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Opening Extract from...

Grow Your Food For Free (Well, Almost)

Written by Dave Hamilton

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Nick Gooderham, an inspiring teacher and good friend.

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INTRODUCTION

When you shuffle off this mortal coil, would you like your memories to be of those drives to an out-of-town retail estate? Will you think fondly of that time you argued with your partner all day and filled the back of the car up with all the things you thought you needed for your new vegetable plot? Or perhaps you'd like to reminisce about the day your new shed was so late that you spent an hour on hold to a call centre?

As your grandchildren gather around your deathbed, you could regale them with stories of the time your new fence plunged you so far into your overdraft that you took on a part-time job just to pay off the interest. It would be such a loss for shared wisdom such as this to miss a generation.

A well-tended garden holds as many memories as a photo album, and you, as the gardener, choose what goes into that album.

The difference between building a productive garden with what you have around you, rather than buying everything in, is rather like the difference between a home-cooked meal and a microwave dinner. A garden that relies on the garden centre or garden mega-store will look like countless others, cost money and use up dwindling resources. This is in marked contrast to a plot with a self-built shed, bench and raised beds, and crops grown from saved seed. The latter will be a totally unique reflection of your personality, quite unlike any other garden. What's more, you will be able to save yourself a small fortune as you 'grow your food for free' . . . (well, almost).



Free garlic – from cloves saved from last year's crop.



PART 1
GETTING STARTED



Whatever the age of the gardener or whatever his or her level of knowledge or experience, every one will tell you “I’ll get it right next year”. I always bear this in mind whenever I take on a new vegetable plot or continue with an old one for another year. Each year we try our best and each year there are successes and failures, but with any luck there will be more of the former than the latter!

In order to get it right, throwing money at a garden is never going to be as effective as taking a step back, assessing what’s already there, and seeing what needs to be brought in and what needs to be done.

Chapter 1

YOUR GROWING SPACE

If I assumed that everyone reading this book had identical horticultural starting blocks, it would be akin to assuming that every reader is my height, weight and age, has a similar income, eats the same kind of food and wears the same kind of clothes as I do. Even my identical twin brother differs from me in his gardening style and where he gardens (he also differs in weight, food preference, clothes and income!).

So I have to assume that no two gardeners, or the gardens they tend, are alike, and any row of gardens is testament to this. As the years go by, gardens change dramatically from their original construction, depending on the gardener or gardeners who tend them. This is even more true of allotment sites, with their patchwork display of crops, trees, paths, sheds, flowers, fruit bushes and fences.

I've moved home a lot in the last few years, and everywhere I go I put down a vegetable patch – be it in a home garden, on an allotment or (by invitation) on someone else's land. It is sometimes only for six months, sometimes a year or two, but each time it is different and I learn something new. The gardens I inherited have come in all shapes and sizes, from a tiny balcony or front yard to vast jungles that provided few clues to what lay beneath the thick undergrowth before I hacked it back like some intrepid explorer.



No two gardens are ever the same.

So, from experience, the most important thing to consider when designing a garden for very little (or no) money is that it has to be adaptable. As soon as you open your eyes to the world of DIY gardening and/or salvaging materials, things can get a little . . . well, let's just say a little creative.

This kind of gardening is akin to cooking with what you have in the cupboard rather than buying in ingredients. Instead of buying in raised beds, you may begin with a deep bed system then, over time, if the wood turns up, the raised bed can be put into place. Or you may even decide you no longer want raised beds as the deep beds seem to be doing a pretty good job! You might have wanted to lay a brick path but then find that a friend is digging up his or her patio. The patio slabs might be just the right size for the job, so why splash out on buying the materials when suitable free materials are there for the asking?

It helps if garden plans are as organic as the plants within them – growing over time and adapting to changing conditions and budgets.



This kind of gardening is more resilient to changes in your lifestyle and income, as it is also to changes in climate and in society as a whole. No one knows what the future holds for us in these uncertain times, so having a garden that can not only feed you but also not require any further economic input will stand you in better stead than one that requires you to throw money at it year in, year out.

