

THIS PICTURE AND INSETS
The Craddocks begin
the labour-intensive
seed harvest about
two months after
the bluebells have
finished flowering

SEEDS *of success*

As the bluebells create a carpet of colour in their patch of woodland, Barry and Karin Craddock relish the magical beauty, while the seeds of the flower form a crucial part of their small-scale, sustainable farm in the Kentish Weald

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Wild garlic also thrives alongside the bluebells; a wild orchid; husks are removed to reveal the blue-black seeds

Barry and Karin Craddock had never gardened, let alone farmed before they bought Farnell Farm near Rolvenden in Kent 11 years ago. Yet today, beneath an airy canopy of ancient woodland, they are wandering ankle-deep in a haze of bluebells, from which in a few weeks' time they will harvest their spring crop of seeds to sell online to the increasing number of keen gardeners wishing to grow wild bluebells at home. "You want the seedheads to be dry and rattle, so we wait about one-and-a-half to two months after they bloom," Barry explains, as he gathers a small posy of bluebells to take home. "You've got to be quick and pick them before they drop, but you mustn't pick them too early either, or they'll go mouldy." It's a very labour-intensive process during which the Craddocks will gather up to two kilos of bluebell seeds – no mean feat for a couple of townies, whose only previous experience of rural life had been holidays in Yorkshire.

"We used to escape to the country for about three months every summer," Karin recalls. "But we didn't like the travelling, so we decided to look for another solution. We weren't just searching for a home, though – we wanted to come across somewhere with a bit of land that could provide us with an active pension."

After a few thwarted attempts at finding the right property, they decided to concentrate on locating some land and then buying a house nearby. It was a small advertisement in the local paper that led them to Farnell Farm, and the moment they laid eyes on it, their future was sealed. "We are both very visual people and we just got carried away with the beautiful landscape," says Karin, who was then earning her living as a photographer, while

Barry was working as an illustrator. This is an area of the Kentish Weald where old-fashioned farming still has a place and it's easy to understand what captured their imagination. The undulating land with generally rather poor soil has saved it from the wholesale removal of hedges to create larger fields, and in many ways it looks much the same today as it did hundreds of years ago. In the woods there is evidence of the 300-year-old regime of coppicing which, by allowing light to penetrate through to the woodland floor, has encouraged the abundant bluebells.

Half the proceeds of the sale of their house in London secured the farm and the balance bought them a small house, six miles away in Cranbrook. Although they weren't sure what they were going to do with the land, the 90 acres of arable, 15 acres of pasture and 75 acres of woodland was filled with potential. "At first, I wondered what we'd done. We were so naive," Karin says. "But I do think most people don't go into things unless they are a bit naive – those that learn fast survive, those who don't go bust!"

Fortunately the arable land was contracted out during their first three years on the farm, but by the time the tenancy came up for renewal, wheat prices had dropped through the floor and the tenant didn't renew his contract. There followed a disastrous episode when they tried to grow rape (the weather was terrible and rape is very sensitive to conditions if not sown at the best time) and it was touch and go whether they would survive at all.

To their great relief they eventually found contractors for the arable land – a local family who have been farming in the area since the 14th century. But their real salvation came in the shape of Countryside Stewardship grants from Natural England (then ▷



ABOVE FROM LEFT The seeds are gathered with the permission of Natural England; coppicing preserves the beauty of the woodland

English Nature). “We asked ourselves what we could do that was local and decided to plant cobnuts, a traditional Kentish crop, in one of the small fields,” Karin says. “So we looked at the farm and all its assets, and the bluebells appeared to be prolific. It is illegal, however, to collect seed and bulbs in England and so we approached Natural England to discuss the possibility of our harvesting the seeds to sell.” The Craddocks were asked to send maps and details of how they proposed to undertake the harvest, which, in the interests of conservation, would have to involve taking the seed from different areas. Much to their delight, Natural England felt their plan was sound and they became two of the first people in England to be granted a permit.

Now, each spring, the couple harvest their bluebell seeds using a method developed at the Millennium Seedbank at Wakehurst Place in West Sussex and, in fact, bought eight of its mini-seedbank kits to get themselves started. As soon as they have harvested the seedheads, they are put into a cotton bag, which is shaken and bashed so that the heavy seed falls to the bottom. They then carefully remove the husks to reveal the seeds themselves. “They are blue-black and look a bit like caviar,” Barry explains. “We decant them into a tray, which is put into a plastic container with silica gel to absorb any moisture, and when the seed is sufficiently dry, the gel changes colour, at which point we store it in a labelled canister in a cool place. We only pick a tiny amount – next season we may go up to four kilos, but the harvest is a very labour-intensive process.”

During the first few years at Farnell Farm, Karin provided vital additional income by working locally as a teacher, but it is a sign

of their growing confidence that they are now both working full-time on the farm. They also have their own flock of Portland sheep on the pasture and the cobnut trees are growing well, providing extra money in the autumn and early winter. Their headquarters is an old caravan where they can brew up, dry out or warm up, depending on the weather. A new barn allows them to store seed and cobnuts in optimum conditions as well as being a secure place to keep their machinery – a far cry from the early days when they had to hide everything in the woods. Having mastered harvesting bluebells and growing cobnuts, they have begun collecting seed from wild garlic and broom and are now considering planting quinces. “You have to find out about your land and use every resource,” Karin says. “We’ve been to Italy recently and we observed that there are many farms there that do things on a really small but very diverse scale – just one or

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two rows of each crop. This is the way we would like to develop the farm because it would mean it could be managed by the two of us. It has been, and is going to be a great deal of hard work, but we know so much more now and we are committed to Farnell Farm – lock, stock and barrel.”
To order the bluebell seeds, as well as packets of wild garlic and wild broom seeds, and Kentish cobnuts, visit www.farnellfarm.co.uk.