

# Peter Bauwens

The Belgian vegetable evangelist discusses the delights of meeting your heroes, his enthusiasm for experimentation and reveals what puts a smile on his face

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PORTRAIT CHARLIE HOPKINSON

Peter Bauwens never stops smiling. "I'm a happy man," he says. "I've been growing vegetables for 40 years. Growing plants; growing vegetables – this makes a person happy." Peter, with his wife Kathelijne Thiers, has a nursery near the Belgian border with the Netherlands. It has introduced European gardens to an astonishing range of fruit and vegetables, which the couple have selected for their beauty as much as their taste.

Although he spent his childhood in rural Belgium, Peter didn't have his first garden until he left college in his early twenties. "I went to art school in the late 1970s. I was too young to be a real hippy – I would have been one – I was interested in nature and the environment and had been a vegetarian since I was 16 so I became interested in growing food. If you don't eat meat you start looking for interesting things to put on your plate."

As a young husband Peter stayed at home to bring up his family while his wife worked. He grew all the family's food and soon realised that he could be selling vegetable plants and seeds to other gardeners. In the 1980s he started attending plant fairs, where he found himself among a new generation of nurserymen who were growing perennials, grasses and shrubs that hadn't, until then, been seen by Belgian gardeners. "It was exciting but difficult. There were a lot of Latin names being thrown around and there in the corner, like a funny little farmer, was me with my vegetable plants. It was hard to establish a place in that world."

It was at this time that he met the renowned Belgian horticulturist Jelena de Belder, who was very encouraging and supported his desire to grow food that looked as good as it tasted. "I had one advantage: I went to art school. I knew how to display things, how to show things, how to look at things, and see how they can be best presented. I learned how to get people to look at vegetables in a different way, to make them attractive and enticing and not just insignificant plants in tiny pots."

Traditionally, vegetable gardens are empty in winter but not Peter's: "We aim to have interest throughout the year. And I want to show people how to do this as well. Jelena taught me that it is a wonderful thing to give someone a plant, but it is even better to show them how to grow it and make their garden more beautiful."

In the early days of his gardening Peter came across a book by Joy Larkcom, which he says "opened a new world for me – a passion for growing food that was inspiring". Shortly afterwards he

discovered the graphic way in which Roger Phillips photographed plants. "The way he looked at plants was a revelation to me in my work as a grower, writer, photographer and artist," explains Peter. Eventually Peter met these two influential heroes. "I love speaking to them both. It is no longer like teacher and pupil. Their work is the foundation for what I do and I am very thankful for that. They have shown me that there is a whole world of fruit and vegetables that needs to be explored."

It is this exploration that Peter wants to continue; trying to find existing food plants and to breed new ones that are suited to modern families. "There is a lot of interest in old varieties – heirloom vegetables," he says. "Of course it is important to preserve these but I think that we need a new generation of vegetables too. Vegetables that are easier to grow, that have more flavour and are more nutritional."

The way we live has changed enormously over the past 50 years but, Peter believes, gardening hasn't. "No one has the need, or the space, to grow 50kg of potatoes," he says. "Or the time to pinch out and net melons." He feels strongly that we not only need new varieties but also new ways of gardening. "I question everything and experiment all the time with breeding new varieties and growing familiar plants in new ways." The result is a seed list that includes melons that are no fuss to grow and plants such as quinoa and edamame that most of us thought we could never grow.

