard in raised beds and tomatoes and even grapes ripening in the polytunnel.

The secret, says local Dave Howitt, who

began cultivating this wild, unpromising piece of land just three years ago, along with his wife Jennie, tour guide Sarah McBurnie and fellow food enthusiast Steve Gifford, is to give everything they grow protection from the wind.

"We use old pallets as wind-breaks and we cover all our raised beds with metal frames covered in old fishing nets."

This has turned out to be surprisingly effective and even when gales are battering the island, salad leaves, kale and cabbages growing under the protection

“The North Westerlies come roaring in from the Atlantic”



Sarah McBurnie harvests an impressive-sized bunch of celery



(left) Plastic bottles of water placed in the coldframes heat up during the day, releasing their warmth at night



The team make use of anything they can lay their hands on: (right) Old windows are used as coldframes, (far right) stacked car tyres make an effective windbreak





Polytunnel protection enables the team to grow a wide range of fruits and vegetables, from tomatoes and raspberries to broad beans and apples

population with locally-grown salad leaves, peas, beans of every description, courgettes, cucumbers and even apples, which thrive within this protected environment.

The commitment of the team is unstinting. Most of them spend long hours in the market garden every day, especially in

summer when it never gets fully dark and instead there are three or four hours of twilight, or 'simmer dim' as it is known in the Shetland islands.

In winter, the darkness barely lifts and although the growing season starts late and ends abruptly, it is an intense period of very rapid growth when plants need constant attention.

Self-sufficient

Sarah McBurnie says there was a real need for the island to start providing some of its own fruit and vegetables.

"The nearest supermarket is a 100 mile round trip and two ferry rides away. It takes all day to get there and back and with petrol in the Shetlands priced

of these nets barely even stir their leaves. Fishing nets too are used to anchor down the polytunnel while old plastic bottles, filled with water, do duty as an ingenious storage heater, warming up during the day and releasing their heat slowly after dark.

Crops are nourished in a rich brew of seaweed from the nearby beaches mixed with pony manure collected from the surrounding moorland, which is home to hundreds of small, sturdy Shetland ponies.

"We dig the mixture into the ground, leave it a year then turn it and then plant directly into the soil," says Dave.

The rocks that are dug up are used to build walls which provide wind protection, and more baffle-walls are made from old tyres filled with soil.

It is the polytunnel however that has enabled the project to enhance the diet of the local

“It takes all day to get to the nearest supermarket and back”



To get around the problem of Shetland's inhospitable soil, the gardeners grow their veg in raised beds and recycled fishing crates

"Because we can grow so much now, and store veg for use during the winter, we are increasing our food security."

Trial and error has taught the URGE team which vegetable varieties cope best with conditions on Unst and nothing goes to waste.

Green tomatoes, apples, onions and cucumbers end up as delicious chutneys and relishes and the team have even enjoyed their own grape jelly.

"So far we haven't had enough grapes to sell the jelly but eventually I would like to see us making our own wine," says Sarah. Such optimism is perhaps the most important element in making this ambitious project work.

Visitors from around the world who have come to see the market garden have been amazed to find that growing nutrient-rich, organic food at

at £1.55 a litre it is also prohibitively expensive."

This is ironic given the fact that much of the oil piped from the North Sea comes ashore at nearby Sullom Voe.

But it is not just high prices that spur Sarah and the team on. Any fruit and veg that does make it this far north will have spent long hours on the road from a distribution point down south, then from Aberdeen on the ferry to Lerwick.

"Goodness knows how old it is by the time it reaches us, or how far it has travelled."

The aim of URGE since the outset, says Sarah, has been to turn food miles into food inches.

"All it needs is for the ferry from Aberdeen to be cancelled because of bad weather and shelves empty very quickly.

It's a real treat for the Islanders to have fresh, locally picked produce





The crops are fertilised with an organic mix of seaweed and well-rotted pony manure

such an extreme northerly latitude is in fact possible.

The URGE project has also won a Shetland Environmental Award but, says Sarah, there is so much more still to be done.

"We need to grow far more. We need to be self-sufficient."

Until recently Unst's claim to fame was for the part it played in the Cold War, when Tornado F3s from RAF Saxa Vord took to the skies for daily encounters with Russian Mig-31s.

The Cold War is just a fading memory and Saxa Vord is now a hotel and resort, but in a polytunnel just down the road, the next battle for this small island's future is being won. ■



Much of the harvest supplies local businesses



Mesembryanthemum copes well with Shetland's drying, salt-laden winds

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shetland.co.uk
Shetland Tourism:
visit.shetland.org