One of the aims of this book – apart from saving you money – is to start you thinking a little differently about how and where you garden. It is not so much about teaching you to garden per se. Many of you will find that you can just garden at home, which is fine but not possible for everyone, and it is by no means the only option. All you really need is a desire to garden – then, in my experience, if you are determined enough, keep your eyes and ears open and remain optimistic, something will come your way.

Some options when considering where to garden are as follows. Each is discussed in detail in the following pages.

- At home
- Indoors
- Allotment
- Garden share
- Landshare
- Community Supported Agriculture scheme
- Volunteering
- Guerrilla gardening

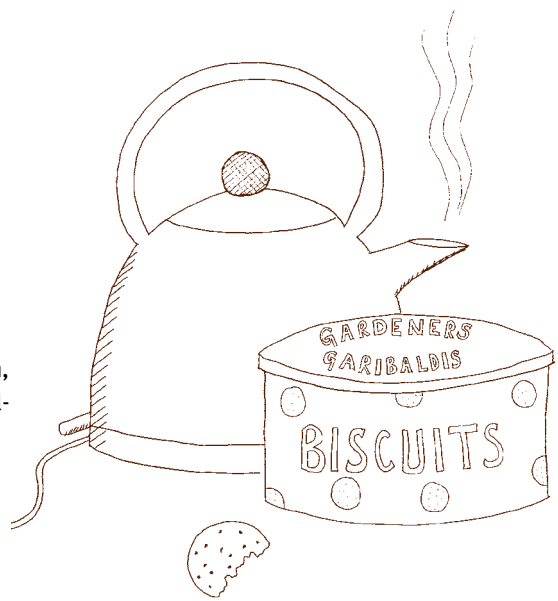
AT HOME

The ideal situation is a growing space where you live. A home plot means regular attention, fresh produce when you want it and no travelling time. For those with a busy lifestyle this has to be the best situation, as a garden benefits from the 'little and often' approach as much as it does from attention for hours on end. Once established, even a large productive garden may need only 20 minutes a day – I've found that if those 20 minutes are not too far from a kettle and a well-stocked biscuit tin, somehow extra time is usually found and helpers are more likely to come by.

The style of planting in a home garden can sometimes be slightly different from that of a garden away from the home. The garden may be seen as an extension of the house, and its overall aesthetic can be as important as the

Edible ornamentals

In the past I've chosen to grow ornamentals with an edible use, to mix the aesthetic with the practical. I've grown things like *Sedum spectabile* (young leaves can be eaten in salads and it is fantastic for pollinators), nigella (edible seeds), mallow (salad leaf and egg substitute), evening primrose (edible flower) and nasturtium (edible everything) mixed in with seasonal vegetables and herbs in a bed surrounded by a chive border.



amount it produces. Many people choose to have a more cottage-garden-style garden at home, with a mix of flowers and shrubs alongside their fruit and vegetables.

Having a garden at home, no matter how small, is of course a lot easier than travelling to one. Lack of soil need not be a problem, as pots can be placed on patios, on concrete, on gravel or on small balconies. I've even made large planters out of pallets and sat them on a gravel garden that otherwise had no soil.

Try to think positively: what has the space got going for it? Is it south-facing, private, low maintenance? How can you make the most of what's there? If there is no room to spread out, can you go up? Can raised beds be built where the soil is poor or non-existent? If there is an ugly old patio, is there sufficient soil underneath for alternate slabs to be taken up and the soil planted?

Even the most artificial, concrete-covered of gardens can have something going for it.

Tips for tenants

As a tenant gardener you really have to read the seed packets and gardening books to work out how many days you have between sowing and harvest. There is little point in sowing crops that might take a year to mature, such as parsnips or purple sprouting broccoli, if you will be gone by the time they are ready to harvest. Quick crops, such as fast-growing salad leaves, are best, since even in a six-month tenancy you will be able to make a number of harvests.



Making the most of a small garden. *Photo: Lou Brown*

There is also the option of growing in pots and taking these with you when you move. This only really works for small pots, as larger ones, once they are full of soil, water and growing crops, can be nigh-on impossible to move. I was devastated when I realised there was no way I could lift my old Belfast sink planted up with herbs. The sink weighed enough before it was planted up, let alone afterwards!

You also have to consider how you are going to move and how far (if you know in advance). If moving somewhere in the same town you should have no problem making a number of trips to pick up your plants. But moving out of an area may mean one trip and one trip only!

