Growing kind

GARDENS CAN BE A SANCTUARY, BUT THEY'RE ALSO FOR SHARING. THESE GARDENERS' PURPOSE IN PLANTING IS TO HELP OTHERS, GIVING JOY, SOLACE OR INSPIRATION – OR SIMPLY A HELPING HAND

Words: **JO MATTOCK**



Planting for... a neighbour

"On more than one occasion, the stresses of my office job made me want to skip going to the garden and stay on the sofa," admits Yvonne Berg, "but I'd go anyway, because I'd made a commitment to my garden partner."

Yvonne gardens through Edinburgh Garden Partners, a scheme that pairs up volunteer wannabe gardeners with people who are unable to tend their own gardens. It's meant that Yvonne – who lives in a flat with no outside space – has been able to extend beyond her houseplant collection to try growing edibles, and on a larger scale for the first time, especially as waiting lists for allotments in the city can be as long as eight years. "I liked the idea of sharing a plot and having someone to discuss ideas and plans with and to share the successes and failures with while also having the support of the EGP team and other volunteers," she said.

The garden that Yvonne took on last year had raised beds for growing veg, but was very overgrown, with lots of brambles and weeds. It did have a strawberry patch, an apple tree and rhubarb, though, which Yvonne is now tending to. She dug out the weeds and cut back the brambles (though she's left some as she says they produce a good amount of fruit).

She also planted in the raised beds. "I focused on things that were (allegedly) easy to grow and things that I liked to eat," she admits. This means parsnips, peas and lettuce will be on the menu again this year. However, gardening with a partner does mean expanding your considerations. "My garden partner told me that podding broad beans is somewhat difficult for her," Yvonne explains, "so I'm switching to varieties that don't need to be podded, like mangetout." And, for fun, she's picked the purple varieties.

She's appreciated the extra motivation to get out into the garden, even when the sofa was calling. "I usually left feeling better than when I set out," she says.

During the first few months, she "was worried nothing would grow, and my garden partner might be disappointed," but now Yvonne better understands how "so much is out of your control as a gardener. There's only so much you can do. So have a go, experiment – it might turn out better than expected."

edinburghgardenpartners.org.uk

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Bringing community gardens to Chelsea Flower Show, Tayshan designed a garden that represented the Mangrove Nine – a group of anti-racism activists from Kensington in the 1970s



Planting for... a community

Tayshan Hayden-Smith grew up in North Kensington, London, and, in the aftermath of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire, he began undertaking local projects such as cleaning and litter-picking. "One thing led to another..." he admits and he ended up creating the Grenfell Garden for Peace in an unloved community space. It started with Tayshan asking garden centres for plant donations, and the growing garden seeded conversations, which led to gatherings and events being held there.

When asked why he felt inspired to create the garden, Tayshan says that it became an outlet. "I can't even pin down why," he says. "It was very natural; this activism, this activist within me, started to grow. I was standing in that garden and what I really enjoyed was the connection. Not just with soil and plants and the land, but also with people. It dawned on me how I'd never seen something bring so many people together in such a way."

Following the Grenfell Garden for Peace, he went on to set up Grow2Know, a campaign group for equal access to green space. He also planted other guerrilla gardens, and has now designed gardens for the Chelsea Flower Show.

He sees the benefits of community gardens – and access to nature, which is often unequal – as wide ranging. "Mental health, physical health, wellbeing, food security, pollution and air quality, as well as community cohesion, intergenerational connection biodiversity, climate change, and climate resilience – all of these thread through society and the environment – we need to start looking at them hand-in-hand rather than as exclusive."

Tayshan says that any space offers the opportunity for nature to creep in. "I'm a big advocate for things being bespoke – what you do in one place will be different to what you do in another. You're guided by conditions like light and soil. I don't have a formula – there's a beauty in that."

No matter how they look or what is grown, there's something similar in all guerrilla and community gardens. "It's our common ground," says Tayshan. "No matter your politics, your ideas, your philosophies, your thoughts on life, we have an intrinsic connection to nature, we *are* nature. And I do think that's the way we can problem solve and find solutions." »

Small Space Revolution by Tayshan Hayden-Smith (DK) is out now.







