

Share some sunshine with Grow Social

Free sunflower
seeds to get
started



Plant a butterfly border
Growing for food banks
Measure your impact on wildlife

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 @RHSBloom
 rhscommunitygardening

Cover image: RHS / Mark Waugh. A volunteer at Petrus Incredible Edible Rochdale's community allotment and 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



RHS / GEORGI MAREE

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

With a relatively mild winter, by February it seemed spring had sprung early, only to be swiftly followed by a succession of named storms and record levels of rain. Then, worst of all, has been the unprecedented threat of COVID-19, which has curtailed many plans for all of us. We do hope you are staying safe and well.

It had been hugely inspiring to see so many groups embracing the idea of Grow Social – a chance to form new connections in your communities through growing. However, in line with government advice, we are now recommending all groups postpone their events if they haven't done so already.

Despite this, we would love to hear your brilliant ideas on inviting bringing different groups together and reaching out to people that may be feeling isolated. We hope you will be able to put some of these into action at some point this year.

The sunflower seeds, free with this issue, are a chance to spread some local cheer – perhaps you can share some seedlings with others, or the spent seeds in the autumn.

Take care out there,



RHS / PAUL DEBOIS

Emily

Emily Braham – Editor

Your views – Queen's award

Stoke Poges, Wexham & Fulmer Horticultural Society was delighted to receive the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service from Princess Alexandra in February. The highest award a voluntary group can receive in the UK, it recognises the 'passing of horticultural knowledge and tradition from generation to generation since 1884.'

Pupils from three primary schools presented the princess with a book of history about Stoke Poges, a scrapbook with photographs of the three schools' pupils gardening, with their comments about gardening, and a posy.

Ruth Rooley, Chairperson, Stoke Poges, Wexham & Fulmer Horticultural Society

Your views – from twitter

@KSBSScotland #BeautifulScotland is all about sharing and learning from each other. Brighten up Kirkconnel and New Luce met at last year's awards and are now meeting to share hints and tips.

@uptonuponsevern Troughs on riverside railings submerged for 2–3 days, hopefully will be OK. Very sad some houses flooded, which is much worse.

@kathfarrell Volunteering at a community garden gave me huge support when I became a single parent a decade ago, and launched my career as a horticulturist. I recommend community gardening to everyone...

Share your news @RHSBloom or email: communities@rhs.org.uk. Letters and tweets may be edited.

New fund to bring people together

The Allen Lane Foundation has a new fund for community projects that work to bring people together, including marginalised groups, or which help to break down social barriers. The fund is particularly welcoming projects that could work to heal local divisions and promote social cohesion in the wake of the Brexit referendum, as well those which would support disadvantaged communities. Available UK-wide except London.

Interested people should contact Tim Cutts – tim@allenlane.org.uk
<https://allenlane.org.uk>

Spread your love of trees

The Woodland Trust's Tree Charter campaign, of which the RHS is a partner, is looking for new branch members – are you or your group interested in being a local tree champion? This could involve encouraging and sharing the benefit of trees where you live, or helping to secure more support and land for tree planting. You could also apply to become a 'charter branch lead' and co-ordinate local efforts.

Visit <https://treecharter.uk/get-involved>, or for more information, contact charter woodlandtrust.org.uk.

City nature challenge

This April, nature enthusiasts are encouraged to join global efforts to find and document the wildlife living in cities as part of the fifth international City Nature Challenge. The bioblitz-style citizen science competition, designed to get people involved in wildlife recording, is organised by the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and San Francisco's California Academy of Sciences. It takes place between 24–27 April 2020, and will see more than 250 cities competing to see who can make the most observations of nature, find the most species and get the most people involved.

Citynaturechallenge.org

Growing social in 2020

Thousands of schools and groups around the country had signed-up to host connecting events as part of Grow Social – a new RHS initiative to help schools and groups spread the benefits of growing. It was hoped these events would help groups reach out to people that could be feeling isolated, in recognition of the role that community gardening can play in addressing the UK's loneliness epidemic.

Unfortunately, following government advice and the ongoing situation with COVID-19, we are recommending that all groups postpone their Grow Social events until later in the year.

However, here are a couple of examples that could offer inspiration for future events, or some much needed cheer in the meantime.