Tenants' karma

Excuse the hippy term but there really is no other word for it. I believe that you should always leave a garden in better condition than when you found it. Even if the next tenants don't garden, what have you lost? You will have improved your local environment, harvested a season's worth of fresh produce and got some worthwhile exercise.

If you've been renting for a while, especially in a city, you may notice there are certain houses that are *always* up for rent. I know – I've gone to parties in the same house hosted by completely different people. The high volume of tenants can be for a number of reasons but quite often it is simply because the houses are pretty horrible places to live! But it is just these kinds of horrible houses that really benefit from having a garden that is taken care of. It just takes one person to break the cycle of neglect and one more to continue working it. An understanding landlord may even drop the rent for a well-tended garden. You won't be upsetting a nasty landlord by not doing the garden; you'll just be making life difficult for the next tenants if they want to grow there.

INDOORS

You may well grow indoor houseplants, but perhaps seldom think about growing indoor vegetables. Yet a surprising amount of produce can be grown indoors, on windowsills, in well-lit porches, in conservatories and under skylights. Modern homes are quite often full of natural light in the daytime and are heated in the winter, making them the perfect growing place for an indoor vegetable garden.

Of course, large vegetables such as trailing squashes won't be suitable for the indoor plot, but plant breeders are cottoning on to the fact that people are growing in pots and are constantly bringing out new compact varieties of our favourite vegetables. I saw first-hand the variety of things people grew inside when I worked as a postman in Oxford. As I delivered the mail I couldn't help but nose around and see what people were growing – jungles of vegetables reached up towards the light in top-lit stairwells; south-facing porches were proudly growing tomatoes, chillies and aubergines. On the rare occasion that I saw the back of people's houses I saw conservatories brimming with more veggies than the average greenhouse!

It helps to find areas with the most natural light possible, preferably with that light coming from above. On windowsills some plants can become etiolated, that is, stretched, elongated and contorted as they reach towards the light. Regular turning can help, as can raising the plant up if it's on a low windowsill.

Crops to grow indoors

- **Tomatoes, chillies and aubergines** Small bush varieties are suited to windowsill



A windowsill can act like a miniature greenhouse.

growing; larger and trailing plants to porches and conservatories. They will need to be grown where the temperature doesn't go below 10°C (50°F). They can become etiolated (see above) so are not suitable for windowsill growing unless on a very well-lit sill.

- **Herbs** These can be grown on a kitchen windowsill so they are to hand when cooking. Basil, mint, chives, thyme and parsley are all suitable for home growing.
- **Salad leaves** Try either whole lettuces in flowerpots or a tray of mixed leaves. Winter leaves such as rocket, mizuna and mibuna can all be grown on a windowsill.
- **Mini root crops** Compact varieties of beetroot and carrots have been developed, and Japanese varieties of turnips are no bigger than a ping-pong ball. They will need to be in a large trough rather than a small pot.
- **Citrus fruits** Dwarf varieties of citrus fruits can be grown indoors in pots. Growing from seed can be unpredictable – the resulting plants may grow up to 2.5-3m (8-10ft) tall.

WHERE TO GARDEN IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE

In the UK the waiting list for most allotment sites has got so ridiculously long that many local authorities are refusing to put any more names on them. Add this to the fact that modern living arrangements push us into smaller and smaller houses or flats, where gardens become a luxury rather than a given, and it's not surprising that growing spaces can be hard to find. Landlords in major cities will happily charge more for a home with an 'outdoor space', even if that outdoor space is a north-facing patch of concrete. There is of course a lot you can do indoors or in very limited outdoor spaces, some of which I have all ready discussed. However, it is easy to forget that gardening doesn't have to be done on your own land – there are many options open to those looking for a plot of land to exercise their green fingers.

ALLOTMENT

For the benefit of those who have never heard of one, an allotment is a small parcel of land, usually public but sometimes private, rented out to an individual or a family to grow their food. In parts of the world outside Britain they are often called community gardens.

I've found allotment growing to be one of the nicest ways in which to grow my own produce. A lot of resources can be shared, such as communal muck or leaf piles, and there is nearly always someone on hand to give advice (whether it's needed or not!).

