

BRITAIN IN BLOOM 2013 The Finalists!

COMMUNITIES DOING IT
FOR THEMSELVES

INTERVIEW

Raymond Blanc

SUSTAINABLE GROWING
MEDIA





WELCOME

To the spring issue and a new name for the magazine! *Grass Roots* is the update for all RHS "in Bloom" and It's Your Neighbourhood participants and RHS Affiliated Societies.

There are over 300,000 volunteers taking part in the RHS community campaigns - the true grass roots that make Britain bloom. We've changed the name of the magazine to shift the focus on to your work. *Grass Roots* is dedicated to sharing your stories and ideas, to inspire and encourage us all, so please do keep in touch with your news.

In this issue we announce the 2013 Britain in Bloom finalists; we bring you news of groups that are using gardening to build new partnerships, restore lost community

spirit and share resources; and we speak to Raymond Blanc, the Michelin-starred chef who is supporting this year's Edible Britain launch campaign.

Please do keep us in touch with your news: sophiedawson@rhs.org.uk / 020 7821 3118

Many thanks,

Sophie Dawson, Editor

YOUR LETTERS The struggling bumblebee

When we think 'bee' we often picture a bumblebee or honeybee and forget that there are hundreds of species of solitary bees and other pollinating insects. Some bumblebee species feed from a wide range of garden and wild flowers and are common in gardens. However, those species with more specialised habitat and floral requirements have been in long-term decline in the UK.

Bumblebees are 'super pollinators' – they work longer hours than honeybees and in worse weather; their hairy bodies collect and distribute more pollen than sleeker insects. By vibrating flowers, they produce a shower of pollen, making them more effective at pollinating many crops.

Bumblebees do not forage far (often just a few hundred metres from their nests) so the more pollen- and nectar-rich flowers* we can plant and join up, the better.

Wildflower and urban meadow mixes, together with red clover and legume crops, are all bumblebee-friendly. Planting these in gardens, parks, community orchards, verges



and roundabouts helps make up for the loss of natural habitat in the wider countryside.

The role of pesticides in the fate of bumblebees is not clear. Studies into the impact of insecticides, especially those in the neonicotinoid group, are being undertaken and will help inform decisions on pesticide use at the European and UK level. Gardeners should minimise the use of insecticides and avoid spraying plants when in flower.

Helen Bostock,
RHS Senior Horticultural Advisor
*rhs.org.uk/Plants-for-pollinators

Please send your letters to sophiedawson@rhs.org.uk or Sophie Dawson, RHS, 80 Vincent Square, London SW1P 2PE. Letters on all community gardening topics are welcomed, but may be edited for publication.

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Cover image: Richmond in Bloom, Ham United Group; Credit: RHS/ Julian Weigall
Back cover image: King's Heath in Bloom volunteers; credit: RHS/ Julian Weigall

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The Royal Horticultural Society is the UK's leading gardening charity, dedicated to advancing horticulture and promoting gardening.

Our community campaigns support more than 5,000 groups in creating greener and more interconnected communities. For more information about RHS Britain in Bloom, RHS It's Your Neighbourhood and RHS Affiliated Societies, please visit rhs.org.uk/communities

Put your skills to the test in an RHS horticultural competition



Camellias compete in an RHS competition

The horticultural competitions run by the RHS are open to all, including amateur plant growers. They cover a wide range of ornamental plants as well as fruit and vegetables, and prestigious trophies are awarded to winning entries. RHS membership is not necessary and entry is free.

For more information or show schedules please contact the Horticultural Competitions Manager, Georgina Barter (020 7821 3142 / georginabarter@rhs.org.uk).

2013 Competitions:

- 9-10 April, RHS Garden Wisley: The Daffodil Show, Early Rhododendron Competition, Main Camellia Competition, Spring Ornamental Plant Competition
- 20-21 April, RHS Garden Rosemoor: Main Rhododendron Competition
- 30 April – 1 May, RHS Garden Wisley: Late Daffodil Competition and Tulip Competition
- 4-5 May, RHS Garden Harlow Carr: Late Rhododendron Competition
- 25-28 July, RHS Flower Show Tatton Park: Summer Fruit and Vegetable Competition
- 8-9 Oct, RHS Harvest Festival, Lindley Hall, Westminster: Autumn Fruit and Vegetable Competition
- 22-23 Oct, RHS Shades of Autumn Show, Lawrence and Lindley Halls, Westminster: Autumn Ornamental Plant Competition
- 1-2 Nov, RHS Garden Wisley: Late Fruit and Vegetable Competition.

Coming soon...new RHS website

Look out for the new RHS website, due to be launched mid-April. Not only are we giving the website a brand new look, we're also adding some great new functions, including your own personal area where you can bookmark content, comment on articles and, if you're an RHS member, you'll be able to access exclusive articles, videos and podcasts. Make sure you visit rhs.org.uk later this month.

