

## Growing community Bloomers make a difference



Grow a hedge  
Greening Grey Britain: RHS support  
Community orchard takes shape



## 2 Welcome

## 3 Greening Grey Britain 2019

## 4 News



## 6 Growing as a force for good

## 8 Planting a hedge

## 10 Reuse your garden sticks

## 12 Urban orchards

## 14 Championing school gardening

 @RHSBloom  
 rhscommunitygardening

Cover image: RHS / Julie Howden  
RHS Regional Development Manager, Liz Stewart with The Ridge's Craig Huggan at the Dunbar Greening Grey Britain 2018 garden.

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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/get-involved](https://rhs.org.uk/get-involved)



...to the winter issue of *Grass Roots*, the magazine for all community gardening groups, including Bloom and It's Your Neighbourhood groups and RHS Affiliated Societies.

A very happy New Year to you all! We hope you've all enjoyed a well-deserved rest and have had a chance to put your feet up after the hustle and bustle of the festive period.

Just as the buds that herald spring appear in the depths of winter, many of your plans for the year ahead may have been germinating for some time. We are excited to see some of those plans take shape as we begin another year of growing together.

Do let us know what you have in store – perhaps you're embarking on a new project, branching out and joining in with others,

or changing tack in some way. Some of your big ideas could possibly be helped into being, as part of RHS Greening Grey Britain 2019. We are again looking for innovative projects that bring different generations together. Find out more on the next page.

Best wishes and happy gardening,



Emily  
Emily Bringham, Editor

### Your news – from Twitter

**@Denbighinbloom** The Temple Bar #volunteers out in force this week clearing, planting, pruning and setting up bird feeders and hedgehogs houses. #Dinbych #Denbigh #Community #wildlife #gardening #ourbloom

**@PortisheadBloom** Lovely to see so many people visiting our River of Poppies in Jubilee Park in the last few days. We're leaving them there until 4th December, after which they will be sold for the Royal British Legion.

**@ChestnutEvents** A brilliant harvest event @StramongateNews @RHSSchools the children have worked so hard all year to produce an amazing crop and 80 people turned up to taste their vegetable and leek and potato soups. Thanks to all the volunteers for supporting the event!

**@Kingsbridgein** We are lucky enough to be able to use spare shop windows on the high street to display what we've been up to! #bloomhour #OurBloom

**@JohnMcG97393023 (McGowan)** @scottishcanals @glasgowoverpla1 @ScottishPower @McDonalds @KBSotland @SustransScot combined with 71 volunteers to collect 91 bags of litter from Murano Street to Stockingfield Junction on the @forthclydecanal Canal a HUGE thank you.

Share your news with us on Twitter @RHSBloom, email your letters to [communities@rhs.org.uk](mailto:communities@rhs.org.uk), or send by post to: RHS Community Horticulture, RHS, 80 Vincent Square, London SW1P 2PE. Letters and tweets may be edited for publication.

Print correction: The following RHS Britain in Bloom Community Champions should have been included in the autumn issue of *Grass Roots*: Tony Kear, Usk; Mel Kirby, Didsbury; Amanda Stevenson, Newcastle-under-Lyme and Lynette Talbot, Sidmouth.

# News



RHS / JULIE HOWDEN

**Left**  
Volunteers and students from Dunbar Grammar School put the finishing touches to a sensory garden they helped create for people with dementia and their carers as part of Greening Grey Britain 2018.

## New RHS support for greener communities

Is there a neglected space in your patch you'd love to transform into a green oasis to help inspire the next generation? Apply to take part in Greening Grey Britain in 2019.

The RHS is again offering a number of community groups expert, hands-on support, plus up to £500 worth of plants and materials, for projects that transform spaces and bring people together.

Imagine forgotten, littered corners reborn as vibrant, wildflower meadows; car parks lined with trees to slow the flow of storm water; or a disused space reborn as a community food garden.

Successful projects will be supported with a tailored approach that suits the place and people involved, with expert advice offered on many aspects, from planting plans to community engagement.

### How to apply

Projects must be partnership-based and intergenerational. At least one partner must either: take part in RHS Britain in Bloom, be part of It's Your Neighbourhood, be registered as an RHS Affiliated Society, or be part of the RHS Campaign for School Gardening. This year applicants must also show how their plans fit in with at least one of the following themes:

### Grow for people

Create a garden to help promote better health and wellbeing, such as a sensory garden for relaxation, or a therapeutic growing space for those with specific health needs. In 2018, Dunbar Dementia Carers Support Group worked with social enterprise The Ridge and Dunbar Grammar School (pictured above), to create a place of respite for people with dementia and their carers.