Waiting lists are long, and it's worth putting your name down for an allotment as soon as

Pros of working in a group

- **Plays to strengths** Some like to dig, some can weed very efficiently, some act as the brains working out problems, and some can act as brawn whenever heavy work is to be done. Working as a group means you will always play to the strengths of the group rather than the weaknesses, so even if you aren't the best gardeners in the world you may make up for it in other ways (even if it is just making a good cup of tea and a nice cake!).
- **Spreads costs** There is often no need to buy lots of seeds or lots of tools individually – a hedge-trimmer may only come out once a year, so do you all need one individually? Likewise, do you really need to grow all 50 tomato seeds or all 20 courgette seeds from a pack into full adult plants?
- **Provides holiday cover** Sharing the work on a piece of land also means that holidays are covered naturally. As long as everyone doesn't want to go away for the same two weeks in August there will always be someone around to do the watering.
- **Gives time benefits** With all the will in the world, you sometimes don't get a chance to get out and garden as much as you want to. The benefit of working with a group means that a plot may not go to rack and ruin if you don't manage to be there day in, day out. Some will naturally do a lot more than others, and I've found that a 'harvest if you put the work in' scheme seems to work.

Cons of working in a group

- It can be hard enough for couples to get on at times, let alone groups of ten or more! Many growing groups try to pre-empt disputes by writing an agreement up first. It may sound needlessly official (though no doubt some in a group will jump at the chance to create a bit of bureaucracy and admin), but in the long run it could stop a whole scheme from falling apart.

- In my experience, groups with an ethos of 'I did this, why aren't they doing that?' will never work. Resentment and bad feeling don't make for a happy, willing workers. instead, try to cultivate a feeling of 'They did that, perhaps I should do this' by playing up to the most productive in the group rather than down to the least. If you choose carefully who you work with, it shouldn't come to this kind of petty dispute. Nevertheless, humans are humans and disagreements do arise, even with every precaution in place: try to quash any dispute before it explodes, as it is far easier to put out a spark than a fire.



A well-earned meal can be a great way to get together.

you arrive in a town. Two-, five- or ten-year waits may seem interminable, but in two, five or ten years' time you will be grateful you decided to put your name down. Besides, people's circumstances always change and a predicted five-year wait can sometimes be just two or three years.

Available plots often seem to be the most neglected and, tragically, I've seen many people come and go very quickly as they get over whelmed by the amount of work that they may need to do. The best advice I was ever given was to not do it all at once. Instead, I cut all the vegetation down to ground level and covered what I could with weed-suppressant material or cardboard (the latter needs topping up as it rots). I worked half the plot in the first year, only reaching full cultivation after about two years. My brother always likes to tell people to work backwards – looking at what you've done rather than what you need to do.

Alternatively, if the work does seem all too much, there really is no need to take an entire allotment. Full-size allotments can be split into half, thirds or quarters and shared out amongst friends or offered to others on the extensive waiting list.

Let's get together

With few exceptions, mammals are social creatures. Meerkats live in 'clans' or 'mobs' of around twenty, and baboons live in groups of up to two hundred. Humans also evolved in groups or tribes rather than singly – there is strength in numbers, and most contact with others has been shown time and time again to reduce stress and increase well-being. There are also many other advantages to working in a group – see opposite.

