



Spring Awakening: Gardening at Whatley Manor

As the days stretch longer and winter's grip loosens, the gardens at Whatley Manor Hotel and Spa are coming back to life. Our team has been busy preparing the grounds for the burst of spring and summer growth. Here's a look at what we've been up to—reviving borders, uncovering curious fungi, spotting a holly mutation, taking a stab at growing wasabi, experimenting with coriander, and taming roses and wisteria into artful displays.

1. Reviving the Borders: Mulch, Poppies, and a Puffball Find

Our borders have been the focus of some serious spring prep. We've been pulling out weeds and clearing away dead material to give the beds a fresh start. During one of these sessions, we unearthed a surprise: a brown puffball fungus, its earthy hue blending into the debris until we disturbed it. Did you know mature puffballs release their spores in a dusty cloud when tapped—earning them the nickname “wolf-fart fungi” in old folklore? It was an unexpected bit of character amid the clearing.



Next came the heavy lifting: 8 tonnes of mulch, made on-site from our own garden waste, spread across the borders to smother weeds and retain moisture. Into these renewed beds, we've planted poppies and wallflowers—grown from seed in our glasshouse since January, toughened up in cold frames, and now taking root outdoors.

Meanwhile, we've repurposed branches from pruning into cage supports for our globe artichokes, a practical and sustainable way to prop up these statuesque plants as they grow. Come summer, their bold, silvery leaves will surge upward, swallowing the rough-hewn cages in a lush, green takeover—nature hiding our handiwork in the best way possible.



2. A Golden Holly: Nature's Odd Twist

Gardening often brings little surprises, and this season delivered a “sport,” or genetic mutation, in one of our hollies. This unusual specimen has swapped the typical dark green for a striking, uniform pale yellow, its leaves catching the light like soft gold. The term “sport” harks back to old English, meaning a playful deviation—a fitting name for nature’s spontaneous quirks.

Curious to preserve this find, we’ve taken cuttings for propagation. We’re using a jar of water with mashed willow (*Salix*) stems at the base—willow naturally releases salicylic acid, a rooting hormone that gives new growth a nudge. With some patience, we hope these cuttings will take, letting us cultivate more of this glowing holly.



3. The Wasabi Experiment: Bringing the Japanese Mountains to Whatley

This year, we're trying something bold: growing wasabi, the pungent green star of Japanese cuisine. We've started with five plants, each settled into 9-litre pots with a 50/50 blend of compost and perlite, topped with pea gravel for drainage—all kept in the shade to mimic their natural habitat. Wasabi loves cool, soggy conditions—think misty Japanese mountains—so we're testing different setups to get it right. Two plants are under plastic spheres to hold in humidity, two are exposed to the open air, and one's in our cold glasshouse for a steadier climate. Regular watering keeps them damp, and we're keen to see which thrives best. Will the spheres win out, or will the glasshouse prove its worth? It's an exciting challenge unfolding in real time.



4. A Coriander Trial: Finding the Perfect Formula

We're also playing detective with coriander, running a little experiment to see what helps it grow best. We've set up 48 tiny pots—each about the size of a matchbox—with two seeds apiece. Half the seeds got a overnight soak beforehand, half went in dry. We're testing three big things: glasshouse (cold or hot), water (some get a splash, about 2.5 mL a day, others a good soak, 5 mL), and soil (compost or a mix with perlite for extra drainage). Every weekday morning, we water them under Malmesbury's natural daylight—about 12 hours this time of year. After two weeks, we'll snip them at the base and weigh them to see who's the champion. Will soaking win? Does perlite make a difference? We're excited to find out!

5. Roses, Wisteria, and Tulips: Sculpting Summer Splendour

March saw us putting the finishing touches on our rose pruning, a task that's as much art as it is maintenance. In the rose garden, we've guided the tendrils of our climbing roses over the walls, draping them down the other side in hopes of a cascading floral spectacle come summer. Rather than snipping away every stray stem, we've gotten creative—weaving some of the rose and wisteria tendrils into graceful loops. These sculpted forms add a whimsical touch to the winter silhouette and promise a playful, eye-catching display when they bloom. Meanwhile, our tulips are stirring beneath the soil, poised to pop up like nature's own Easter parade, adding their vibrant punctuation to the season ahead.

From hands-in-the-dirt prep to experimental plantings and artistic pruning, these months have been a mix of groundwork and discovery. As spring rolls into summer, we'll keep you updated on our blooming borders, that golden holly's progress, the wasabi and coriander verdicts, and whether our rose cascades steal the show. For now, the gardens are poised for action—come take a look!