### Grow for the planet

Create a garden that helps address local environmental issues. This might be a productive space with fresh, seasonal food to share with others, reducing food miles, or a garden made from reused materials, as a Sheffield-based intergenerational wildflower project did in 2017. If you're in a low-rainfall area, you could create a dry garden to cope with long, hot summer days, or for those in wetter parts of the UK, you might consider a rain garden or flood-resilient planting.

### Grow for wildlife

Creating a space for wildlife will help boost local biodiversity. In 2018, Bloom group Burncross Action Team in Sheffield partnered with schools to transform a neglected council storage yard with wildflower meadows and bug hotels. Other ideas might include growing a butterfly garden to help halt the widespread decline of these beautiful insects, or creating a new network of wildlife ponds.

Please note that as this programme involves hands-on involvement from a member of our Community Outreach team, we are only able to support projects in regions where we have a project officer.

The RHS would like to thank M&G Investments for its support of this programme.

To apply before the end of February, and for more info, visit [rhs.org.uk/get-involved](https://rhs.org.uk/get-involved)





RHS / HELEN VATES

## RHS School Gardeners of the Year

Do you know a fabulous school gardening group, a young gardening star, or a gardening leader who inspires young people to get growing? Entries are now open for the 2019 RHS School Gardeners of the Year competition, so why not nominate them for an award in recognition of their hard work?

The School Gardening Champion of the Year does not need to be a teacher – you could nominate a community volunteer that helped set up a school gardening project, for example.

Visit [schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk](http://schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk) to apply before 24 April.

Shreya Per was one of the young winners in 2018.



RHS / RICHARD DAWSON

## Pupils shine in Green Plan It Challenge

More than 1,000 12–14-year-olds took part in the RHS Green Plan It Challenge in 2018, designing gardens for their schools and communities. The pupils were challenged to come up with a garden design in small teams, supported by an industry mentor. Designs ranged from hydroponic balconies for garden-less buildings to calming, plant-filled retreats for exam-stressed pupils. Some previous participants have gone on to create their gardens, including the 2016 Scottish winners, Notre Dame High School, which created a sensory garden for people with dementia. More teams will now be able to follow suit thanks to a new Community Outreach support scheme to assist them.

## Bloom criteria updated

Following feedback from hundreds of Bloom groups, the RHS Britain in Bloom marking criteria are being updated to reflect the changing nature of the programme. From 2019, 40 percent of all marks will be awarded to efforts in horticulture, with 30 percent devoted to community and 30 percent to the environment, replacing the previous split of 50, 25 and 25. This recognises the growing importance of community engagement and environmental stewardship to groups across the UK. New marking sheets have been adopted by UK Finals judges for 2019, and may be adopted by Regions and Nations at varying times. See [rhs.org.uk/get-involved/britain-in-bloom](http://rhs.org.uk/get-involved/britain-in-bloom), or contact your co-ordinator or RHS Communities for more.

**Below**  
RHS Britain in Bloom judge Jon Wheatley viewing the WI Garden in Usk, Wales.



RHS / ADRIAN WHITE

## Bloom at Tatton in 2019

Would your gardening group like to design a Blooming Border for RHS Flower Show Tatton Park 2019? This year the theme is 'Hot Topics' – a chance to explore a pressing issue on a local, national or even international scale. Your design will need to be planted-up on site between 8 and 15 July, before being judged and going on display. Visit [rhs.org.uk/getinvolvedshows](http://rhs.org.uk/getinvolvedshows) or contact Ashleigh Griffith on [ashleighgriffith@rhs.org.uk](mailto:ashleighgriffith@rhs.org.uk)/020 7821 3098, for more.

## Fund for rural communities

Community groups in an area not on the main UK gas network could be eligible for a grant from Calor. Grants of up to £5,000 are on offer for projects that aim to improve a community, such as a new public garden. The fund opens in March, with communities encouraged to register interest at [calor.co.uk/communityfund](http://calor.co.uk/communityfund)

## Salford grows well

RHS Garden Bridgewater has teamed up with Salford CVS to encourage community groups to transform their local green spaces. The Grow Well fund, supported by NHS Salford CCG, is supporting projects that promote wellbeing through community gardening. The fund is part of a wider programme of community outreach work to get Salfordians growing ahead of the fifth RHS Garden opening in 2020.