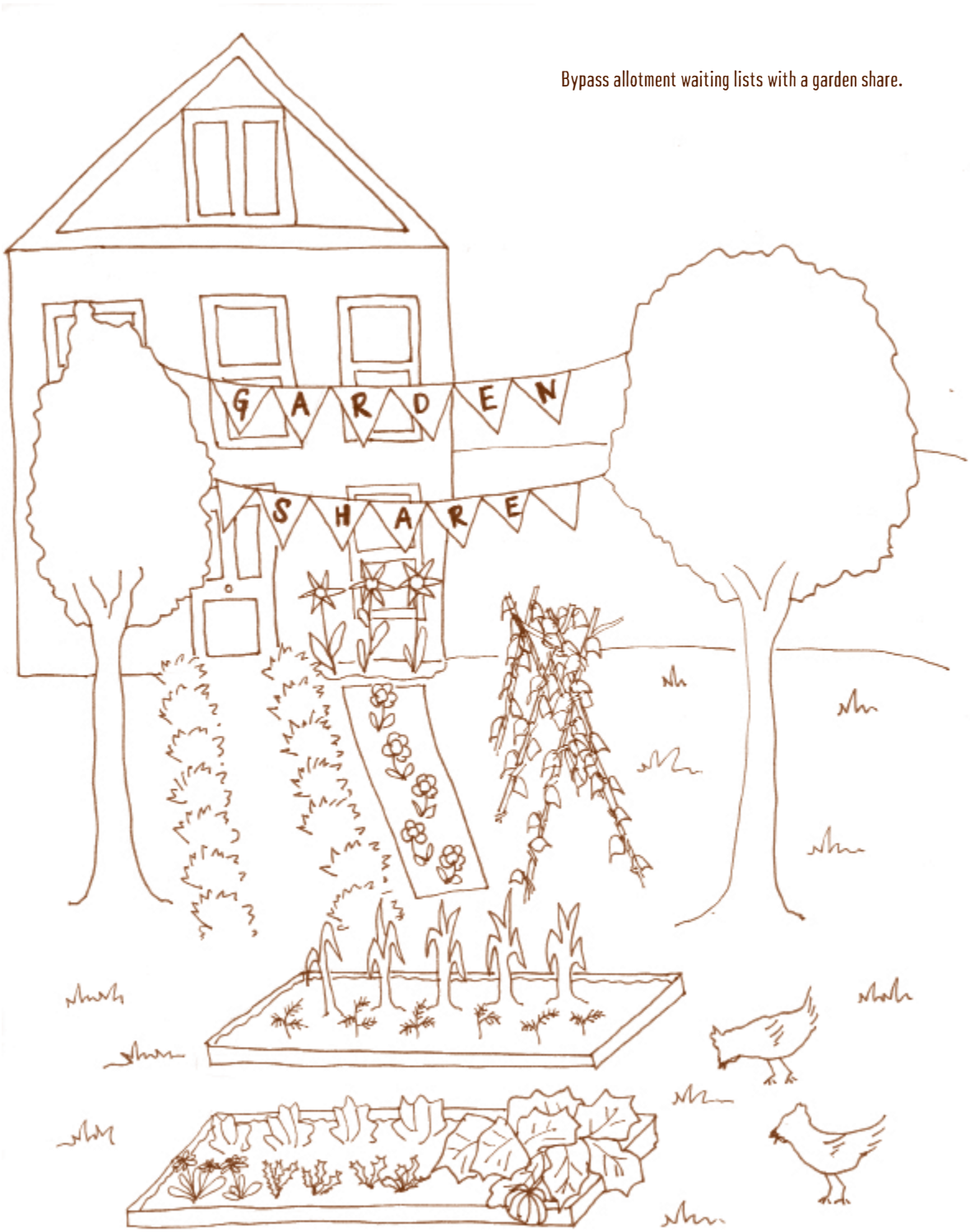
GARDEN SHARE

In the very early stages of this book I hit quite a major snag – I didn't have a garden! Although my partner and I did have some outside space it was not enough to grow the sort of things I wanted to, or to build some of the projects necessary for a book of this kind. However, help was at hand from Francis, a neighbour of ours who lived a stone's throw away from our maisonette.

Francis is a very keen, but not always very green-fingered, gardener. As a man on his own he found the work quite daunting and jumped at the chance to share his space and the produce it would hopefully give. So, with our growing experience and his land, we suddenly found ourselves with not only a space for growing but also a good friend just around the corner. I was lucky to know Francis before he offered the garden, and he knew us enough to trust us both with his back garden key. This is of course the most convenient way to start an informal garden share, but if you wish to find a space, or offer yours out, becoming a member of a garden share scheme could be the most logical approach.

Many towns and cities run garden share schemes, which can be found in the usual sources of local information, such as local noticeboards or on virtual or online notice-boards such as www.gumtree.com. If you find that your town doesn't have one, then you could consider setting one up – See the Transition Town Totnes website for more details (http://transitiontowntotnes.org/gardenshare/startupscheme).

