

“When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life;  
for there is in London all that life can afford”.

Samuel Johnson 1777



Team members of the Thai Floating Market by the Long Waters of Hampton Court Palace during the 2008 Flower Show.

**I**N CITIES ACROSS AMERICA and the UK there are an increasing number of covert activists intent on leaving their mark on society. They are the urban warrior gardeners, a growing group of individuals whose mission is the ‘greening’ of our cities, turning pockets of derelict or untended land into oases for wildlife and creating visual respite from some of our dusty, rubbish strewn, concrete wasteland.

The current energy crisis has had scientists and politicians clamouring for land on which to grow bio-fuels. The knock-on effect of this has been less food production leading to an increase in the cost of corn, wheat and other staple foods. Genetically modified crops are also being hailed, by some, as the answer to all problems in spite of insufficient long-term proof that they won’t upset the balance of nature and harm the environment. As the cost of fuel increases, so does the cost of transporting food to the supermarkets and shops and, with less wheat, corn and essential grains available, prices

continue to spiral upwards. As a result, more and more people are looking at their gardens, courtyards and even balconies with new eyes.

Demand for allotments is at an all time high in England and, in the last year alone, major seed companies Marshalls and Suttons state that sales of vegetable seeds have exceeded those of flowers, with Suttons now selling 70% vegetables to 30% flowers. Suttons emphasises the health, wealth and happiness benefits of ‘growing your own’ with a speedy seed range of vegetables that can be grown quickly and in very small spaces which are ready to eat in 1–3 weeks. They also sell a range of baby vegetables that are ready to eat in 6–12 weeks and, for novices and busy people, there are seed mats for growing herbs, tomatoes, peppers and chillies that can be started indoors on the windowsill.

There are over 3,000,000 gardens in Greater London and the London Wildlife Trust is running a campaign to highlight the importance of the capital’s

gardens to wildlife and people. Not only do urban gardens provide vital habitat for wildlife and a corridor along which species can move freely, but they also provide shade, absorb carbon, soak up flood water and, by retaining water, help to cool the city, thus reducing the impact of climate change. The Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, believes that the gardens make life more pleasant for millions of people, and has pledged to “protect our gardens from being eaten up by developers”.

Add into the equation the current concerns over global warming and its many effects and we have more to concern us. Scientists predict that temperatures will increase by an average of 3-4% in summer with rainfall reducing by 20-40%. This is the equivalent of Britain moving south by 600 miles. Warmer temperatures will affect the types of plants that will thrive in these conditions so we are likely to be growing more Mediterranean style fruit and vegetables in the future.



A section of the *Dorset Cereals Edible Playground*, overall winner of the 2008 Hampton Court Flower Show.

At the 2008 RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, many of the display stands and gardens reflected the perceived need to prepare for climate change and its effects and the trend among gardeners to grow more fruit and vegetables. Many of the most vibrant and colourful gardens combined edible plants with flowers to great effect, including the overall winner of the show, The Dorset Cereals Edible Playground.

The purpose of this enchanting and educational garden was to encourage schools to develop a small kitchen garden, thereby providing children with the means to learn how to grow different crops and enjoy the fruits of their labour! Wheat, barley and oats were part of the planting scheme so that children could make the connection between the bread and cereals they eat and the crops themselves. Judging by the response from the many school children 'experiencing' the garden it certainly stimulated great interest. A see-through compost heap caught the imagination of some, while others were fascinated by the use of eggshells as containers to sprout edible seeds like alfalfa and mung beans.

Another garden that caught the eye was the 'Send A Cow' garden for its use of space and raw materials. It offered a

practical approach to gardening in a future where global food shortages and environmental challenges are likely. Its designer, John Marshall, has created a garden that provides a sustainable source of food, fodder and fuel for the unpredictable weather conditions likely in the future. The keyhole garden is based around a compost basket that continually feeds the garden as it grows, using kitchen waste. At approximately 1m high with a radius of 1.5m there is plenty of space to grow a great selection of vegetables.

The 'bags for life' are multi-storey vegetable gardens in a sack and are ideal for small and/or arid spaces. Jute sacks, with a central column of stones for drainage and aeration, provide a columnar garden. Holes can be cut at various levels of the bag (think

strawberry pots) for smaller plants, while those requiring deep roots are grown from the top of the sack. Even if you have a paved courtyard garden it's possible to grow plenty of fresh produce in these jute bags.

In contrast, the 'Living on the Ceiling' roof top style garden provides a flexible outdoor living space for the growing number of city dwellers desiring a green space of their own. Carefully designed to reduce the weight on a roof, the planters offer privacy as well as a safe barrier. Noise from traffic on the streets below is reduced by the sound of water cascading from wall-mounted planters that also provide a cooling effect to the garden. Lightweight furniture for dining and relaxation can be stowed away when not in use.

Gardens aren't only havens for relaxation or spaces to grow flowers fruit and vegetables, but can also be sanctuaries for those suffering from stress or depression. 'Breathing Space ... Thinking Place' was the title of the impressive garden designed for the Samaritans. The UK's only 24/7 emotional support service, their aim is to promote better emotional health in the community. One of the designers, Catherine Kenny explained how the garden was created to encapsulate the Samaritan experience. "The front section represents busy lives, stress and the sort of things that might lead



Close-up of a keyhole garden at the *Send a Cow* site, showing access to the central compost area which, when watered, feeds the entire garden.

someone to feel they need to ring the Samaritans. The next section, delineated by a curved steel archway with two beautiful facing seats over reflective pools, represents communication, unloading and speaking your mind. Then, after the communication, you go through to the third section, a wilder, softer freer area representing a place of quiet reflection where you can think through the process.”