## How do you celebrate?

Community groups are quite rightly keen to celebrate their anniversary milestones, perhaps using them as a chance to bring in new members. Todmorden in Bloom in West Yorkshire, which celebrates 20 years in 2019, is looking for bright ideas to mark the occasion. We'd love to share your ideas and experiences – if you've celebrated an anniversary recently, tell us how you did it on Twitter, tagging @RHSBloom or email [communities@rhs.org.uk](mailto:communities@rhs.org.uk)

## Community grants

The Big Lottery Fund is calling for applicants to the Reaching Communities programme, with grants of more than £10,000 available to groups in England for projects that bring people together. Project activities, operating costs, organisational development and capital costs are all eligible. Find out more and apply with a summary of your idea in the first instance, at [biglotteryfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/reaching-communities-england](http://biglotteryfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/reaching-communities-england)

## Passing the taste test

If your group holds annual horticultural shows, when judging do you consider the taste as well as the appearance of fruit and vegetables? Some groups are relaxing the rules of their competitions and introducing new elements in a bid to bring in new members. We'd love to hear your experiences or views. Email [affiliated@rhs.org.uk](mailto:affiliated@rhs.org.uk) before the end of February.

## Get all our news online

Did you know that you can access all the issues of *Grass Roots* on our website? Feel free to share this link with your co-gardeners and friends. If you sign-up to our monthly e-news you can also have it delivered straight to your inbox each quarter, along with monthly news, tips and case studies on growing better with others. Visit [rhs.org.uk/grassroots](http://rhs.org.uk/grassroots)

## Water stories

Has your club or community gardened with a focus on water? We are interested in your best examples of saving water, such as through innovative water harvesting or drought-tolerant planting. We'd also like to hear your experiences of dealing with too much water, including planting for flood resilience or creating rain gardens. Please share your stories or future plans before the end of February at [communities@rhs.org.uk](mailto:communities@rhs.org.uk)



RHS / PAUL DEBOIS

## RHS allotment visits in 2019

The RHS Fruit, Vegetable and Herb Committee is hoping to share its expertise with allotment and community gardeners in 2019.

Members of the committee and RHS staff are available to visit groups to discuss all aspects of edible crop production. The visits could cover topics such as ground preparation, cultural techniques, choice of cultivars and pest and disease control.

The visit could take the form of an onsite tour with plot holders to discuss the site's production in detail. This could also be followed by a more formal question and answer session with a larger audience, possibly as part of an evening event.

Members will be visiting East Worcestershire, South Staffordshire and the West Midlands from 28–30 June 2019. If your group works in one of these areas and is interested and available at this time, please contact [plantcommittees@rhs.org.uk](mailto:plantcommittees@rhs.org.uk) to arrange your visit.





SIMON GRAHAM



SIMON GRAHAM

**Right**  
The verdant Berries and Blooms community allotment, Ballymena, Northern Ireland.

**Below**  
Allotment volunteers Thomas Balmer and John Logan (centre) with RHS judges and project partners on their Bloom UK Finals judging day, 2018.

# Growing communities

How two communities overcame significant challenges and brought people together through innovative gardening programmes.

## Rochdale's pebble effect

Earlier this decade, Rochdale found itself in the headlines for all the wrong reasons, but more recently it has begun to be singled-out for a much cheerier cause. The large town, northeast of Manchester, is now being seen as a place of resilience, in part through residents' remarkable efforts in community gardening.

Rochdale in Bloom sprung up in 2010 around three projects, and has blossomed into a 31-strong It's Your Neighbourhood (IYN) network, including, 'friends of' groups, schools and charities – a considerable feat for a programme with less than £5,000 annual funding.

In 2018, the volunteer team won Gold at the Britain in Bloom awards in Belfast, before being handsomely rewarded at the North West in Bloom awards, scooping more awards than any other town in the competition.

The energetic chair of Rochdale in Bloom, Roy Down, who was also recognised with a North West in Bloom Community Champion

award in 2018, describes the effect the programme has had locally. 'Previously there was only negative press, but all those fears of what kind of place Rochdale is have been blown away,' he says. 'It's a deprived area, but Bloom has given us that infectious spirit and everybody has got behind it.'