Garden shares can help bridge the gap for those who have no garden of their own or are on a long waiting list for an allotment. There are also many benefits for the garden owners. Some elderly people find that keeping a



Bypass allotment waiting lists with a garden share.



Totnes garden-sharer Jenny, in her well-tended garden.

garden maintained is too much of a challenge and they are forced to put in low-maintenance measures, such as gravel or decking. In extreme cases gardeners may even move away from a family home as the upkeep of the garden is simply too expensive.

So having someone tend to an overgrown garden can make a real difference, both financially and to the well-being of a garden owner. A friend of mine tends the garden of a woman in her 90s and finds himself also checking on her health – both out of compassion and in view of the risk of losing his growing space!

As with all human relationships there can be setbacks and misunderstandings in garden shares, but Lou Brown, the garden share scheme coordinator in Totnes, believes that these happen far less than you may imagine.

Reasons for offering your garden

- Neglected areas of the garden can be utilised
- A share of the fresh produce
- No need to install expensive low-maintenance features (such as gravel)
- New friends may be made or existing friendships built on
- Increased sense of community

Reasons to share someone else's garden

- Often no need for initial investment in tools
- No long waiting lists
- New friends may be made or existing friendships built on
- Increased sense of community
- Sometimes the work is shared

"All I can say is that the experience has been profoundly positive and there have honestly been no drawbacks. All the gardeners and the many garden owners have worked and shared their spaces with respect and commitment. Sure, there have been a couple of gardeners who haven't put in the work and have been disappointed, but inexperience and lack of time has been the worst of it – and these cases are astonishingly rare!" Lou Brown, Totnes garden share scheme coordinator

LANDSHARE

Aside from garden shares, landshare schemes are on the rise. In the UK a landshare directory has been set up at www.landshare.net, where members can post if they need or want land. This can include everything from large pieces of agricultural land right down to small private gardens. The directory covers all of the UK and it seems to be growing daily.

Some areas of the country are much better represented in the directory than others, and, unsurprisingly, it seems that cities have an abundance of growers looking for land rather than people offering it.

Landshares can range from plots as small as a back garden to fields of considerable sizes. The pros and cons are similar to those of a garden-share scheme and are as unique as are the people who offer the land. There seems to be a lot of positive feedback on the scheme, so with luck its success will continue – and I'm sure that even if this particular scheme doesn't, something similar will take its place in the coming years.

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

According to the Soil Association there are well over a hundred Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes in the UK, at various stages of development. Some are very small, comprised of a few allotments where members do all the growing themselves. Others are large farms with over 200 members, producing large quantities of meat and veg. Some have been led by farmers who seek a dependable market; others by communities where social and environmental concerns about food have been motivating factors.

Community Supported Agriculture is one of the most recent and perhaps best examples of groups working together. James Adamson, Founder and Coordinator of Sims Hill Shared Harvest, Bristol, tells us more about them, drawing from his own experience in North East Bristol – see right.

VOLUNTEERING

It often seems that those with time on their hands generally have no money and those



Willing workers taking a rest at a workday at Chagford CSA.
Photo: Boz Kay

About Community Supported Agriculture

James Adamson, Board member and co-grower of Sims Hill Shared Harvest, Bristol

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has been steadily gaining popularity since its conception in Japan several decades ago. There it is known as *teikei* – 'food with a face'.

Principles of CSAs

CSA is a broad term which manifests in many ways depending on the land, growers/farmers and community involved. There are, however a few key principles that make CSA stand out from conventional consumer culture.

- CSAs have members rather than customers, and these members commit to financially supporting the running of the farm by either weekly, monthly or annual subscriptions. Subscriptions cover all the running costs of the farm, such as wages for growers, seeds, land rental, etc. In exchange for this investment, members receive an equal share of all the produce (usually veg but sometimes eggs, dairy products, fruit and meat).
- This unique form of food production fosters beneficial relationships between people, farmers and the land. For its members this means the opportunity to truly know the origin of their food, see how it is produced and have a say in how the farm is managed.
- Farms become not just places to grow food but social hubs, where friends gather and take part in work days and seasonal celebrations.
- For farmers, growers and landowners CSA presents a viable economic model. Investment and commitment from the community can make a massive difference, especially for small farms where margins are narrow.
- All CSAs are built on trust, sharing the risks and the benefits of locally sourced food. They present a refreshing change to supermarket shopping, with active participants rather than passive consumers.