Calling all Midlands-based community gardeners

The search is on for the best community gardeners in The Midlands and BBC Gardeners' World Live is calling on all communities to vote. The winners will receive a greenhouse worth more than £1,000 and £300 worth of seeds, plus tickets for them and their family to attend BBC Gardeners' World Live at the NEC.

To nominate someone from your own group or another near you visit www.bbcgardenersworldlive.com/communitygardeners.

The closing date is 20 April 2013.



Volunteers in Belper re-plant a flower bed.

New affiliated societies pack available

There are several changes to the Affiliated Societies scheme for 2013, including changes to the 'event finder' facility and a new system for registering for the speakers' and judges' registers online.

To request a 2013 Affiliated Societies Information Pack, please email communities@rhs.org.uk quoting your affiliation number and club/society name or, for those without internet access, please phone 020 7821 3069.

Funds for sustainable growing (England only)

Defra, in partnership with the RHS, have set up a project to help Bloom and IYN groups to increase their use of sustainable growing media. £100,000 is available to support groups' use of sustainable growing media in place of peat. To apply for funds groups must be either local-authority led or working in partnership with the local authority. To find out more see page 9. Applications will close in July 2013.

New match funding opportunity

The online fundraising platform Spacehive has announced £100,000 of match funding available to projects aiming to revive the UK's town centres and high streets. Projects setting out to boost visitor appeal to the UK's high streets can apply to receive match funding from Experian. The drive is being led by the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) with backing from DCLG. For more information, visit: www.spacehive.com/initiatives/towncentres

Brighten up your community

Dulux are offering 60,000 litres of paint for community spaces as part of their Let's Colour project. For more information, visit: www.letscolour.co.uk

Santander Community Plus provides grants of up to £5,000 to charities benefitting local disadvantaged people. Funding is available to cover salaries, equipment or materials. www.santanderfoundation.org.uk/

Congratulations RHS Britain in Bloom 2013 finalists!

This year 78 communities have been nominated to take part in RHS Britain in Bloom, the UK Finals stage of the campaign. They will be visited by the judges in August and we will let you know how they did in the autumn issue of the magazine. For more information, please visit rhs.org.uk/britaininbloom.

SMALL VILLAGE	
Entry Name	Region / Nation
Barton in Fabis	East Midlands
Scarva	Ulster

VILLAGE	
Entry Name	R/N
Cartmel	Cumbria
Elswick	North West
Filby	Anglia
Luddenden	Yorkshire
Moorsholm	Northumbria
Pembridge	Heart of England
St Issey	South West

LARGE VILLAGE	
Entry Name	R/N
Barwick-in-Elmet	Yorkshire
Caistor	East Midlands
Coupar Angus	Scotland
Eynsford	South East
Hillsborough	Ulster
St Pierre du Bois	Guernsey
Usk	Wales
Watlington	Thames & Chilterns



Clockwise from above: children in Cleethorpes celebrate their town's place in the finals; volunteers plant a pollinator-friendly bed in Coupar Angus; floral celebrations in Bristol; a nautical theme for coastal Dartmouth; dazzling displays, North Berwick



COASTAL UP TO 12K	
Entry Name	R/N
Aberdour Village	Scotland
Dartmouth	South West
St Brelade	Jersey

COASTAL OVER 12K	
Entry Name	R/N
Bangor	Ulster
Bournemouth	South
Cleethorpes	East Midlands
Falmouth	South West
Great Yarmouth	Anglia
Prestatyn	Wales

SMALL TOWN	
Entry Name	R/N
Ahoghill	Ulster
Garstang	North West
Hunmanby	Yorkshire
Sedgefield	Northumbria

TOWN	
Entry Name	R/N
Blairgowrie & Rattray	Scotland
City of London	London
Freckleton	North West
Garforth	Yorkshire
Henley on Thames	Thames & Chilterns
Morpeth	Northumbria
Newquay	South West
Oakham	East Midlands
Windermere	Cumbria

LARGE TOWN	
Entry Name	R/N
Alton	South
Biddulph	Heart of England
Colne	North West
Colwyn Bay	Wales
Glenrothes	Scotland
Market Harborough	East Midlands
Ripon	Yorkshire
St Helier	Jersey
Tunbridge Wells	South East
Wisbech	Anglia



Coupar Angus Pride of Place

SMALL CITY	
Entry Name	R/N
Bath	South West
Bracknell	Thames & Chilterns
Bury	North West
Colchester	Anglia
Derry City	Ulster
Grimsby	East Midlands
Shrewsbury	Heart of England

CITY	
Entry Name	R/N
London Borough of Richmond	London
Norwich	Anglia
Stockton-on-Tees	Northumbria
York	Yorkshire

LARGE CITY	
Entry Name	R/N
Bristol	South West
Edinburgh	Scotland
London Borough of Hillingdon	London