One of the most popular recent projects has been the aptly named Wonderwall garden – a high-achieving IYN outside Spotland Stadium (home to Rochdale AFC and Rochdale Hornets), where the hit *Wonderwall* by the band Oasis is the theme song. Several new IYNs emerged from this effort, a trend Roy has observed and encouraged, describing it as the Bloom pebble effect. 'Most groups have at least one spin-off IYN now – it's really spreading,' he says. A planted urban trail for an over 60s walking group and a garden at an assisted living complex for people with disabilities are two that have arisen out of the original project.

The core volunteer team at Rochdale in Bloom mentors newer groups where

possible, or matches up similar smaller groups so that they can share plans and learn from each other.

Many new memorial gardens to commemorate the First World War were also born in 2018, allowing some villages to hold their first ever local Armistice Day events. Volunteers have also restored a large number of derelict allotments at learning centre the Growth Project, working with people with mental health issues alongside the charity Mind. At the same time, a former neglected woodland has been restored with the help of the Countryside Rangers, Groundwork and Community Payback. The woodland, which has seen a four-fold increase in the number of wildflower species recorded on site since 2013, is used as an outdoor classroom by five schools in the area.

'So for us, Bloom is like the nucleus and then loads of networks and projects come off that,' Roy explains. 'It's not even about gardening for a lot of people. I'm hopeless with plants, it's all about people.'

## Blooming Ballymena

Berries and Blooms is a thriving community allotment that sits directly within a housing estate in Drumtara, Ballymena in Northern Ireland. In 2012 the residents had first expressed the wish for a community growing space to transform the neglected land in the centre of the site, which was a hotspot for anti-social behaviour and fly-tipping. Their hard work and persistence finally paid off – in 2016, a £267,000 grant from the Department for Communities at Mid and East Antrim Borough Council helped bring it into being.

Residents embraced the opportunity and now run the site as a social enterprise, with funds going back into the development of the project. The once bare site now holds 33 allotment plots, alongside a polytunnel, timber pergolas, raised vegetable beds, sheds, and ornamental planting. Allotment holders are also planning for a small native orchard and an outdoor pizza oven to complete their food-growing hub.

Aside from the sweeping green vistas

residents now enjoy, the real transformation has been in the way they've taken ownership of the plots, says Thomas Balmer of the residents' association that took on co-ordination of the project.

'The project has made a phenomenal difference to the community here,' he said. 'Some of the residents with physical and mental health problems have found a new lease of life and a real sense of purpose. It's hard to describe the impact it's had; most people had never gardened before and now everyone does – men, women, young and old. It's really brought people together and it just seems to get stronger and stronger.'

The group now makes up part of Ballymena in Bloom, which last year competed in the UK Finals, representing Ulster. Visiting judges Rae Beckwith and James Cordingley described Berries and Blooms as, 'The most remarkable allotment. It has changed the lives of those living in the area and working on the site, and there is no doubt it will be a model for others going forward.'



ROCHDALE IN BLOOM



ROCHDALE FOOTBALL CLUB

**Left, above**  
The restored woodland used as an outdoor classroom by five schools and managed by Rochdale in Bloom.

**Left**  
Rochdale in Bloom volunteers taking a pause from planting the Wonderwall outside Spotland Stadium.





RHS / NEIL HEWORTH

**Left**  
A mature native hawthorn hedge can act as a wildlife refuge as well as a natural boundary and garden feature.

# Plant a hedge

**RHS Chief Horticulturist Guy Barter gives some sound advice on selecting and planting a natural garden barrier.**

A hedge is a great way to create a natural boundary for a garden or community space and is often beneficial to wildlife. Mixed hedges – those that contain many different types of plants – are more valuable for wildlife than a hedge grown of a single species. Many bird species nest and seek berries within the protection of an established hedge. Bumblebees nest at the base or forage for nectar, and many other insects make their homes in hedges too. Small mammals will take shelter in hedges, as will frogs, toads and newts if conditions are damp.

A typical British wildlife hedge will contain hawthorn, blackthorn, field maple, spindle bush, guelder rose, wild rose and holly, the only evergreen. Having said that, a single-species hedge can still provide a useful function for wildlife particularly in winter, and if it is evergreen such as *Photinia*, Portugal laurel, *Lonicera nitida*

and *Elaeagnus × ebbingei*, the foliage will provide extra cover.

Evergreen plants make excellent hedges; cherry laurel, native holly, Portugal laurel, evergreen oak (*Quercus ilex*) and privet are all reliable options. Conifers, with the exception of yew (arguably the best of all hedges), are best treated with caution – western red cedar and Leyland cypress make lovely mossy hedges, but are prone to dead patches and if they become unruly may respond poorly to being cut back.