Paul Singh from Wednesfield in Bloom, shared how the competition has allowed the village's Sikh Gurdwara and St Thomas Church to come together, the two village institutions now hosting joint breakfasts, working days and clean-up events. 'The Gurdwara had flowers anyway, to help the grounds look beautiful, but then because

of Bloom we had this new opportunity,' he explains. 'I wanted to put the spotlight on the Sikh community, so it was personal in a way, then Joanna from the church was amazing, so the dots started joining. The church is within 100 yards from the Gurdwara – we are these two central buildings in the village, so it just made sense. Now we are like two best mates in the community.'

In another, York House Community Gardens, an It's Your Neighbourhood group in Milton Keynes, supports a network of communities with individual plots on a shared reclaimed piece of land, including branch of the WI, a playgroup, and therapeutic horticulture groups. There are shared working days and open events to invite groups to connect with each other, as well as to open up the garden to the public. Stony Stratford in Bloom hosts an annual plant sale fundraiser for the gardens at the site, coinciding with a coffee morning and mini Shakespearean performances.

As this situation is changing daily, please follow government and NHS advice for up-to-date information on COVID-19.



RHS / BRIAN MORRISON



RHS/HELEN YATES

Growing new connections

New community growing projects around the UK are again and again poised to set seed. thanks to RHS funding under the Greening Great Britain campaign, sponsored by M&G Investments. Around 50 projects have been offered practical support from the community outreach team, along with up to £500 to transform unloved spaces and create new community connections.

In just one example, an RHS advisor will work with Route29 – a project co-ordinated by Salford Youth Service that supports young people in care or ‘on the edges of’ care – to create a relaxing new garden to boost mental wellbeing.

The young people plan to fill the unloved space outside the project hub with low-maintenance, sensory, wildlife-friendly and edible plants, to create a space for mindful,

reflection. The garden will eventually be used by the team for informal therapy work, such as to help share skills on managing emotions and coping with feelings.

There are also plans to use the garden to help the young people connect with the wider community, which ‘would be a real achievement for Salford’, according to the hub manager.

The RHS outreach programme has a particular focus in Salford, as part of a commitment to the community surrounding the new RHS Garden Bridgewater, due to open in July. The garden also includes a horticultural therapy programme with participants referred by local GPs to help improve both physical and mental health. To see the full list of supported projects, visit rhs.org.uk/ggbwithcommunities

Help protect juniper trees

Phytophthora austrocedri is a fungus-like organism that is currently killing our rare native juniper trees. Once infected, a tree can be killed within one or two years, depending on environmental conditions and the general health of the affected tree.

Symptoms include bronze leaf discoloration on individual branches or the whole crown, leading to complete loss of foliage; as well as orange-brown lesions in

the phloem (inner bark), from the roots up the trunk, often with resin oozing out.

More than 100 sites in northern England and Scotland are affected, and as juniper supports specialised insects, fungi and lichens, and birds such as goldcrest, the impact of its spread could be significant.

You can report this disease via tree alert: www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/tree-alert/

Support global science

You could join in citizen science efforts this month to harness the power of volunteers to help solve some of the world’s biggest problems. There are options to add details of your group’s work to online datasets and contribute to international understanding on topics of interest to science. Events and topics include ‘keeping your neighbourhood litter free’ – helping to map litter across the planet – and light pollution, a known factor in recent mass declines in global insect numbers.

<https://scistarter.org/events>

Urban tree report

A new report says that UK urban centres should plant a greater range of tree species, with more large species with wide canopy cover. The report published in the journal *Forestry: An International Journal of Forest Research* examined 12 cities or urban areas in the UK and found that even where tree cover was good, there was a lack of diversity, which risks greater loss of tree cover from disease and also offers limited wildlife benefit. The report includes a guide to urban forestry it advises local authorities should follow.

<https://academic.oup.com/forestry/article/93/1/107/5610079>

Grants for community connections

Barchester’s Charitable Foundation is seeking to fund projects in 2020 that support community connections or reconnections. Grants are available in England, Scotland and Wales for projects that support older people, adults with a disability or with mental health conditions.

The trust favours applications that help improve peoples’ mobility, independence and quality of life.

Grants range from £100 up to £5,000, with the average grant in 2018 being approx. £850.

www.bhcfoundation.org.uk

How Bloom grows

At the RHS we are always working to better understand the many community groups growing with and alongside us – ultimately so that we can better support you. Here's some of what we've learned.