URBAN COMMUNITY	
Entry Name	R/N
Aldridge (Walsall)	Heart of England
Bolnere Village (Haywards Heath)	South
Clifton (Bristol)	South West
Eston (Middlesbrough)	Northumbria
London Bridge (Southwark)	London
Mancroft, The Lanes (Norwich)	Anglia
Starbeck (Harrogate)	Yorkshire
The Meadows (Nottingham)	Nottingham
Uddingston (Glasgow)	Scotland
Woolton (Liverpool)	North West



Dartmouth in Bloom



Bristol in Bloom

CHAMPION OF CHAMPIONS	
Entry Name	R/N
Halstead	Anglia
Herm	Guernsey
Lytham	North West
North Berwick	Scotland
Stanghow	Northumbria

High-impact edibles

Kim Parish is a Britain in Bloom judge and Co-ordinator of South West in Bloom. Before setting up her own horticultural business in November 2012 she spent 15 years working for local authorities, where she experimented with edible displays.

“I took on responsibility for planning and designing the thousands of seasonal bedding schemes across the middle of Cornwall in 2000. I had hundreds of species to choose from and hundreds of seasonal beds to show them off in. Apart from colour, shape and form, my choices needed to include speed of establishment, size and ease of maintenance and, in Newquay, tolerance to salt-laden winds! After a couple of years working with traditional bedding plants, I started experimenting with edibles. Initially I started out mixing in a few edibles to ornamentals. I found that beetroot worked well as an edger around plants like *Rudbeckia*, African marigolds or *Cosmos*. *Salvia* (sage) was a fantastic discovery as it stands up to salt winds, lasts several seasons and when it starts to look tired, you can replant whatever is still thriving as ground cover. The quick-growing *Cynara* ‘Green Globe’ (Globe artichoke) worked wonderfully as a dot plant in summer and spring displays, with its fountain of luscious grey foliage.

Having used these plants to great effect I became more adventurous, creating whole beds entirely of vegetables, with herbs and exotics mixed in too. I wanted to create increased interest not only for our residents and visitors but for our gardeners too, create something that people would talk about.

Generally, it’s been a great success and the displays have been really popular. I have had a couple of failures - with basil and brussel sprouts which the pigeons and

Foeniculum vulgare (fennel) mixes well with ornamental *Lobelia* ‘Fan Scarlet’



seagulls took a fancy to! One worry people have is that the produce will be taken but having grown it in public spaces for over 10 years we found that people respect the planting. They are very happy to help themselves to produce once it is ripe, but they ask rather than just taking.

My advice is start small, experiment, have fun and enjoy the displays!”

To see Kim’s full list of recommended edibles for high-impact displays, visit www.landscapesofdistinction.co.uk/news

Edible Britain



In Cumbria, Cartmel in Bloom have initiated a partnership between the 2 Michelin-star L’Enclume restaurant and Cartmel Primary School involving pupils learning about growing herbs at L’Enclume’s local farm.

Last year, 30 pupils visited L’Enclume’s farm, learning about all of the herbs and vegetables grown for the restaurant.

This spring they will be helped to grow their own herbs so that they can use them in their cooking classes at school.

Dan Cox of L’Enclume says, “We will create a special area at the farm where the children can cultivate their own herbs in trays, each labelled with their own name. At the right time, the herbs will be transferred to the school garden for the pupils to take full ownership.

“Simon Rogan and all of us at L’Enclume love using herbs and it will be our pleasure to organise demos and short talks to the pupils about the benefits and value of herbs. Who knows, one of these youngsters may one day be working with us!”

One 8-year-old pupil who enjoyed his visit recalls, “We were allowed to walk around the farm on our own and taste the herbs. I brought home some tiny carrots.”

Sarah Firth, Head teacher of Cartmel Primary is delighted with the partnership. “We have a well established school kitchen garden

that has been developed with support from both parents and members of the local community,” she says. “Our staff and children are very keen to be involved in this project which we believe will continue to motivate our children to grow and eat their own herbs and even provide them for use in our school kitchen.”

www.cartmelinbloom.co.uk

Stony Stratford’s medieval garden celebrates the town’s position along the route of Queen Eleanor’s funeral procession in 1290



RHS/Julian Meredith

Medieval edibles

Volunteers in Stony Stratford are keeping the their town’s heritage alive with their ‘medieval’ garden, planted in memory of Eleanor of Castile, the queen consort of Edward 1.

The garden commemorates the town’s location as one of 12 sites that Queen Eleanor’s funeral procession stopped in 1290 on its way from Lincoln to London. Close to the spot where an elaborate stone cross once stood (destroyed in the English Civil War), volunteers have laid out a thirteenth-century garden.

As medieval gardens largely concentrated on plants with a medicinal or culinary value, the group has planted a range of edibles including rosemary, thyme, fennel, marjoram and wild strawberries. A field surrounding the site has been planted with ancient local varieties of fruit: Caldecotte pear, medlar, Blandurel apple, Aylesbury prune, greengage, mulberry and quince.