Annual pruning or clipping of a hedge is necessary to stop it from doing what comes naturally – turning into trees. This is best carried out in winter when the hedging is dormant, and to make sure that wildlife won't be disturbed. Avoid nesting season between early March and the end of August too. Hedges can be clipped into formal shapes, best suited to tight spaces or formal gardens, or allowed to be relatively scraggy

or informal, requiring less upkeep and being more wildlife friendly.

Some woody plants, large shrubs and trees respond to repeated clipping from an early age to shape them into a hedge. Hazel makes an indifferent hedge, while beech and hornbeam make excellent hedges. Hornbeam, along with lime, is especially suitable to pleaching (interlacing young trees to form an elevated canopy).

In a wildlife-friendly hedge, ideally only a portion of the hedge should be cut back each year, leaving some older, bushier growth for winter food as well as bird nesting sites in spring. The untrimmed section is also more likely to flower the following year.

## Creating a wildlife-friendly barrier

An instant natural barrier can be created very cheaply from dead prunings – this type of barrier is called a 'dead hedge' and is often found in managed woodlands or reserves. It makes good use of cuttings and garden debris while providing a habitat for insects and beetles as well as a rich feeding ground for small mammals such as hedgehogs. Creating a dead hedge is a great activity for volunteers or for young people in a school environment, since its creation can be tied in with science or conservation learning.

For an attractive and wildlife-friendly barrier, drive a parallel line of upright poles into the ground every 1.5 metres. Chicken wire can be used to define the space to be filled, but if your hedge is a boundary, be sure hedgehogs have somewhere to pass through. Pack prunings lengthways. Depending on the uprights, the 'hedge' can be up to around 2m tall.

The twigs will rot and crumble quite quickly, and this decaying timber has wildlife value. Simply top up the shrinking prunings each year and from time to time, knock in replacement uprights.



RHS

**Above**  
A dead hedge, such as this one at RHS Garden Wisley is a great way to create a rich habitat for invertebrates and their many feeders.

## Planting hedges

Prepare a line of weed-free, firm, fertile soil by digging then set hedging plants at 30–50cm intervals, depending on the plant used. The roots should be only just covered in soil, and the soil firmed around them. A garden line helps ensure straightness where required. A double row of staggered plants gives quicker results, though is not essential. Hedging plants may be small, but they are inexpensive and usually grow fast. At RHS Garden Wisley, the practice is to trim just the sides as they grow to produce dense growth, and only start trimming the top as the plants begin to reach the desired final height. Weed control, protection from grazers such as rabbits, and summer watering is important for the first two years.

For hedges in shady areas, consider evergreens that will grow when most trees are leafless; Portugal and cherry laurel, holly and yew, for example. Hedges in shade won't be quite as dense as those that grow in the open and will need careful watering to get them started when they have to compete with tree roots. The advantage is that they will grow more slowly and need less cutting.

## The sad case of box hedges

As if fungal box blight diseases were not enough, box tree caterpillar has now arrived in Britain. Between them these problems mean a dark shadow is hanging over the future of box – the best of all small hedges. The RHS is researching these problems and evaluating potential box tree substitutes, but given this, box may not currently be the most reliable option for your project, particularly if you are averse to chemical control [www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?pid=88](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?pid=88)



# Up sticks

**Maintaining and pruning trees and woody plants creates garden waste that can serve a purpose, as RHS Chief Horticulturist Guy Barter explains.**

A wide range of woody plants yield sticks, stems and supports that have many uses in the garden. Prunings from garden shrubs such as *Kolkwitzia* and *Philadelphus* could provide material of sufficient size to be used for staking, while dogwoods and willows yield coloured shoots that can be fashioned into decorative supports. Native or naturalised plants such as spindle bushes, hazels, sweet chestnut, poplar and willow all yield great pliable material that can be utilised around the garden. Ash in particular makes good poles.

Garden prunings of one-year old woody stems are usable for basket-making, while 10-year old lengths are suitable for hurdles.