Case study: Sims Hill Shared Harvest, Bristol

Sims Hill Shared Harvest (SHSH) was born following a very successful public meeting held in Bristol to gauge if there was enough interest to run a CSA in the city.

Bristol City Council gave its full support to the venture, offering a large site of some 6 acres (known as Sims Hill) in Frenchay, North East Bristol. The site is part of a fertile strip, stretching out into the hinterland and historically used to grow food for the city. In recent years the site has been neglected and underused, and it seemed fitting to restore the land to its former productivity.

In the summer of 2010 a second public meeting was held to present the work and achievements of Sims Hill Shared Harvest. It was well attended and we launched the project as "a members-owned-and-led CSA that will:

- provide quality fruit and vegetables grown using natural farming methods
- offer opportunities for education, work and recreation to the wider community
- work to include and support people who are socially or economically marginalised
- build community life through creating a relationship between food and its production."

The farm will be managed using a standard CSA model, where members contribute to the costs in exchange for a share of the harvest, but SHSH represents a lot more. Some of the core principles are taken from permaculture and community

Cont...

Cont...

development models, so there is a strong emphasis on education, inclusion and equality as well as environmental stewardship. All members will be encouraged to have their say on how things are run, and the legal structure of the farm promotes this.

So far 120 households have expressed an interest in the project, and over 40 are already directly involved. Our first members' meeting was held in January 2011, and we have started a workshare scheme through which people can do a few hours' work for their share. By year 3 we will have reached capacity, supplying 100 households with veg. By then Sims Hill will look quite different. Not only will it be immensely productive but there will be ponds, more trees, and spaces for people to come and enjoy being close to the land and each other.

For more information on Sims Hill Shared Harvest please visit http://simshillsharedharvest.wordpress.com or email simshillsharedharvest@googlemail.com.

Two (or more) growing spaces

If you're lucky enough to have more than one growing space but in different areas then you have some quite unique choices to make. It makes sense to use each plot differently rather than having two identical plots. Many people with two allotments choose to grow fruit on one and vegetables on the other. This makes sense, as each have different requirements at different times of the year. The fruit plot, for example, will need less regular attention than the vegetable plot, but you may need to spend some time pruning it in the winter when there is little to do on the vegetable plot.

A friend of mine owns a field a few miles from his home and has a small garden plot at home. On his field he has a small orchard and grows potatoes and other vegetables that don't need daily care. At home he grows things such as salad greens, herbs and tender vegetables that he wants to have in regular supply and that need a little more attention.

with money generally have no time. In many ways lack of time can lead to a much more impoverished existence than lack of money, and giving time to someone can be much more appreciated than giving them cash (although I wouldn't object if anyone reading this wants to send me a big cheque).

One of the most enriching things you can do with your time is to volunteer, and there are countless gardens and organisations with gardens looking for someone to give up their time. I found that as soon as I made the choice to volunteer there was so much around I could pick and choose where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do.

The sort of work I did was as varied as the people I met – I ended up doing everything from constructing a green roof with a group of filthy mouthed but very entertaining long-term unemployed, building a cob Wendy house with a professional photographer and an out-of-work actor, and potting seedlings with a wannabe rap artist.

On the whole the sort of people I met were intelligent, funny, well-rounded individuals

who wanted to make a bit of a difference to their community. Volunteers, especially those keen to work on the land, can make a huge difference to an area. In Detroit, USA, derelict housing blocks are being turned into productive gardens to feed locals who otherwise have no access to fresh vegetables.

I'm still in touch with many of the people I volunteered with and would strongly advise anyone moving to a new town or city who is finding it hard to make friends to go and find a community project, city farm or local public garden that needs his or her help. Many places will have evening sessions in the summer and weekend sessions all year round, so even those in full-time employment can squeeze in a few hours.

I've found that quite often these organisations are so glad to have you on board that you'll receive a generous share of the produce in return for your volunteer hours. These are often organically grown, well-cared-for vegetables that would cost a fortune to buy.

On some volunteer placements you can try out new equipment and tools, or work on unusual plants and in unusual locations (such as in botanic gardens, arboretums or city farms) that would normally be well outside of your normal set of circumstances.