Medieval gardens expert Mike Brown, from nearby Prebendal Manor explains that growing edibles was essential for survival during the medieval period. “Peas and beans were easy to store as a good source of protein for winter, while most of the greens ended up in the pottage, a vegetable soup,” he says. This included the pot marigolds, *Calendula officinalis*, although these have a rather strong flavour for modern tastes. “Queen Eleanor would certainly have recognised many of the plants we have here in Stony’s garden,” he adds.

Stony Stratford in Bloom volunteer Mary Robinson, one of those who tends the garden, says, “We are delighted by the response we’ve had from local residents.

“We now have an information board which details the town’s link to Queen Eleanor as well as the plants in the garden. We want our children to know about their town’s history and we’re working with local schools to arrange visits to the garden to talk about medieval Stony.”

www.stonystratford.gov.uk
www.prebendal-manor.co.uk/

Fruitful plans in Acocks Green

Bloom volunteers in Acocks Green, Birmingham are creating an orchard in the centre of their neighbourhood.

Fran Lee, Co-ordinator of Acocks Green Village in Bloom, explains, “It is slap bang in the middle of two blocks of shops, next to a primary school. One young boy asked if we were digging for buried treasure. I think he was a little disappointed when we told him what we were actually doing!”

The group spent several months preparing

the site before planting a mixed berry ‘jam hedge’, espaliered apples, plum, damson, pear, cherry and fig trees in March, along with herbs and other plants to encourage biodiversity.

“The orchard will be open 24/7 and local people will be able to help themselves to any fruit produced,” explains Fran. “It has

engendered quite a bit of interest. In fact, I have never seen so many volunteers for a project before.”

The group is currently in discussion with the neighbouring primary school about creating a forest school classroom in the new space.

Local resident Sandra Garbett says, “We are very happy to have this natural resource placed within our urban environment and take satisfaction that everyone in our community will be able to benefit from it.”

www.acocks-green-neighbourhood-forum.org



Volunteers prepare the ground for Acocks Green’s new orchard

RHS ADVICE

Sustainable growing media

Help for your community with regular news and tips from RHS scientists and advisors. To suggest a topic for this section of the magazine, contact sophiedawson@rhs.org.uk / 020 7821 3118

Dr Paul Alexander (RHS Principal Scientist – Horticulture) leads the RHS's work with the horticultural industry and Defra on the issue of sustainable growing media.

Why should we be using less peat in our gardening?

The impacts of peat extraction are often debated and cases can be made to support and contradict most of the issues. However, there is no doubt that pristine peatlands are increasingly rare habitats supporting fantastic floral and faunal biodiversity and acting as an important carbon store.

In 2011 the Government announced its aim of voluntarily eliminating peat use in horticulture by 2020 for home gardeners and by 2030 for professionals. It is now working with the industry in order to deliver these targets. By taking steps to reduce the peat content in our growing media, or removing it completely we can adapt our growing techniques and keep ahead of future changes.

Peat-based media have been a huge success, and some experience and adaptability is needed to get the best from peat-free media. The RHS suggests that this is an effort well worth making in view of the benefits of using renewable resources compared to depleting peat and damaging the environment in doing so. With a bit of extra care and attention growing peat-free should not affect plant quality. Gardeners can play an important role in supporting manufacturers, expanding the market and encouraging the development of more consistent products.

Alternatives to peat

In the UK, the main alternatives to peat include materials such as coir, wood fibre, green compost and composted bark. Coir is a by-product of coir-fibre production (the dust), originating from coconut husks. Wood fibre is produced by pressure treating wood chips to expand and separate the fibres. Green compost is the composted green residues often collected from local authority civic amenity sites and composted bark is simply bark that has been composted.



Common alternatives to peat include coir (made from coconut husks), wood fibre, green compost and composted bark.

Ten easy plants for novice users of peat-free media:

- Coriander
- Cosmos
- French and runner beans
- Fuchsia
- Parsley
- Petunia
- Pumpkins, squash and courgettes
- Sunflowers
- Sweet corn
- Tomatoes

Most bagged growing media are blends of two or more of these materials, each one included for the properties they bring to the mix (e.g. green compost can be used to improve nutrient levels).

Growing with less peat

When switching to use growing media containing zero or reduced amounts of peat there are a few points worth considering:

Choosing your plants

Plant growth will vary according to many factors including the growing media (e.g. the available water, nutrition and physical structure), the environment the plant is in (e.g. temperature, humidity) and the physiological demands of the specific plant.

Some plants will be more challenging to grow in peat-free and peat-reduced mixes, while others will thrive with relatively simple adjustments to the watering and feeding routine. In some cases, the physical structure of the base media mix can be tweaked, for example by adding perlite to improve drainage in fine-textured mixes.

