

Long, spindly parsnips are caught in a dance with frothy-rooted leeks. The artwork will take its turn on Natasha's studio wall, alongside portraits of radishes, alliums and borage.



# FRUITS OF THE LAND IN EARTHY TONES

Artist Natasha Clutterbuck captures the beauty of vegetables from her garden using colours from the Somerset soil in which they grow

**I**N THE SOMERSET village of Stanton Drew, mud is seemingly everywhere, from the narrow country lanes and cow-grazed fields to the regimented rows of community allotments. For many, it might be considered a nuisance, but for Natasha Clutterbuck, it is a delight. She is an artist who uses soil as a basis, with other natural materials, to create a varied colour palette for her pictures of vegetables.

“For me, it’s all about the mud,” she says, kneeling next to a row of leeks to rub some earth between her fingers. “I love to feel that connection with where my food has come from; to feel that sense of life. After all, if we don’t look after the Earth’s soil, we’ve all had it.”

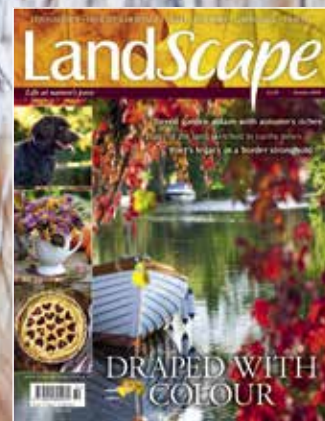
Her love of home-grown produce began in childhood. Early memories include growing onions with her father on the family allotment, and a treasured bean plant that she packed into her suitcase when moving to a new house. “Plants were important to me then, and they still are,” she says. “There is nothing more magic than seeing something grow.”

### Expanding beds

It was natural that, when Natasha and her husband, Colin, moved to the village from Bristol, she would take over part of the garden for her vegetables. A strip of lawn was dug up and, over the 14 years that the couple have lived in their stone-built cottage, that cultivated area has been extended. Natasha now grows everything from carrots to chard. Onions take up eight rectangular >



Natasha Clutterbuck with an armful of vegetables, freshly uprooted from her Somerset plot. They form the subject of her elemental paintings. Charcoal is Natasha's chosen medium for her initial markings. After creating the outline, she adds the characteristic features of each vegetable.



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Relishing the chance to get her hands dirty, Natasha pulls a parsnip from the soft earth. From its mottled leaves to its fibrous, intricate roots, Natasha finds beauty to inspire her paintings.

beds, as well as some of a neighbour's allotment, a five-minute walk up the road. This is where, today, Natasha is gathering armfuls of seasonal root vegetables to sketch in her studio.

Their very form are a source of inspiration. "Look at the root structure of these leeks," she says, pulling up a solid bulb next to her. "And the colour of the leaves on those beetroots." She pauses by a row of parsnips, digs in her fork, then grabs a handful of the vegetable's feathery fronds and begins to tug. Mud gives way to creamy white flesh. She holds the parsnip up for a closer inspection. "Stunning," she says. "Each one has its own story to tell. It's that diversity that I aim to celebrate."

#### Still life models

A former ceramicist, Natasha switched clay for charcoal nine years ago, shortly after her eldest daughter, Rosie, was born. "I still had the urgency to create, but didn't have the time for the long-winded process of making ceramics," she says. "The immediate nature of drawing was ideal because it was something I could do while my baby was asleep." When bags of vegetables began to appear on the new family's doorstep, comprising allotment surplus left by well-wishing neighbours, they naturally became her still-life models.

Her cheeks rosy with cold and arms full of earth-caked vegetables, Natasha heads back to her studio, a compact room in the centre of the family home. She lays the parsnips and leeks down on a wooden unit and starts creating the composition for her next artwork. First, she arranges them on a flat surface, then she ties them with string and hangs them from a hook on her wall. "I like to work with the nature of the vegetable," she says. "These leeks and parsnips lend themselves to free-flowing balletic bundles, whereas pumpkins, for example, would be still and more set. It's an intuitive way of working."

It was these organic compositions that set Natasha on the path to where she is now. A chance invitation to teach a drawing class at the local village hall led to a commission by a nearby pub. She was then asked to create a mural for the Yeo Valley headquarters in >



Back in her studio, Natasha makes initial sketches in charcoal of the freshly-picked vegetables.

*"All that we did, all that we said or sang  
Must come from contact with the soil..."*

**William Butler Yeats, "The Municipal Gallery Revisited"**



Using mud and natural dyes, Natasha brings the vegetables to life from plot to paper.



Bark is gathered and boiled in water to produce a natural dye. Natasha uses this to give her paper a softer hue.



Natasha's charcoal comes from a local supplier but she also produces her own by heating twigs in a metal container.

