

Growing together

A recent RHS report found increasing numbers of UK communities discovering the many benefits of gardening, including neighbourliness, crime reduction, practical skills... and sheer enjoyment >>

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With help from the RHS, It's Your Neighbourhood and Britain in Bloom, several projects in Manchester, such as here in Newton Heath, have strengthened community relationships.

Community gardening

The word 'community' is somewhat overused in political circles, and the public might be forgiven for feeling cynical about it. But community gardening initiatives often belie this cynicism: gardening has long been an informal and unorganised means of breaking down social barriers. After all, horticulture is something real and tangible, pursued over the long term, and involving physical work. Gardening together – whether as part of a city-wide RHS Britain in Bloom scheme or a more small-scale endeavour – can engender real feelings of empathy and create lasting friendships between people from disparate backgrounds. Just think of the camaraderie slowly forged over many years on allotments.

As Karen Liebreich, founder of the Chiswick House walled garden initiative and leading light of Abundance London (a charity that promotes the use of fruit harvested from roadside trees in the city), recently said to me, 'Gardening side by side is like going on a long walk with someone. It's okay if there are silences – you just get on with it. I've definitely bonded with troubled youngsters in this way.' Will Sandy, of the



Community orchards, such as this one in Clayton, Manchester, are becoming increasingly popular.



Bright bedding outside the Open University in Milton Keynes injects vivacity into an urban environment.



Transforming disused spaces changes the way residents feel about their neighbourhood.

Brixton-based Edible Bus Stop initiative, calls it 'garden-fence syndrome': that feeling of just chatting to your neighbours about what is in the garden.

In March 2011, Will and his comrade-in-spades Mak Gilchrist noticed that there was some disused land by their local bus stop. It seemed to be a waste, so one day they posted hundreds of flyers through local letterboxes advertising a day of gardening action, when the plot would be turned into a vegetable garden. To their amazement, at the appointed hour, some 40 would-be 'guerilla gardeners' appeared from nowhere, most of them armed with spades and other tools, who proceeded to create the garden together. Will and Mak's plan now is to extend it into an 'Edible Bus Route'.

These and many similar initiatives were a part of the inaugural Chelsea Fringe festival in May and June this year. The organisers hope that the Chelsea Fringe will become an umbrella event for this new generation of

gardeners who see horticulture less as a way of improving their own space and getting their hands in the soil (the traditional reasons for being interested in gardening), but more as a communal activity, a form of environmental and social activism. This new breed tends to focus their interest on fruit and vegetable growing – what they call 'edible gardening' or just 'edibles'. The 'granddaddy' project is probably Incredible Edible Todmorden, which was begun by Nick Green and has now effectively colonised the Lancashire town, with vegetable gardens at schools, businesses and in miscellaneous roadside spaces. But that project formally began only in 2009, which gives a sense of how recent this phenomenon is.

Making a difference

This upsurge in communal gardening builds on the existing tradition of community gardening in this country, fostered by long-standing initiatives such as Britain in Bloom, which has been organised by the RHS since 2001 and is (together with It's Your Neighbourhood) the largest community gardening initiative in the UK. A perceived image of neat yet rather overstuffed hanging baskets and immaculate displays is at variance with today's reality. The RHS has long been keen to foster Britain in Bloom initiatives in the inner cities as well as the leafy byways of the country – and yes, 'edibles' are an important part of it nowadays. It's Your Neighbourhood, which is part of Britain in Bloom, is a noncompetitive scheme that aims to help local volunteers rehabilitate and improve their own, usually urban, environments. One benefit of large-scale, national initiatives such as these is that they can make a difference across wide areas, even entire cities.



Almost two thirds of all RHS Britain in Bloom and It's Your Neighbourhood groups work with local schools.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: RHS / JULIAN WEIGALL EXCEPT PREVIOUS PAGE; AND FAR LEFT: MANCHESTER IN BLOOM

The Society's recent report, *Britain in Bloom: Transforming Local Communities* (see panel, p50), provides some revealing data on the state of community gardening, and its measurable benefits. It is based on a survey of 230 RHS Britain in Bloom and It's Your Neighbourhood groups across the UK and 11 in-depth case studies. Statistics are often open to different interpretations, but the report presents compelling evidence that 'the programmes are having a significant social, economic, environmental and transformational impact on the spaces, places and people involved'.

We all know that well-presented public spaces tend to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour. Of those surveyed, 79 percent said that these schemes increased the overall sense of civic pride in the area, while 40 percent believed



All kinds of horticulture are seen in community gardens, from bedding displays to wild flowers.



Richmond in Bloom's new wildflower meadow at Crane Park, Richmond-upon-Thames, helps to attract butterflies and other wildlife.

that rates of crime had been lowered by the gardening activity. In Hulme, Manchester, gardening provided a physical deterrent thanks to 75 large planters filled with thorny and other shrubs, which are thought to have helped cut the number of burglaries. We also know that cared-for areas attract better businesses and shops, and raise house prices. Of the groups surveyed, 63 percent had received financial or practical support from local businesses.

