

? What do you think? Should all gardeners grow at least some food, and is it morally wrong to cultivate ornamental plants only? Write to: Viewpoint, The Garden, 4th Floor, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT; email: thegarden@rhs.org.uk; please include a postal address

HOW WOULD YOU REACT to being told that the way you garden is ‘morally wrong’, that you must grow certain plants, in a certain way? I’m guessing most gardeners would be unimpressed. Landscape architect Geoffrey Jellicoe wrote in 1953 that British gardens are ‘a peculiarity of an independent island race, in which every man would like to think that his home were his castle and the front gate his drawbridge’. We have a fierce independent streak: if I should take the notion to fill my garden with exotics, or petunias, or a faithful reproduction of Tom Stuart-Smith’s last Chelsea garden, ain’t nobody’s business if I do.

It seems harmless enough to do our own thing on our own little patch of earth – it’s only gardening, after all – unless you stop seeing it as just a garden and start seeing it as land. And on land, food can be grown, and food is set to be a major political issue of our time. Seeing it like this, there is a moral case we need to answer.

Should gardens be viewed as consumers?

The answer is, perhaps. British gardeners ship supports such as bamboo canes in from around the world. We generate rubbish that has to be driven to the dump. We use petrol or electricity to power lawn mowers, man-made nitrogen fertilisers to keep things growing, and peat-based composts because we believe they help us grow things a little better (and more cheaply) than peat-free alternatives.

Some of these things have a tiny impact on the wider world, some massive. Most gardeners are now aware of the issues involved with peat – by taking peat out of the ground we not only destroy a precious habitat but also release locked-away carbon into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change. The impact of chemical fertilisers is less well known, but producing a tonne of nitrogen fertiliser takes one tonne of oil and 108 tonnes of water, releasing seven tonnes of greenhouse gases in the process. Our gardening is in fact using up increasingly scarce resources. What seems an entirely innocent hobby has far reaching effects.

The moral garden maze

Can gardeners truly help balance some of the environmental, social and cultural inequalities now facing society? **Lia Leendertz** believes that with conviction, we can. Photography by Neil Hepworth

Gardeners can help change that by finding ways to reduce consumption. For example, you can grow and coppice your own plant supports; use push and hand tools; compost waste on site; make organic fertilisers from comfrey or dandelions. But above all, you can grow food.

Widely cited statistics suggest food accounts for about 30 percent of personal carbon footprint. Every calorie our bodies gain from the shop-bought, non-organic vegetables we consume takes the equivalent of 10 calories to produce. Tractors, packaging, freight and refrigeration all play their part, as do those nitrogen fertilisers. On an increasingly crowded planet with finite resources this is unsustainable long term.

Choosing to change

So should morals be brought into the argument? Yes – because there are people and suffering involved. We are kept so sheltered from it all in the developed world. In Britain, the effects of climate change are a mild irritation – but climate change means death and misery somewhere, most often in less developed parts of the planet. There is also pollution caused by oil use, wars being fought over it, and dictators being tolerated to ensure supplies of it.

The West’s dependence on oil is all-pervading. But because of the disproportionate way in which food is bound up in this dependence, gardeners find themselves in a powerful position to reduce oil use. And yet many of those with the greatest capacity to do so, with the land, the skills (and even the staff) do not do so. ‘Should’ and ‘must’ are words that rankle, and words many environmentalists avoid because they don’t want to appear off-putting. But we aren’t children, and we in the Western world have taken and taken – isn’t it now time to face up to our responsibilities? Gardening more sustainably, especially by growing some of our own food, is what we should all be doing, if we care at all about those beyond our imaginary drawbridge outside the garden gate.

We have come through an era of excess, of cheap, seemingly endless energy, where almost everything we have wanted was available to us. Climate change and oil shortages mean this must change, but change doesn’t have to be a bad thing. We have all seen gardens where the owner has, arguably, had too much choice and an unlimited palette of plants has made for visual hyperactivity.

Yet constraints and a limited palette can be spurs to creativity. So, here is my suggested palette: you should grow food, and you should do it organically and sustainably. In my own garden I’m adding perennial edibles: mixing sorrel, rhubarb, asparagus and trained fruit in with the ornamentals. Others will find their own way.

Living more sustainably is the major challenge now facing us, and gardeners have a larger part to play than most. Set your creativity, your skills – and your garden – to the vital task at hand. ■

Lia Leendertz is a gardening columnist and blogger



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