For the best advice, discuss the needs of your proposed plant requirements with the nurseries and growers you work with. Most growers will have tried peat-reduced and peat-free mixes - learn from their experiences and get them to help compile your plant lists. If possible, talk to the supplier of their growing media, they should be able to offer specific advice too.

If you are looking to sow seeds, give consideration to the physical structure and texture of your mix. Seeds need finer textured



Adding perlite can help to improve drainage in fine textured mixes



Many peat-reduced mixes favour frequent light waterings

mixes but some peat-free and peat-reduced mixes can be quite coarse. Sieving growing media helps to remove the coarser particles.

Water requirements

Many peat-free and peat-reduced mixes favour more frequent watering but with much lower volumes of water at any one time. Check moisture levels throughout the growing depth, not just on the surface, as mixes may appear dry on the surface when there is plenty of water available deeper down.

Nutrient needs

Some peat-free and peat-reduced mixes, especially those containing green compost, can provide a valuable source of nutrients enabling growers to save money on fertilisers that they don't have to apply as early as with other mixes.

However, for seed sowing this can make some mixes a little rich, and many tender plants or seeds can grow very slowly in such circumstances. It is recommended that for seed sowing specific seed mixes are bought.

Defra funding opportunity (England only)

Defra, in partnership with the RHS, have set up a project to help Bloom and It's Your Neighbourhood groups to increase their use of sustainable growing media.

£100,000 is available over two years to support groups' use of sustainable growing media in place of peat. Funding is available to cover the additional costs of using plants grown in sustainable growing media. Projects can be large or small, whatever is appropriate to local activities.

To apply for funds groups must be either local-authority led or working in partnership with the local authority. There are no restrictions on the size, location (within England) or type of horticultural project. Application for funding will close in July 2013.

For further information and to apply for funding, please visit: rhs.org.uk/britaininbloom

What to do if plants fail to thrive and seeds germinate

Check back and see if the instructions were followed. Seeds are easily killed if the media is too rich in dissolved salts – manufacturers often recommend flushing nutrients out of the media before sowing by heavy watering until water runs from the bottom of the container.

If plants fail to thrive check the roots – a stunted root system with reddened areas suggests excess nutrients; pale foliage and thin roots suggest a nutrient deficiency. If roots are concentrated at the bottom of the pot it suggests water drains too freely; if concentrated at the top it suggests water doesn't drain freely enough and the bottom of the pot is becoming waterlogged and unsuitable for healthy plant growth.



Pumpkins (above), cosmos and sunflowers (below left) are reliable plants to try in a peat-free mix.



Free RHS advice for communities

All "in Bloom" and It's Your Neighbourhood groups, as well as RHS Affiliated Societies, can contact the RHS Advisory Service for free gardening advice relating to their group's work.

To contact the team visit the online hub, selecting the 'Support for all groups' advice sheet. To access the online hub please visit: rhs.org.uk/bloomIYN

To search for advice online visit: rhs.org.uk/advice

Flotsam to flowers

Transforming other people's rubbish into flowers is what drives 62-year-old Michael Welsh.

Michael co-ordinates SEED PODS in Easington Colliery, County Durham, a community-run initiative to fill the former mining town full of colourful blooms. SEED PODS (which stands for 'Sow Everywhere in East Durham' and 'Plant On Disused Sites') uses donated seeds and plants, old pots, reclaimed timber and compost to grow seedlings and propagate perennials at a cliff-top garden site. Plants are then added to communal areas and waste land around the town in partnership with the local "in Bloom" group.

Now in its second year the project is gaining momentum. "Easington has suffered greatly from unemployment and has its share of drug and alcohol abuse," says Michael. "There's less community spirit since the mine closed and you can see that in the outward appearance of the streets and houses. Our aim is to put a bit of colour into people's

lives. By planting flowers we're hoping to inspire people to get involved, to rebuild community spirit."

Michael conceived the idea for SEED PODS on retiring, realising a life-long ambition to grow plants in the old cliff-top allotments. "We describe our garden as having the best view from any community garden in all of East Durham," he says, describing the seascapes that change with the weather. "The first thing I did was buy a chair so I could take it all in!"

Starting out with a £500 grant from the Wakeham Trust the group purchased spades, forks and several second-hand wheelbarrows. A further £500 was donated by the local shopping centre towards the cost of a polytunnel, which Michael is hoping to install this year. Pretty much everything else is recycled, begged, borrowed or donated, "you just have to be an opportunist," he says.

Beyond the aesthetic benefit to the town, the project provides a positive environment for those that are long-term unemployed. "Volunteers work in the garden and hopefully find it relaxing and beneficial, mentally and physically," says Michael. "We welcome anyone who wants to make Easington more colourful."

Last year, SEED PODS' efforts were recognised with an 'Outstanding' award in the RHS It's Your Neighbourhood (IYN) campaign. Visiting IYN assessor Liz Lazenby says, "They have planted stuff all over that little town – bulbs, flowers. It's just wonderful."