Blagdon, nine miles away. From this flourished a five-year relationship, which has seen Natasha become the dairy company's artist in residence, run seasonal drawing workshops in its organic garden and design a limited-edition label for a new flavour of yoghurt. "People often say they never thought a bunch of carrots or turnips could look so beautiful," she says. "I love taking a vegetable that would typically just be chopped up and thrown into the cooking pot and showcasing it in a way that makes people admire it and go 'wow'."

#### Importance of origin

With that, Natasha pulls out a piece of heavyweight paper, which she has softly stained using a home-made oak-bark dye, and secures it to her easel. She begins to draw with fluid, sweeping strokes of charcoal to capture first the outline shape of each vegetable, then the distinguishing details. The charcoal Natasha is using today comes from Musgrove Willows, a Somerset family-run company, but she also makes her own by slow-cooking twigs in an old metal tin.

"In the same way that it is important to me to know where my food comes from, so the provenance of my materials matters to me," she says. In addition to the charcoal, Natasha adds colour to her artwork using 'paints' made from red iron ore, local rocks such as sandstone and chalk, and ochre, ground down and mixed with water using a pestle and mortar. She uses vegetable juice and of course, mud, gathered from the spot where the subject matter was grown. "When you >

Colour is added to the pictures including ochre, a natural clay and sand pigment.





Some of Natasha's 'paints' are made from pieces of ore and rock ground down using a pestle and mortar.



A jar of bark tannin extracted from a locally felled oak.

Using vegetable juice for colour adds to the connection between the subjects of Natasha's paintings and the objects themselves.



Bold pumpkins are an autumnal subject, leaping out from the still life arrangement, which follows the seasons.

apply earth from the roots of the plant to the page, you connect the two directly," she says. "And by doing it with my fingers, I become a part of that relationship."

This natural palette is stored, higgledy-piggledy, in jam jars and pots around her studio. On shelves and surfaces are myriad shades of mud gathered from countryside walks then dried for later use; rocks brought to her in buckets by a local caver; and pieces of oak bark, harvested from a dying tree. Around them are remnants of her previous 'models', including a pile of onion skins now waiting to be boiled up to create an experimental stain, and a vase of leek seedheads. Other subjects are long gone, used up in homemade meals for her family. "I grow to draw, but I also grow for my

family to eat, so there's a degree of compromise," she says. "Our garden plot always contains plenty of potatoes, for example, which Colin loves, but we also have beetroot, which he hates, but which is beautiful to sketch." For her daughters, Rosie and Bonnie, there are herbs. "They love to gather the flowers," Natasha says, "but they are invaluable, too, for attracting pollinators and discouraging pests. Growing our own and seeing my artworks has given them a real appreciation for the seasons and where their food comes from. They love to tell guests that the carrots they're eating are the ones featured in a painting on the wall."

On a productive day, she could complete up to six pieces of art. "I don't worry about the end result or >



A higgledy-piggledy bunch of purple radishes are depicted just pulled from the soil.

making mistakes. Every mark is an invaluable part of the journey,” she says. With one stroke, she applies a dash of colour to the paper. “I combine my natural colours with conventional paints because they work in harmony to make each other sing,” she explains. “I am exploring how to create more tones organically, though. It’s just that some materials, such as beetroot juice, are more fugitive than others.”

As the seasons change, so does the content of Natasha’s work. Come spring, it will be the vibrant salads that grab her attention; now it may be ballooning autumn squashes. But it is the big roots that hold a particularly special place in her heart. “I can never get bored drawing vegetables,” she says. “The scope is endless. Not only is each item different, but so is each variety, each colour, each season. That’s the excitement of nature: you never know what you’re going to get.”

Her plot is at the heart of everything she does. “It has formed the basis of my art as well as being the starting point for many special friendships, from the neighbours I’ve met to the public who stop and chat when they see me sketching in the organic garden. Food has the power to bring people together, after all.” It is time to gather her own family to the kitchen. From artist to cook, still-life to supper, the next stage of her vegetables’ journey has come. ■

• Words Emma Pritchard • Photography: Nanette Hepburn

#### CONTACT

To view Natasha’s work and to find out more information about her 2018 ‘Drawn from the Garden’ workshops, visit [natashaclutterbuck.co.uk](http://natashaclutterbuck.co.uk).

**A MESSAGE TO SHARE** The sense of provenance is a message that Natasha is keen to share with other children, as well as her own. She runs curriculum-led workshops in schools, during which the pupils grow a vegetable from seed and document its journey. She has also been commissioned to create educational murals, most recently painting a 10ft (3m) display of purple kale, tomatoes and cucumber plants in a school dining hall; her biggest project to date. “It took me 10 days to complete,” Natasha says. “The children came alive when they saw me at work, especially when I started mixing soil with water to make mud. They loved it.” Natasha also sells her work at exhibitions, during the annual Chew Valley Arts Trail and Yeo Valley Organic Garden open days and, following demand, in her own online shop. She has recently developed a range of prints and postcards. This year sees Natasha expanding her school workshops and collaborating with other independents, who share her ethos. And, of course, she will be adding to her own vegetable patch.