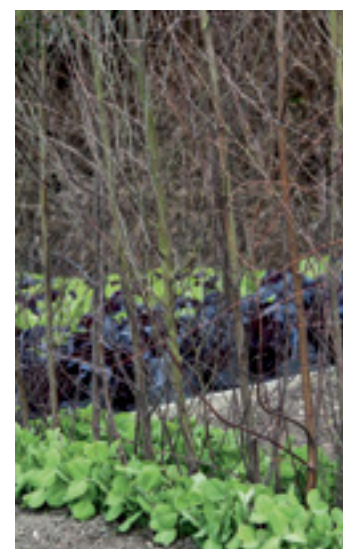
The practices of coppicing (repeatedly cutting trees to ground level to induce many shoots) or pollarding (where a tree is cut back so the stems sprout at the top of the decapitated trunk) generate abundant shoots, canes, stems or poles depending on the length of the regrowth.

Sticks are not very durable and become brittle within a year or so outdoors, often crumbling in their second year. Happily, discarded and decomposing sticks add great benefit to wildlife.

Not all uses of sticks are utilitarian – children will instinctively use suitable sticks to construct dens, for example.



RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH



RHS / TIM SANDALL



RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH

**Top**  
Stream banks stabilised with woven willow.

**Left**  
Young pea plants and twiggy pea sticks.

**Above**  
Woven wicker supports, or 'hurdles' for border edges.

## Which stick for what?

- The most straightforward use for straight and strong prunings is as pea sticks and stakes, for tomatoes or kale.
- Small wigwams can be woven from pliable material to provide support for plants such as *Rhodochiton* or *Thunbergia* and taller ones for more substantial plants such as pumpkins or squash.
- Wigwams can be extended to become lengthy supports and complicated stick structures for rows of runner beans and other climbers.
- Pliable stems, a feature of immature shoots can be woven to make baskets.

Willow, specially grown for this purpose and stripped of its bark is the most familiar wood used for basketry but any shoots from garden, hedgerow or forest can be used.

Soaking the stems in water for several days before weaving them makes the stems much more flexible, although some such as bramble can

be used without being soaked but de-thorned, of course.

- Heavier stems are commonly interleaved with sturdier uprights to make woven hurdles (traditionally from hazel, for enclosing sheep) and plant supports.

- Light timbers of chestnut may be nailed to a frame to make gate-like hurdles. Short 'hurdles' (as in the photograph above) can be used as edging for beds and borders.

- Willow plantations exist today for basket- and coffin-making though much of their former widespread use in agriculture and industry has faded away. In some places, the practice is being revived in a bid to encourage the higher levels of biodiversity once encountered in coppiced plantations. That their production doesn't contribute to carbon emissions, nor add to landfill as plastic or metal options do, is another advantage.

## Sources of sticks

If you don't have a good source of sticks in your patch, your local wildlife reserve may have coppiced or pollarded trees that they maintain, and may allow access to offcuts. The Community Forest Association, National Coppice Federation, or the company Coppice Products may also be able to assist.

## Other things to consider

- ✿ Ash tree dieback – please note that it is not currently permitted to move ash seeds or trees. However, ash timber can be moved.
- ✿ Oak trees are not often pollarded or coppiced nowadays, but it is important that any oak tree products in areas where oak tree processionary moth occurs are not moved out of such areas.
- ✿ Felling licences are required to fell trees other than in private gardens. Some trees may fall under Tree Protection Orders (TPO), or be in a conservation area and so permission must be sought before any cutting goes ahead.

## Stick science

- All plants have a root-shoot balance, and if shoots are removed the plant will grow more foliage to reset that balance.

- Deciduous trees store nutrients in their roots. These reserves allow particularly speedy regrowth if shoots or boughs are pruned.

- Plants that respond well to coppicing, such as hazel, or to pollarding, such as willow, are especially likely to send out masses of speedy, straight shoots that lend themselves to basketry, weaving, hurdle-making or trimming into stakes, poles or pea sticks. This is due to their having a reserve of buds (epicormic buds) beneath their bark that lie dormant until released into growth by pruning upper parts of the tree that normally inhibit these buds.

Deciduous oaks, for example, have fewer dormant buds and are less suited to coppicing and make poor hedges.

- Evergreens don't become fully dormant so are usually less suited to pollarding and coppicing than deciduous plants (eucalyptus is an exception), but many make excellent hedges.



# Big idea bears fruit

**An ambitious idea for a networked food forest in south-west London to encourage healthy living, help reduce food poverty and tackle flood risk is beginning to take shape.**

The idea of a food forest for the suburb of Hackbridge has been slowly brewing for the past decade, with residents keen for more usable green space, as well as new solutions to the high levels of food poverty in the area. However, it took a substantial leap in early 2018 when volunteer Robert Walker secured a £10,000 grant (from Tesco's Bags of Help), which allowed him to drive the project forward. The grant meant planting for the first orchard could begin, along with planting in a churchyard, a school and two community centres, which volunteers hope will eventually link to a network of food gardens along the 12 mile-long Wandle Valley walking trail and beyond.