This year they hope to plant recycled *Begonia* and *Polyanthus* from the parish council, as well as create new perennial beds on the main street.

For Michael, who grew up in Easington in more prosperous times, he hopes that the flowers will encourage more residents to participate in the project. "If all goes well, Easington will be full of colour and wildlife, all done by the community for the community and at very little cost."

Communities doing it for themselves

"You just have to be an opportunist"

Michael Welsh,
SEED PODS

Clockwise from top left: The cliff-top SEED POD community gardens; volunteers prepare to plant *Rudbeckia* in town; some of the many plants being grown on at the garden; the site before work started, a magnet for dumped rubbish.

Local campaign saves Brighton and Hove's Bloom

Council reinstates Bloom funding following campaign by residents and MPs.

Two years ago, Brighton & Hove City Council announced its plans to cut the entire £30,000 budget used to fund the local Bloom campaign. Volunteer Paul Skelly was one of those disappointed at the severity of the cut. "The council wanted us to set up Bloom as an independent charity," he explains, "but without any funds it would have been impossible to start that process."

Paul joined other volunteers and local MPs in lobbying for the reinstatement of funding to support the development of a new group to run Bloom. "We felt the decision was short-sighted as Bloom is about so much more than putting up a few hanging baskets. It's about getting the community involved to improve the environment," he says.

Following a successful campaign in the local press funding was reinstated and the new organising group co-ordinated its first 'Bloom' in 2012, judging more than 100 entries across 14 categories. The new team has also undergone a re-branding

exercise and is in the process of setting up a website. "With a fresh start we hope to attract new sponsors and increase the numbers taking part," says Paul. "In future we'll be trying to secure new sources of funding from events and sponsorship, so that we're not relying on the council."

A council spokesperson says, "Like all councils around the country, Brighton and Hove City Council has had to make substantial budget savings and unfortunately this has resulted in the annual funding for the local Bloom group being withdrawn."

She continues, "The council does recognise how important the Bloom programme is for enhancing the city and making it an attractive place to live and work in and for visitors to enjoy. It therefore made a one off grant award payment of £25,000 to help volunteers take over the responsibility of running the city's Bloom campaign. The Bloom community group put on a wonderful competition last year and officers continue to offer their support."



Photos: SEED PODS

HMP Norwich

In Norwich, 91-year-old volunteer Bill Webster is a bit of a hero. Thanks to his initiative, HMP Norwich now runs a successful horticultural nursery, supplying bedding for city-centre displays and training prisoners in horticulture. Just 10 years ago the prison's gardens were largely derelict.

"I heard they'd got some greenhouses standing empty so I arranged a visit," explains Bill. "There were four there that were pretty much derelict so we got in touch about getting them back into use."

In his role as Ambassador for The Friends of Norwich in Bloom, Bill established links with the prison which enabled the Bloom group to supply compost, seeds and pots to a team of inmates working under the supervision of horticulturist Ray Curcher. In exchange, the prisoners grow plants for flower beds around the city. Last year they produced over 60,000. Funding comes from local businesses, which are acknowledged alongside the displays that they sponsor.

According to Ray, the scheme provides great personal satisfaction for the prisoners. "I think they come over here with the attitude, 'it would be nice to work outside in the sun,' and then they get involved in what we do, and they become more involved, and

they treat the plants like babies, literally, they are so proud of them," he says. "I'm really impressed with what they do."

One young inmate who had never worked in a greenhouse before, arrived on site and began swatting the bees, recalls Ray. "I explained to him the problem with bees, how they're struggling, and in the six months he worked there he looked after them and started telling everyone else about them. It was brilliant."

In addition to growing plants for the city, the inmates also maintain the prison gardens and use scrap wood to make garden furniture like bird tables and planters. To become a part of the gardening team inmates have to pass through an application process, and once accepted they take part in horticulture work five days a week.

As inmates near their release they are offered an 8-week work experience programme in Chapelfield Shopping Centre, tending the grounds or working in retail. General Manager Davina Tanner is supportive of the horticulture scheme. "Anything which provides a positive work culture is beneficial," she says. "Lots of people in prison haven't had those work experiences in their lives, so anything that can help them to find employment on their release is a good thing."

The reoffending rate after Chapelfield is low - 5 percent, against a national average of 47 percent - and two inmates have gone on to find employment in horticulture, one setting up his own business and the other working as a landscaper.

Chairman of The Friends of Norwich in Bloom, Norwich City Council's Horticultural Officer Terry Bane is delighted with the scheme. "Without the support of HM Prison Norwich and Ray, Norwich would have no bedding displays in the city," he says. "The council has shifted its focus to perennials so this is a wonderful addition that the community is able to make. It is through the generosity of all our sponsors that the initiative is funded and we're enormously grateful for their support."

www.norwichinbloom.co.uk



The prisoners' flowers bring extra colour to the heart of Norwich, a 2013 RHS Britain in Bloom finalist

Community greens

On the outskirts of Aberdeen the community in Cove Bay has come together to transform an unattractive council amenity space into a vibrant communal growing area.