Planting for... passers-by

"When the tulips flowered, I noticed people stopping to take photographs," says Jessica Stokes, who writes the blog *Flower and Land*. She's a champion for the front garden – a way of not only increasing your growing area but also sharing joy with those who pass by.

"No matter how big or small, most people have some kind of space outside their front door," she says.

Jessica speaks from experience; her own front garden is compact, measuring 3m by 4m and is partly paved and partly gravel. Using galvanised containers, she planted a wide range of bulbs and annuals to create "an abundant cottage garden at the front of my house," she explains. She's certainly felt the benefit. "It's always a tonic to see it as I step out the house in the morning, or walk in through the gate after a stressful day." The containers have encouraged wildlife, and given colour and scent to what was a rather barren area. But the benefits extend in other, more social ways, too. When Jessica started her garden during lockdown, part of its purpose was to give her a connection to the people living around her. "I like to sit on my doorstep and watch the life of our village, and my garden has become something for the wider community, too. When I'm watering, I meet new people passing by – before I know it, we'll be exchanging tips on growing sweet peas."

"The containers have encouraged wildlife, and given colour and scent to a barren area"

Jessica says you don't need to make big changes to improve your space. Planting up pots with spring bulbs or summer annuals like cosmos, and placing them by your front door can do the trick. "Every year I make a simple tripod from hazel, willow or bamboo and plant sweet peas," she says. "It provides jarfuls of cut flowers all summer, and the birds love eating the aphids on them. But the best thing is the scent in the evenings."

Whether it's full of sweet peas in the summer or tulips in spring, Jessica's front garden can raise a smile on her face and others'. "It's become a haven for me, something to nurture, and a positive focus to set my mind to. I never have any visitors walk into my house without commenting on the garden – even the postman likes to talk about my dahlias!" *flowerandland.com*

PHOTOGRAPHY: MONA ABBOUD; ALAMY; YVONNE BERG; MARIANNE MAJERUS; JESSICA STOKES



Planting for... posterity

Gardeners always plant with an eye on the future – but perhaps Mona Abboud is thinking longer term than most of us. While legacy gardens are often associated with the likes of stately homes, Mona proves it's possible with more modest plots. She's bequeathed the back garden of her London terrace to the charity Perennial, which supports people who work in the horticulture industry. After she dies, the house and garden will belong to the charity, who will open it to the public and use it as a base, and for propagating rare plants.

In fact, leaving her garden to the charity spurred Mona on to buy 600sq m of a neighbour's neglected land and expand her plot. "Otherwise I wouldn't have done it," she says. "I'm 73 years old. If I hadn't, at this stage of life, I wouldn't lumber myself with that. If I did it just for me and then once I'm gone, somebody buys it and wrecks it, there's no point."

She speaks from hard-won experience. "I created a garden in Sussex, and things didn't work out, so I sold the property within a year," she explains. "But I'd planted these wonderful and very rare shrubs and trees. When I came to sign the final contract, and was in front of the house, I realised they'd dug everything up and chucked it all in a skip. I sat there, I howled and I swore to myself that this would never happen again. Somehow!"

Mona, whose father was Lebanese and who has lived in France and Italy, grows a range of plants from the Mediterranean. "One always recreates one's background and childhood wherever one goes, I think," she says. She hopes the garden will inspire people to broaden the range of plants they grow.

"People can be narrow-minded in their choice," she says. "It's always the same old, same old. But particularly if you have a small garden, you could have maybe three wonderful evergreens that you can shape, prune or topiarise that will give your garden definition and wonderful architectural interest."

She has the national collection of Corokia, an evergreen shrub native to New Zealand, which she says is a great species to plant for longevity. "These plants are the future because they're low maintenance, they're mostly drought tolerant, they're suited to this climate, and they're not labour intensive like perennials. I've created a garden for all seasons, and a garden for the future." *Mona is currently writing a book about her garden extension. To find out more, visit monasgarden.co.uk*

