

Calling our communities

How you can support the RHS community campaigns From Britain in Bloom to Its Your Neighbourhood, and from Dig Together Day to the RHS Campaign for School Gardening, there are many ways you can help support local communities through the enjoyment of gardening. Visit: www.rhs.org.uk/gardening/community-gardening

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Even though many people say that gardening can be a force for good, **Alan Titchmarsh** believes that engaging communities and local authorities is now the real challenge. Photography by Neil Hepworth

A GLANCE AT ANY NEWSPAPER or television news bulletin will quickly apprise you of the state of the nation or, as many call it now, 'Broken Britain'. It is seldom a pretty picture, but then I doubt that it has ever been. The news media have an insatiable appetite for doom, gloom and tragedy, and while we all feel that we need to 'be informed', there comes a point where the apparent inability of us as individuals to make any difference to the state of the nation leads to inertia.

Climate change is an example. We have been harangued for years about carbon footprints and global warming. We have read countless reports explaining what we must stop doing, what we must reduce, and what we need to give up. It's wearying. Oh, it might be necessary, to avoid exacerbating the problem, but the innate negativity of the approach is counter-productive. Give a child a good telling off and it will sulk. Offer it an alternative activity and it might just turn a corner. It is the same with adults.

What we need, above all else, is the encouragement to believe that we can make a difference by doing something, rather than by giving something up. If I suggest that gardening is the answer you might laugh. But bear with me.

Many people lead lives of surprising insularity. Even those who work in offices often communicate by email, rather than walking across to talk to a colleague. Face-to-face contact can, if you choose, be avoided to a greater degree than ever before. You can email the supermarket and it will deliver to your door; you can buy something on

the internet and your package will arrive within days. We have a nation of children more at risk from rickets (a bone disease prevalent where there is a lack of exercise, vitamin D and exposure to sunlight) than at any time since the 1800s. Children who are glued to PlayStations and laptops indoors while shovelling down a burger and chips are more at risk than those who get out, climb trees, eat apples and drink milk.

But we can make a difference. We can encourage children, and adults, to garden.

We can create community projects that bring people together and give them a greater understanding of nature and things that grow; in addition, we will be helping them develop an ability to get on with each other. Clearly, some people already do this, but we need more.

Now, I'm aware that I might be sounding like Kurt Hahn, that legendary founder of Gordonstoun, but in truth, we have suffered over the years from a series of governments whose understanding of the great outdoors – and that

includes agriculture and horticulture – is at best shaky and at worst indifferent. The countryside has relatively few voters, compared with large towns and cities.

Curiously, in times of national stress and economic downturns, gardening has enjoyed a resurgence. It happened in the mid-1970s, at the end of the 1990s and is happening again now. We can only hope that the current urge to 'grow your own' is deeper seated and lasts longer than the previous two flashes in the pan.

Depending on your source of information, anything between 50,000 and 100,000 people are waiting for an allotment in the UK. Now, as anyone who has – or has had – one will know, many of these folk will fall by the wayside once they realise how much work is involved. But many will not, and they should be given a chance to grow their own food, mix with others of like mind and improve their understanding of plants and natural processes. Their contribution to society will improve as a result, and they themselves will enjoy the unique sense of achievement that comes from growing together.

In local government, the departments hardest hit by financial constraints are those regarded as expendable. Health, education and law and order are given priority. But we must also understand the value of parks and open spaces to society as a whole and realise that they contribute immeasurably – if invisibly – to our mental and physical health, easing the load on our legal system, our hospitals and our schools. People who have room to let off steam with physical activity – be it sport or just a walk in the fresh air – are less likely to vent their wrath on another member of society. They are also likely to be healthier.

But what about community gardening? These projects should not just be restricted to a handful of retired people who devote time to brightening a town's roundabouts. We need to reach out to all communities and demonstrate not only the difference that gardening can make to city streets and village greens, but also that it is an essential lifeskill which, at a local level, can help relieve stress, produce fresh food (and flowers), and improve understanding between different layers in society. We need to show that growing things is a basic tool for life, not a hobby for the retired.

Saving the world is a tall order, but start with your own patch and you are on the way to making a difference. I hope that one day media and governments alike will realise that encouraging people to make the most of their front and back gardens will do as much to improve the environment as lagging their loft and leaving their car at home.

Gardening has the ability to transform lives; it is as simple as that. Gardeners are the only truly interactive naturalists – they involve themselves with the natural world, rather than just spectating – and the sooner the powers that be realise the value of this to society the better. We don't want to take over the earth. We just want to show how fulfilling it is to look after it. ■

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