In 2010, with funding from the Scottish government's Climate Challenge Fund and a five-year lease from the council, work started to lay out plots for a 0.28 hectare community allotment. Today 31 members tend plots on the site and communal areas are made available to schools. Last year the group, Nether Loirston Growers Association (NLGA), received an 'Outstanding' award in the RHS It's Your Neighbourhood campaign.

"It's made a significant difference to the area," says NLGA Secretary Michele McPartlin. "With everyone involved it's enhanced what was previously a pretty derelict part of our community."

"We're all local residents and we hold regular social events. It's a nice mix of people and there's always someone around to chat to and always something to learn!"

Sandy Scott from Aberdeen City Council says, "The new allotment site has revitalised the neighbourhood. The council is delighted to be able to support such a community-driven enterprise and this has helped forge strong links with the community."

www.nlga.info/



Cove Bay's new community growing space and (inset) as work started.

Joined-up thinking

Gardening clubs in the North East forge links to share information, ideas and programme tips.

The Garden Clubs Information Exchange (GCIE) is a network of 21 garden clubs and specialist societies spread over North Yorkshire and County Durham. Its aim is to share information between clubs to benefit the programmes offered by each. It enables groups to keep their speaker lists up-to-date and to incorporate new but tried and tested formats or garden visits into their programme of events.

Sue Sinclair, Secretary of Hutton Rudby Garden Club & Co-ordinator of GCIE says the exchange has been a welcome source of information and has even helped to support the formation of several new clubs. "It's quite overwhelming when you start out," she says. "I suddenly found myself Secretary when our club was set up in 2001 and you think 'help!' I've got to write a programme and I have absolutely no clue as to what's out there and how to start."

"I now have a very thick folder full of information and ideas and it's great to be able to help others starting out."

Members use the exchange to send out messages when looking for speakers or to publicise and share anything from club events, to charity open gardens or allotments becoming available. Clubs have also joined together for summer visits. There's no charge to take part, all that's required is an email address and the commitment to share club programmes with the group.

"It's helped me to produce an interesting and varied programme," says Sue, who is constantly on the lookout for new ideas to keep the schedule exciting. "Every club secretary is glad of the back-up of the information exchange when it comes to writing the next programme."

The exchange meets once a year, hosted by a different club each time, to discuss shared challenges such as declining membership and the pitfalls of organising coach trips. "We have addressed the nightmare scenario of a 'no show' speaker and have devised quiz questions for such an occasion," says Sue. "Instant DIY Gardeners' Question Times can also be a life-saver!"

Should you have any queries about the information exchange Sue can be contacted on: sinclair.sue@gmail.com

Need a speaker or judge for your show?

The 2013 Speakers and Judges registers, produced by the RHS for Affiliated Societies, are now available on the RHS website.

The lists contain speakers/ judges' contact details, along with their specialist topics and their fee.

To view the registers, please visit: rhs.org.uk/affiliatedsocieties (selecting 'resources for groups')



Prisoners in the horticulture team tend the grounds of HMP Norwich in addition to growing flowers for the city centre

Savour flavour



Raymond uses fresh ingredients from the garden to create his award-winning food.

Raymond Blanc OBE is the owner and chef at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, a two Michelin star restaurant and hotel in Oxfordshire. He is supporting the Edible Britain campaign and will be helping to plant up edible gardens at Bermondsey's Tyers and Whites Estates in April.

RHS: Why are you supporting the Edible Britain campaign?

RB: When I was a child I helped my mother with her garden, and watched her grow, harvest and cook most of the wonderful things we ate – juicy, fragrant tomatoes; crisp, refreshing salads; tiny, gem-like broad beans; deliciously waxy potatoes; and beautiful, sweet orange pumpkins. I knew exactly where our food came from; I knew the feel and smell of the earth in which it grew. So even as a child I valued and cherished every bite, every mouthful; for I was connected to the land via the food I ate.

Children nowadays lack this connection with the place in which they grow up – so the best thing we can do for them is to encourage them to grow some of their own food, to experience the exhilaration of reconnecting with the soil, for the joy of eating and cooking is preceded by the joy of growing.

RHS: How did you get started with food?

RB: My childhood was probably a cliché of French rural life. At the age of seven, my father took me to the garden, made me take a handful of earth, look at it, smell it, taste it! And of course, I was very much involved in all the toiling in the garden, whilst my friends

were playing football. Then the veg would be picked, topped and tailed and cooked by my mother and often bottled for the winter.