Another charity, Thrive, whose aim is to research, educate and promote the use and advantages of gardening for those with a disability, made its debut at the Flower Show. According to a recent survey, commissioned by Thrive, three out of four people believe that gardening has benefited their health, while one in five claim that it has helped them through a time of mental or physical ill health. Thrive helps people of every age and ability to achieve, through gardening, better physical health, a sense of purpose and achievement, the opportunity to connect with others and a chance to gain new skills.



A close-up of some jute sacks at the *Send a Cow* garden

With the emphasis on growing edible plants, the show included a Growing Tastes Marquee, highlighting the best in seasonal produce from amateur growers, with a stunning display of edible produce. The National Farmers' Union staged an impressive and colourful display composed of British-grown flowers, fruits and vegetables, while an equally delightful display, celebrating the Year of Food & Farming was designed to fire young children's imaginations as to the source of the fruit and vegetables they eat.

The Growing Tastes Kitchen Garden high-lighted three fruit and vegetable gardens inspired by Asian, Mediterranean and traditional British cuisine. The Mediterranean garden, enhanced by fig, olive and peach trees, displayed a colourful array of artichokes, aubergines, fennel, radicchio and romaine lettuces, while the Asian garden featured herbs and such vegetables as Chinese celery and Japanese turnips under a canopy of loquat and persimmon trees. Many familiar varieties of vegetables, including swede, beetroot, leek and potato were on display in the British garden, intermingled with vibrant perlargoniums, marigolds and nasturtiums.

The aim of the UK's leading gardening charity, the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), is to encourage everyone, whatever their age, to reap the benefits that gardening can bring. The charity is running a 'Grow Your Own Veg' campaign with some intriguing suggestions as to how you can grow healthy produce in very little space: lettuce in an old piggy bank, spring onions in discarded wellington boots, beetroot in an unused drawer and carrots in an old bucket, not forgetting tomatoes in a hanging basket.



Elevated dining at the *Living on the Ceiling* stand.

Their ambition is to help 80% of UK primary schools provide their pupils with hands-on learning opportunities by 2012, using school grounds to grow plants and garden sustainably. Children are encouraged to enjoy healthy physical activity while learning to develop social skills such as communication, teamwork, patience, caring and respect. By inspiring, motivating and stimulating the children, thus making learning more relevant and enjoyable, schools can expect an improvement in academic achievement, a reduction in behavioural problems, and better attendance.

There are many benefits to be gained from growing our own fruit and vegetables. Even those with tiny gardens or balconies might be surprised at how much can be grown in a limited space. Gardening is a natural form of exercise that calms the mind, gives us a greater connection with Nature and exposes us to fresh air. Home grown fruit and vegetables are fresher, cheaper and generally taste better than supermarket bought produce and the nutritional benefits from eating freshly picked produce are many. Leafy vegetables can lose between 30-60% of vitamins within 8 hours of harvesting so the 'fresh produce' we buy in shops is less beneficial than locally grown, recently harvested food. If you are



A magnificent display at the Year of Food and Farming South East stand entitled *School's In - School's Out*.

concerned about carbon emissions you are cutting down on food miles and, if you choose to grow pesticide and chemical free crops, the benefits to your health and the environment are even greater.

Whether you believe in global warming or not the last two summers in Britain have certainly raised some people's awareness of changing climatic conditions. The UK has seen monsoon-like rainfall leading to extensive flooding again this year. India, China and Bangladesh have suffered extremes of weather, while parts of the Caribbean and the USA have been battered by successive hurricanes. The world's ten warmest years have occurred since 1995 and many scientists now believe that global warming is already here,

predicting that Britain will seem more like the South of France within 80 years. With the fears of financial meltdown throughout the European and USA stock markets very much on people's minds perhaps now is the time to consider what we, as individuals, can do to help our environment as well as ourselves? ♦



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She is also a 'Project You' Life Coach and a Wordweaving™ practitioner. Prior to becoming an alternative therapist Suellen spent 20 years travelling/living in such diverse locations as Greece, Borneo, Germany, Belize, The Falkland Islands, Hong Kong, Gibraltar and Cyprus where she worked as a freelance writer/photographer. Her travels inspired in her a love of wildlife and the natural environment and she believes that the health of our planet will be reflected in our health.

For further information visit:  
[www.wildlondon.org.uk](http://www.wildlondon.org.uk) for the London Wildlife Trust  
[www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables](http://www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables)  
[www.edibleplayground.co.uk](http://www.edibleplayground.co.uk)  
[www.sendacow.org.uk](http://www.sendacow.org.uk)  
[www.warkscol.ac.uk](http://www.warkscol.ac.uk) for the Living on the Ceiling (no more room down there) garden  
[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)  
[www.thrive.org.uk](http://www.thrive.org.uk)



An aspect of the Homebase garden showing how attractive herbs, fruit and vegetables can look in a garden.