What may not be as obvious are the hidden economic impacts – the way gardening projects can help people learn new skills (including 'people skills') or get back into the habits of work, and also reduce the burden on local authorities (and, in the process, often improving the quality of the horticulture itself in public spaces).

A quarter of the groups surveyed had involved convicted offenders in their work via the Probation Service's >>

“These schemes increased the overall sense of civic pride in the area”

As part of Luddenden in Bloom, Brownies in Luddenden, West Yorkshire, built a 'bug hotel' in the wildlife corridor by the River Ludd.



Community Payback scheme, where between 40 and 300 hours of challenging work can be undertaken as an alternative to going to prison. The truly revealing statistic here is that 13 percent of these offenders later chose to come back to work on the projects voluntarily.

Learning young

In terms of environmental awareness, people can learn about recycling, composting and biodiversity through gardening. They can also learn about the benefits – and, most importantly, the pleasures – of healthy eating. Moreover, they can learn young: 65 percent of the groups surveyed had worked with local schools, building school gardens from scratch and teaching children about gardening, as well as working with parents.

In the end, community gardening initiatives stand or fall on the enthusiasm, dedication and competence of the volunteers involved. Although it did not form part of the survey, a subtext that can be inferred from the RHS report is the sheer enjoyment and satisfaction that many people derive from these schemes.

In 2009, Naomi Schillinger and a neighbour in Highbury, North London, began a project which now has some 100 local households growing vegetables and fruit in their front gardens. People from all walks of life can now stop and chat to each other unselfconsciously as a result. Naomi says that one of the attractions of gardening is that you can be reminded of your own childhood, when it may have been something your family did. She recounts the great pleasure gardeners can derive from their own generosity – 'knocking on doors to give fruit away if you have a glut' – something which, as she has proved, can be enjoyed even in an inner-city area. Now that is surely what gardening is all about. ●

FURTHER INFORMATION

❖ Britain in Bloom www.rhs.org.uk/britaininbloom
❖ It's Your Neighbourhood www.rhs.org.uk/itsyourneighbourhood
❖ Chelsea Fringe festival (19 May–10 June 2012) www.chelseafringe.com

❖ Abundance London www.abundancelondon.com
❖ Edible Bus Stop, Brixton www.theediblebusstop.org
❖ Incredible Edible Todmorden www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk

RHS survey: the impact of community horticulture



For 11 years, the RHS has invested in community horticulture by taking responsibility for the Britain in Bloom and It's Your Neighbourhood campaigns.

Britain in Bloom is a UK-wide competition between communities across a wide range of categories; within this, It's Your Neighbourhood is a noncompetitive scheme for groups who want a greener neighbourhood. Approximately 2,100 communities take part each year in both campaigns, with up to 200,000 volunteers participating. Last year the RHS surveyed 230 of these groups and undertook

11 in-depth case studies; its findings demonstrate the significant impact of community-based work. Highlights from the report include:

- ❖ **Planting:** on average, the groups plant 115,000 trees, 352,000 shrubs and 21.6 million bulbs and other plants each year across the UK.
- ❖ **Personal development:** acquiring a wide range of skills has benefited many, while older participants feel less isolated. **Case study:** Booth Centre, Manchester; 20 homeless people were employed in landscaping jobs after working on a Britain in Bloom project.
- ❖ **Community cohesion:** improved relationships, trust and understanding. **Case study:** Central Estate, Dukinfield, Manchester experienced 50 percent less crime and antisocial behaviour, and an increase in neighbourliness.
- ❖ **Physical surroundings:** improvements encourage a feeling of safety and have a positive impact on the environment. **Case study:** Cumbernauld Community Park, North Lanarkshire; new wildlife habitats and food sources led to an increase in sightings of swallows.
- ❖ **Financial contribution:** on average £6,044 is raised per group per year, with support from businesses and local authorities. **Case study:** in 2012, Manchester City Council spent £67,000 on Britain in Bloom activities, but estimated the value of volunteers' work at £2.6 million.
- ❖ **Stronger local economies:** skills development and environmental improvements attract new businesses, keeping people and revenue local. **Case study:** Ahoghill, Co. Antrim; two new businesses have opened in the village, with others expanding their operations.

www.rhs.org.uk To view or download a copy of the report, with more detailed case studies, and for more information on both RHS Britain in Bloom and It's Your Neighbourhood, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/britaininbloom

RHS Flower Shows: communities, edibles and inspiring design ideas

This month the RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show (3–8 July) and RHS Flower Show Tatton Park (18–22 July) bring together show gardens, horticultural displays and enticing edibles.

At Hampton Court, the central feature focuses on community work, highlighting how gardening can bring people together and improve communal spaces. The new Low Cost/High Impact gardens show what can be achieved with a realistic budget and size of plot.

For Tatton Park, new features include 'orchestra gardens', local schools competing in the RHS Summer Fruit and Vegetable Competition, and three designers battling out to be named National Young Designer of the Year 2012.

More from the RHS For more on the RHS Shows at Hampton Court Palace and Tatton Park, visit www.rhs.org.uk/hamptoncourt and www.rhs.org.uk/tatton For tickets, call 0844 338 7539.