From the age of seven I was also a hunter-gatherer across the woods of Franche-Comté where there are fields growing numerous types of wonderful produce – mushrooms, chanterelles, wild asparagus, wild berries and flowers. All that we picked would be handed to my mum to create a simple creative act of cooking and the rest sold on the side of the street. This gave me a good understanding of the cycles – and also made me a rich young man by the age of 10!

Food was very much at the heart of our house. But so was the gift of food – food was an act of love which was to be shared with the people you love, your family. All of those values have permeated my own approach to cooking and preparing food.

RHS: You grow over 90 types of vegetable and 70 varieties of herb in your kitchen garden at Le Manoir – which favourites would you choose for a small space, just a few metres large?

RB: I would have early crops of radish, crisp lettuce (I grew as a child in France 'Reine des glaces', one of my favourite varieties).

I would have canes to grow French climbing beans and peas – delicious to pick and eat straight from the garden.

RHS: What is your favourite use of an herb in the kitchen?

RB: There are so many. For example basil in pistou soup – a hearty peasant soup, combining lots of fresh vegetables in a flavoursome broth – is truly delicious. Blanching the basil leaves for a few seconds and dipping them in cold water to stop the cooking will fix the chlorophyll, preventing discolouration, thereby ensuring the vivid green colour is retained. You will lose some of the perfumes of the basil, but as there is so much of it you will still have a wonderful flavour.

RHS: What one thing could we all do to enjoy the taste of our food more?

RB: Grow the varieties you love. The journey of planting, nurturing and harvesting is incredibly rewarding and will certainly add to the enjoyment of eating it!

www.manoir.com

RHS Young School Gardener of the Year 2013

The RHS Campaign for School Gardening is on the hunt for the exceptional young gardening talent of 2013. RHS Learning Development Manager, Claire Custance met one of last year's finalists.

Last year, the RHS received more than 100 nominations from schools across the UK, telling us about young people who had made an exceptional contribution to their school and local community through gardening.

To find out what makes these young gardeners so special, I met up with Alan Monk, whose dedication to community volunteering earned him a place in the list of finalists for last year's award.

At 16, Alan already has nine years' gardening behind him, and is mostly self-taught. His interest in gardening began at the age of seven with an old, battered copy of 'The House Plant Expert' found on his mother's coffee table. It was about to be thrown away, but Alan asked if he could keep it. Soon after, he persuaded his mother to buy him some African violet plants during a trip to the local supermarket. He started to nurture a small collection in his room.

As time went on, Alan noticed that the communal gardens he could see from his window were in need of an uplift. Working alongside his mother and a few local residents, he began to plant colourful perennials to improve the area.

Meanwhile, back at Oaklands College in Havant where he is a student, Alan's developing knowledge was a great asset to his teacher Jane Osborne, who was redesigning the school garden to make way for a new BTEC course in horticulture. Alan showed great initiative by organising a 'tool amnesty' among local church-goers. Old tools

were collected by Alan and brought to school on his bike.

Whilst studying for four 'A' Levels, Alan still manages to spend five or six hours a week volunteering and doing odd gardening jobs for local residents. The pocket money he has earned from his paid work has already helped him to fund a four-week spell on a tree conservation project in Borneo. He is now saving for his next school trip to Ecuador,

where students will work with the Ecuadorian community to help them develop an understanding of sustainable forestry.

So what did Alan think about being judged a finalist in RHS Young School Gardener of the Year? Above all he was surprised to have been singled out from so many entries. On being told that he was highly commended for the time he gave up for his local community and environment he replied, "I don't see it as giving up my time. I just love being outdoors!"



In November Alan spent a morning working in RHS Garden Wisley's model gardens with Lucie Ponsford, an RHS gardener studying for the Master of Horticulture qualification.

Make your nominations!

2013 RHS Young School Gardener of the Year is now open for nominations of children and young people aged 5-16. The deadline for this year's entries is 18th May 2013.

For more information, visit rhs.org.uk/schoolgardening

How you can support your local school this spring

Spring is a busy time of year for school gardening – trying to keep on top of sowings, watering and maintenance as well as the curriculum! Here are a few ways that your group might be able to help your local school:

- Help out with the weeding – the warmer weather and rain will mean that the weeds grow faster than the crops, so a quick hoe around emerging plants will really help them establish.
- Water in dry spells – if we are lucky enough to get any! Or maybe help schools set up water harvesting from shed gutters, where butts can overflow to other butts (can be cheaper plastic barrels) by attaching piping between them.
- Donate surplus veg and flower seedlings – schools will usually be happy to try new crops.
- Help build all-weather paths around raised beds by laying old offcuts of carpet and then covering with bark chippings, if available. This will mean teachers and children alike will be more inclined to use growing areas if they don't have to walk through mud, and it stops grass from getting untidy.
- Help plant a wildflower meadow to encourage bees and give the school more biodiversity.



A small wildflower area will bring more biodiversity

**Get involved and
transform your community!**



**Find out how at
rhs.org.uk/communities**