The group is now known as Social Orchards, a registered RHS Affiliated Society and Community Interest Company, with hopes to become a template and hub for community food growing projects.

## Forming connections

The group has been busy connecting with growers, schools, housing associations and residents in the area, seeking support and planting sites, with a long-term goal of volunteers adopting different sections of the trail. There are plenty of ideas for collaboration, says Robert, including for a sensory garden, live storytelling events, art installations, food events, and a traditional apple blessing or wassailing, in January, complete with morris dancers.

Fruit from the orchards will be available to the community for free and there are plans to link in with the local community food box scheme run by Sutton Community Farm, as well as to help supply food banks.

Happily, Robert discovered the restoration of a historic orchard under way at the nearby Beddington Park, while a Transition group planted pear trees at Hackbridge Railway Station, offered further connections. 'Our idea is to eventually plant all up and down the Wandle River (a tributary of the Thames) and into Wandle Valley Regional Park,' he explains. We want to give fruit trees for planting in parks,

community gardens, railway stations and in schools, for example – we want to show that any size space can be used to grow food.'

Eventually the main orchard in Hackbridge, which draws inspiration from the Karuna Garden in Shropshire (above), will have seven layers, in a permaculture method that allows a natural symbiosis between different plants and wildlife. These layers are known as 'storeys' and include: an 'overstorey', or canopy (large fruit and nut trees); and 'understorey' tree layer (dwarf and smaller varieties); a shrub layer (such as currants and berries); a herbaceous layer (herbs and comfrees); root layer, or rhizosphere (root vegetables); soil layer (groundcoverers such as strawberries) and a vertical layer (climbing fruit and vines).

'It has taken on its own shape to an extent, but we have plans to have soft fruit more accessible at the front of the site, with pears, nuts and apples slightly further away, and everything sited for its harvesting need,' says Robert. The group was also donated 450 'wild harvest' and hedging species from the Woodland Trust, which have kept them busy planting.



SOCIAL ORCHARDS

## Far left

The food forest garden showing the multiple 'storeys', at Karuna Garden, Shropshire, which provided inspiration for Social Orchards.

## Left

Pupils from Culvers House Primary School plant some of the first trees at Social Orchards' site in Hackbridge, south-west London.

## Overcoming early hurdles

While the project is now progressing with support from across the community, Robert admits that there were several times in trying to get it off the ground that he was almost deterred. 'It was a bit cart before the horse, and I wasn't quite as joined up with other groups as I should have been, but thankfully everybody is on board and receptive now,' he explains. 'There were various times that I started to regret it and I thought about giving up. But I have found that it does have a future, and also it's not my project, or my orchard – it's for the community and we'll find a way though.'

Robert was surprised at the bureaucratic stages needed to begin work on the first orchard, which are ongoing. 'There was an understanding that we would get a licence in 2017, but it didn't come through until Easter 2018,' he explains. 'Then I realised that I also needed to supply eight different documents, as well as checks on archaeology, hydrology and contamination.'

Though there is a lot of work ahead, the project is beginning to take shape and Robert is full of enthusiasm. 'I now feel really fulfilled, really excited when I think about it,' he says. 'It's not just about me, or what I get out of it, it's much more than that, but when I saw the first blossom in May and June, I thought this is just magic, brilliant. In our last planting day we put in 60 trees and suddenly it's looking a bit like an orchard.'

For more information see [socialorchards.co.uk](http://socialorchards.co.uk). If you are interested in being part of a food forest network, or on speaking to Robert about your own ideas for a similar project, contact [info@socialorchards.co.uk](mailto:info@socialorchards.co.uk).





RHS / SUZANNE PLUNKETT

**Left**  
Matt Willer, School Gardening Champion of the Year, 2018.

**Below**  
Students on a tour of RHS Garden Wisley as part of Green Plan It Challenge, 2018.



RHS / RICHARD DAWSON

# Growing with teenagers

**Matt Willer, 2018 RHS School Gardening Champion, shares how The Allotment Project, a sustainable garden he started at Reepham High School in Norfolk, recharged his batteries and captured the community's imagination.**

When I started The Allotment Project, I had two volunteers from the sixth form. Almost four years on, there are easily 100 people engaged in many different ways. From children coming down for the daily lunchtime session, to Duke of Edinburgh's Award participants, through to local volunteers that join our community sessions. Once a few get involved, more will come, but to sustain their engagement for years to come, you have to make it clear their effort is truly valued.