It's a sad fact of life that many organisations disappear not through lack of funding but through lack of volunteers. Recruiting volunteers has been likened to herding cats, and it may seem that some places advertise for volunteers in the same way that the Vogons advertised the destruction of the Earth in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. However, local newspapers, library noticeboards or direct contact with an organisation can be good ways to find out about ad hoc or regular volunteer opportunities, or just ask around in your local area.

It is a very rewarding way to garden: turning up somewhere where they will always be glad to see you is a real boost to the self-esteem.

Pros of volunteering

- Learn new skills
- Share produce
- Free plants, seeds, pots and
- compost on occasion
- Make new friends
- Improve employment prospects and enhance CV
- Work in interesting environments
- Increase happiness

GUERRILLA GARDENING

Guerrilla gardening can brighten up the dullest, most neglected patches of our city streets. The grey urban landscape can suddenly be transformed by the wash of colour from flowers, shrubs and even food plants. What's more, as there is zero rent or yearly subscription to pay, it can be a totally free way to garden.

If I can't give them away, I use up any extra seedlings or unwanted seed by guerrilla planting. I heard a lovely story once of someone who would see sunflowers appear all over her neighbourhood right through her childhood. It wasn't until she became an adult that she found that her father had been sowing seeds in neighbours' gardens every year as he loved the flowers so much. This just goes to show how such imaginative gardening can have really worthwhile effects.



If it looks like it's meant to be there it will generally get left alone.

Seed bombs

I first became aware of seed bombs from reading David Tracey's brilliant book *Guerrilla gardening: A manualfesto*. Seed bombs are a great way to introduce plants to otherwise inaccessible places. In my adaptation of the seed bomb 'recipe' in David's book I use a hollowed-out vegetable such as a potato or a small squash about the size of a tennis ball (or grenade), to hold the horticultural contents. You could also use an already-hollow vegetable such as a pepper (capsicum).

Seed bombs are most useful for flowers, but self-seeding salads such as land cress or rocket can also be sown this way. If allowed to run to seed, both these plants will quickly become naturalised and add to the variety of edible 'wild' plants.

Guerrilla planting and vandalism

Guerrilla-planted plots can get vandalised, but this is rarer than you may imagine. Contrary to popular belief, vandalism is rarely planned and it is rarely malicious. Often it is nothing more than a case of something in the path of someone with more testosterone or alcohol (or both) in their system than they can handle. Planting away from busy pubs or clubs, planting out of reach or just making something look like it is meant to be there can go a long way to ensuring it is left alone.

Contamination

Guerrilla-planted food can carry all the same risks as foraged food in urban areas. There is a risk of contamination from rats, dogs, cats and even humans. Any food plants should be washed thoroughly or, preferably, washed AND cooked before eaten. Leafy greens take in a lot of air pollution. Unless there is some kind of barrier, such as a hedge or fence, between the road and the plants they will contain these pollutants.

Guerrilla gardening and the law

Technically, guerrilla gardening is illegal and can be classed as criminal damage. Its advocates often play up the dangerous side, but if caught you are much more likely to get a telling off than a conviction. You may have the moral high ground and the support of local residents, but in the eyes of the law you are in the wrong. To be on the safe side, avoid areas with CCTV or even ask for permission first.

If you look like you are meant to be there, nine times out of ten the police will ignore you. A team with fluorescent jackets in broad daylight looks a lot more legitimate than a team dressed in black at 2am in the morning.

HOW TO MAKE A SEED BOMB



1 Using a sharp knife, cut the top off your vegetable and hollow it out in the same way you would a Halloween lantern. It should be cut in such a way that the cap can be replaced. Or pull off the stalk of your pepper.





2 Coat the base of the bomb with a moist, rich potting compost – use a funnel if the top hole is too small. If you wish to sow wildflowers, use spent potting compost as they prefer an impoverished soil.



3 Add the seeds on small piece of wetted tissue paper



4 If sowing 'hungry' plants such as sunflowers, add some slow-release fertiliser pellets (this may not be necessary if the compost is rich enough)

5 Top with more moist compost.

6 Find somewhere to throw your bomb!