

## VIEWPOINT

**? 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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# Letters

## The moral garden maze

In June (Viewpoint, pp410–411), Lia Leendertz discussed whether all gardeners should grow at least some food, and asked if it is morally wrong to cultivate ornamental plants only. Some letters were published in September (*The Garden*, pp18–19); here are some more of your responses:

❖ We all have a moral obligation to live without adverse affect on others – gardeners are not exempt. This does not mean that we should not enjoy the beauty of our gardens, or that they should be utilitarian, but it does mean that whatever we do, we must take into account the wider picture. If we don't, eventually the effects of climate change, pollution, and overuse of natural resources will destroy all that we have striven to create.

When we moved into our current home, we were working full time and wanted a beautiful garden to grow our own food, but did not want to become slaves to the garden. So, plants that do not survive the increasingly dry conditions here in East Anglia are not replaced – we plant, water and mulch, and then leave it up to nature. During the past 21 years we have become fairly self-sufficient in soft fruit and vegetables and have a comfortable modern lifestyle with an attractive garden that

has interest in all seasons. We have time to sit down and enjoy our garden but we have not wasted resources or disadvantaged others in pursuit of its creation and maintenance. We make our own compost and leafmould, shred prunings for mulch, use water collected in water butts and we do not worry if the grass is brown in summer – it will recover.  
*Hilary Hill, Suffolk*

❖ Who could argue against an exhortation to garden sustainably? Yet I can't accept Lia's definition of a 'moral gardener' as one who produces vegetables with an eye on oil consumption and then imagines they are redressing some age-old imbalance in resource allocation with the Third World.

I just make a gentle plea for tolerance, both in the garden and elsewhere. If one person wants to grow vegetables, then do it with energy, grace and success. If another wants to fill

their garden with hyperactive floral arrangements then more strength to their good right arms. Who are we to say which of these hypothetical gardeners are more moral? The vegetable gardener may race stock cars every second weekend and the floral gardener may support schoolchildren in Sri Lanka. Growing vegetables to lessen oil use while still driving a car seems logically perverse. Growing vegetables to eat seems completely sound.

Perhaps it is just about how one wants to characterise one's own activities? Please, ease up on the name-calling and celebrate the differences.  
*Sue Croton, Victoria, Australia*

❖ Producing food in our gardens is making a valuable contribution to both the environment and future food security in the UK. Our garden is full of raspberries, apples and pears in late summer. I'm delighted that local birds have also taken up

*'If I resorted to zapping predators I would not feel like a real gardener'*

the practice (pictured, below left). Not content simply to eat from the birdfeeder, they too have planted their own food for harvest before winter sets in.  
*Stephanie Findlay, Oxfordshire*

❖ I congratulate Lia on her article. For too long we have been scared to come out and say that we, as gardeners, must be responsible for our actions.

In our gardens at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth we are keen to show that sustainable gardening can be as stylish, attractive and productive as any petrol-, peat- and pesticide-intensive garden. I strongly believe that organic methods are more rewarding. If I resorted to zapping predators with a can of spray I would not feel like a real gardener.

It is time sustainability came before personal preferences. It is more important to have sundews (*Drosera rotundifolia*) and bog asphodels (*Narthecium ossifragum*) thriving in wild peat bogs than any prize specimen in a garden. The protection of our environment and climate is important >>



# Letters

‘The moral garden maze’ continued...

because, as Lia says, there are ‘people and suffering involved’.  
*Chloe Ward, Senior Display Gardener, Centre for Alternative Technology, Powys*

❖ All natural systems are cyclic. Germination of crops in the soil leads to harvest; then stubble and weeds provide food for insects and birds and, as they die, food for millions of unseen micro-organisms and mini-beasts. These compost it into humus and food for further crops. If harvest is followed by the application of weedkiller there will be no wild flowers for insects and birds to feed on and complete the cycle.

People need to look at their lifestyles as a cyclic system to see the reasons for composting and improving plant growth, using methods other than toxic sprays – such as natural predators and companion planting.  
*Avril Burt, Hampshire*

❖ Lia asserts that climate change means death and misery in less-developed parts of the world. There is no evidence for that statement; on the contrary, if by climate change she means global warming, then evidence shows that climate change is beneficial as it results in fewer deaths due to hypothermia and disease, and enables greater food production. The main cause of suffering in less-developed parts of the world results from a shortage of affordable energy. Cheap energy enables people to escape grinding poverty and to have proper housing with clean water and clean fuel, to cook and heat their homes, to grow food and to develop a prosperous economy with all the other benefits that ensue.

Lia also discusses oil

shortages and the end of abundant cheap energy. With the discovery of shale gas, oil shale and gas hydrates, the date of depletion of fossil fuels has been pushed back by centuries. Long before such fuels are depleted, copious supplies of energy from nuclear fission and nuclear fusion will be available.

Abundant and cheap energy supplies will enable us to look after the environment and provide food for all in a truly sustainable fashion. After all, it is only in developed countries that there is sufficient wealth and energy both to provide food and to care for the environment.  
*Phillip Bratby, Devon*

❖ I remember being intrigued with growing vegetables on our half-acre plot in rural southwest Ireland in the 1980s. I weeded, trained, caned, netted and picked my first pea pods for dinner. It was unheard-of to buy vegetables if you had land outside your door.

But now no-one seems to grow vegetables there because it simply does not pay. Were I to equate the work it takes to ‘grow your own’ into time, and then compare it to a trip to the local supermarket where a punnet of tomatoes costs so little... well, it is a ‘no-brainer’.

An easily implemented compromise would be to incorporate vegetables together with herbaceous plants in gardens. In addition, it would be an unattractive environment if everyone just grew vegetables in their gardens.

*Mike Kelly, Sussex*

❖ ‘Growing your own’ will broaden skills and knowledge, and help you appreciate seasonal produce. Knowing how your vegetables are produced reduces the risk of

food poisoning. It also lets you share or swap excess produce.

Whatever the size of your plot, see what you can grow, or take part in a ‘landshare’ scheme and let someone else have a go – there really is no excuse.

*Hillary Tilley, Essex*

❖ For five generations in my family it has been an obligation to grow what you could to feed yourself. I would do so if I was the owner of a magnificent house and garden in the Cotswolds, or an apartment with a balcony.

Lia’s article made me decide what I would grow if I had only a couple of large pots, or a 2 x 2m (6½ x 6½ft) bed. There would be two zucchini and several pak choi, the neat little tasty fast growers. I would make a wigwam above to grow protein-producing beans – even though I am wheelchair-bound, I would be able to do that.

*Patricia Gilbert, France*

❖ There are many people who may not be able to grow food in

*‘Now no-one seems to grow vegetables because it simply does not pay’*

their gardens. They may lack the space, time or energy for the sustained commitment this requires. Frankly, the number of us who can grow sufficient to meet all our needs must be small indeed. If this means that many gardeners will grow ornamental plants for their beauty, then they should not be made to feel guilty about it. Most gardeners that I know care passionately about their plots and use organic and sustainable methods wherever possible. Let’s encourage this rather than badger everyone with ideas that for many are simply unrealistic.  
*Veronica Dawson, France*



Should gardens only be used for growing fruit and vegetables?