For me it's all about making the students genuinely feel that it is, with no façade, their project, so I aim to involve them as much as I can from planning right through to creating. At The Allotment Project we (staff, parents and community volunteers) have a site ethos where the young people are asked their opinion and, where possible, these ideas are acted on. I've found that instilling a sense of value in our young volunteers brings a wonderful positive energy and, with it, a high degree

of ownership. As I say, almost daily: 'this is not the 'Mr Willer Project' this is The Allotment Project and it belongs to you because you are part of it.' Does it really matter if someone makes something that is a bit wonky? Who cares! They made it for the allotment and that makes it extra awesome. Nature doesn't have any straight lines anyway.

A community or school garden should not just be a place to work, work, work! It should also be a place to relax and feel human again. The Allotment Project is, of course, about encouraging young people to lead more sustainable lives, but it also serves as an escape. Talking face to face, laughter and banter and not using mobile phones, are just as essential as making compost, or sowing seeds. It's all about helping people feel good about themselves. Modern education can be very hard on students, with what seems like assessment after assessment. Tests are clearly important, but, I refuse to accept that I am employed

just to help young people pass their exams. The Allotment Project was, among other motivating factors, set up to counter this exam-centric culture. It also saved me, without question, from quitting as a school teacher, which I came close to doing. Now I get the greatest sense of achievement that I have ever experienced in my whole life. It has been an incredible journey since that cold winter's morning in February 2015.

Using The Allotment Project as a place of healing and refuge was something that we discovered by accident; it was not part of the original design. We found that many volunteers just wanted to be at The Allotment Project to escape the bustle of the school day, to find some peace. Of course, the location was key. Again, rather by accident, we discovered that where we were working was the perfect spot – not too far from the main buildings, but far enough that people could remove themselves from the noise of the school grounds.

## Set up a gardening project with a school

### Making contact

Seek out a teacher that has shown an interest. If you are contacting the school cold, start with the receptionist or business manager and find out who best to speak to. Look at the school website or social media feeds first to see if they have a gardening club or eco-club and who runs that. Approach several schools, as they will have different priorities and won't all be able to take up your offer. Primary schools are often smaller and less complex to negotiate and may have more flexibility in terms of the types of activities they can take up. If you are invited to a meeting, be prepared, perhaps with a presentation.

### Make a plan

Have some ideas for how you might work together, but be open to suggestions and stay flexible. Perhaps you can help the pupils raise seedlings in your greenhouse, or host a joint garden fundraiser. If you would like pupils to visit or help with a community site, ideally find one in easy reach of the school, allowing the pupils to walk there and back again during the school day. If you've found a suitable space, be prepared to allow them to wholly adopt it. Think about how the project will be funded – schools are almost always short of funds. Would your local council support a school and community project, or could businesses get involved?

### Make it relevant

Activities can be tied into the curriculum. For example, nature identification and life cycle studies with science; measurements of spaces with maths; or using the space to spur creative writing or drawing. However, many schools will see the benefit as more fundamental, helping with children's overall wellbeing and encouraging their connection with nature.

### Make it fun

Once you've set up your project, make it hands-on – show them what to do, but let them have fun and do it their way. It may not be as perfect as if you do it but it will be their own work. Get them involved in everything – from weeding, to tending plants to harvesting, but understand there will be varying attention spans and skill levels. Don't bore them with too many facts at a time, instead let them discover things for themselves through doing. Help them feel it is their space, so ask what they would like to achieve with it.

### Invite others

Hold open days so people in the area can see what is happening, or volunteer sessions for adults wanting to get involved. Also invite in other schools from nearby to encourage a true community. Some school and community gardens also run family sessions where keen kids can bring parents, siblings, grandparents to, say, a Sunday morning session, helping you to reach new audiences.

### Reward effort

Think of how to celebrate what you've achieved. You might like to enter the school garden or its produce in a local show, or set a challenge, such as the recent RHS Monster Pumpkins competition, or of course, suggest they enter the local Bloom competition.

Thank you to Kerry Wheatley from Chaucer School and Paul Dee from Hitchin Youth Allotment for their tips.



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