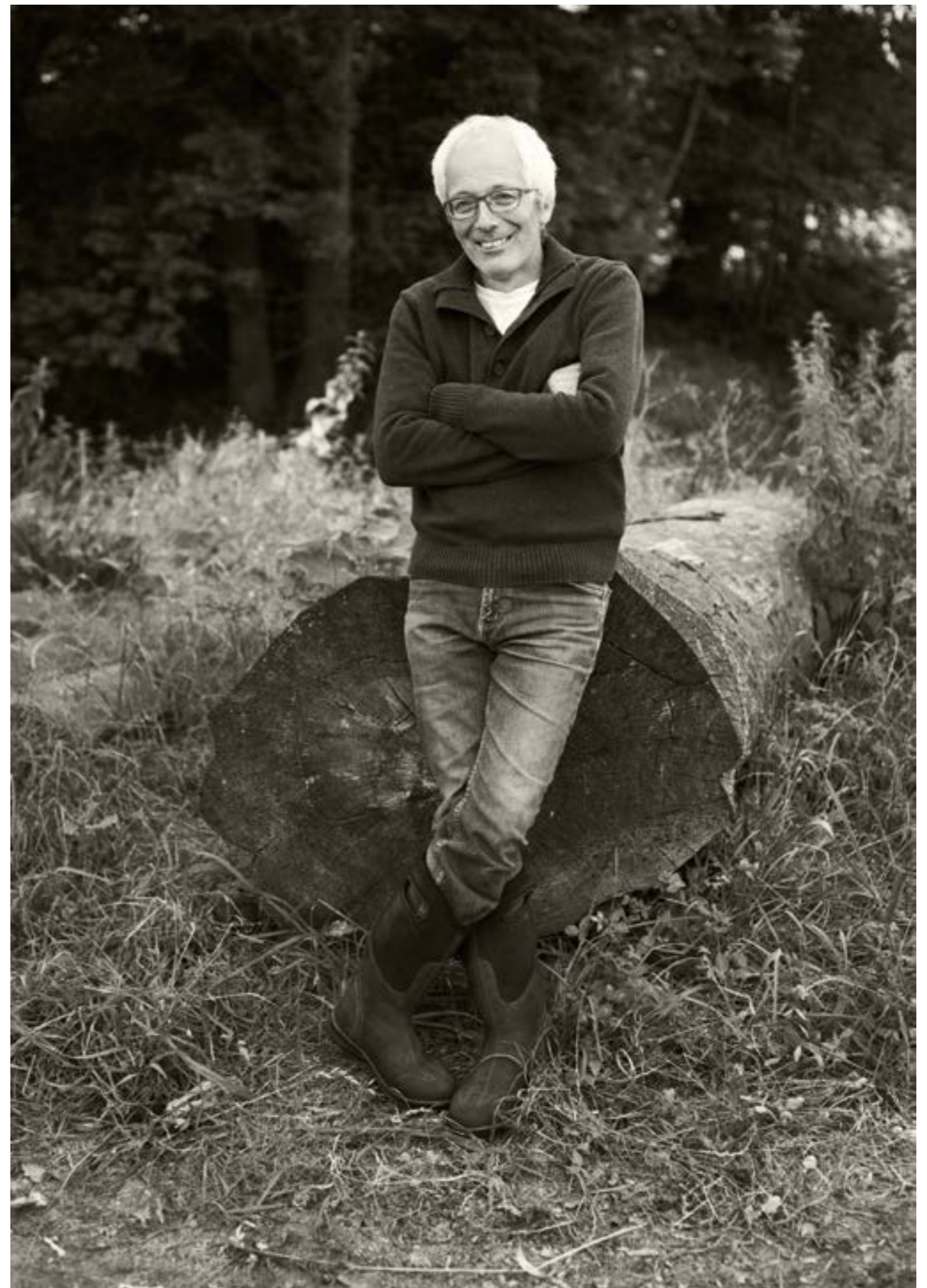
Peter's enthusiasm for growing vegetables is irresistible. "Growing your own food is a way of connecting to the world," he says. "Issues around soil and air pollution, climate change, water resources are all brought into sharp focus if you have a vegetable garden. Even a few salad plants in a pot on your patio and you begin to notice all sorts of things, that you are connected to the natural world. Most of all it makes you happy. That is the important thing. Enjoy it. Be happy." □

## USEFUL INFORMATION

Peter is exhibiting at Arboretum Kalmthout, 19 April; Beervelde, 8-10 May; Hex, 12-14 June; and Bingerden, 19-21 June. For more information about these and Peter's seed list visit [denieuwetuin.be](http://denieuwetuin.be)

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