In 2019, the RHS commissioned various strands of independent research into Bloom. We'll use the results of this research to inform our future work and hopefully help you have a bigger impact. Here's some of what we've learned.

Challenges groups face

While all communities are different, there are some common themes in the difficulties groups experience. Many say they struggle with landowner support and 'red tape' to get projects off the ground; recruiting enough volunteers; fundraising and unpredictable weather – unfortunately something we're likely to see more of.

In the year ahead, we will be exploring, identifying and sharing solutions to some of the most common problems groups face, and we're always keen to hear more of your own examples. There are also some existing resources that might help on our website. www.rhs.org.uk/get-involved/communitygardening/resources/

Community Engagement

A specific concern for many groups was a lack of support or engagement from the wider community. We wanted to find out why some groups have extensive community support while others can struggle to engage people to the extent that they would like. We wanted to hear from groups that have found reliable ways to engage plenty of volunteers and partners, as well as how Bloom is perceived in places where there is less community engagement.

Here are a few key tips from Bloom groups who have had great success at engaging their wider community:

- ✿ Be 'visible' – wear branded clothing or hi-vis jackets; use a diverse mix of communication channels, including digital and social media; and hold stalls at events to showcase your work and attract volunteers.
- ✿ Make connections – reach out and build relationships with key stakeholders, such as councils, businesses, and schools to secure wide-ranging support. Highlight the mutual benefits of working together, such as

attracting tourists and boosting the economy.

- ✿ Share your knowledge – engage and inspire the community, through teaching others your skills, hosting public events, or giving presentations.

Connecting to public concerns

One part of our research investigated the different factors that inspire people to get involved in Bloom. It is worth reflecting on your own motivations and those of your fellow volunteers, as well as what your community cares about when considering how to appeal to a wider audience.

Many volunteers told us they are motivated by a desire to bring the community together; to support biodiversity and wildlife; to protect green spaces for future generations; and to improve their own and others' wellbeing.

The current up-swell in concern for the planet has made it loud and clear that people, and young people in particular, care deeply about the environment. In areas where Bloom is not well supported, the members of the public we surveyed had a strong interest in caring for the environment, but they hadn't considered Bloom as a way of making a positive difference. This presents an opportunity for individual groups, and all of us, to

emphasise the important environmental benefits of Bloom – such as creating habitat and food for wildlife, reducing waste and tackling litter – when reaching out to prospective volunteers and partners. For example, if you don't already, could you invite the wider community to join litter-picks to help address the plastic waste issue; or host food growing events to share fresh produce and sustainable living skills with prospective volunteers? Be sure to also ask residents and partners about their own motivations in taking part and ideas they might have to tackle problems in the community.

More than 750 people participated in our research in some way. If you didn't have a chance to take part, we would still love to hear from you – what challenges do you face within your activities and in engaging your wider community in Bloom, and how have you overcome them? Let us know at communities@rhs.org.uk.

Far left

Greening Great Britain community groups get hands-on support from RHS Outreach Advisors.

Below

People have made it clear they care about the environment – let them know how your Bloom activities are making a difference.



RHS / JULIE HOWDEN

Grow a Secret Butterfly Garden

Help butterflies and moths in the new Wild About Gardens campaign and create a place for contemplation and discovery for your community.

The Wild About Gardens campaign run by the RHS and The Wildlife Trusts is collaborating with film producers StudioCanal this year to coincide with the release of the film adaptation of *The Secret Garden* (see below) to celebrate the healing power of gardens.

Community groups, schools and individuals are urged to grow a Secret Garden for Butterflies, creating a new 'butterfly border' or, for those with less space, a 'butterfly box'. The new gardens will offer nectar-rich planting for adult butterflies and larval food plants for their young, while also creating a contemplative space to observe nature.

Helen Bostock, RHS Senior Horticultural Advisor says: 'The best thing we gardeners can do is think about the whole life cycle, so we are creating feeding grounds for caterpillars, butterflies and everything else that depends on them. This doesn't mean sacrificing your whole garden, but perhaps allowing an area that could support a new generation of butterflies, but which may also feed hungry baby birds.'



Help British butterflies such as the small tortoiseshell thrive

RHS / MARK BOLTON



Your butterfly garden

Top tips from RHS Senior Horticultural Advisor Helen Bostock

Your garden could offer a tranquil space for people to relax while taking in one of our most beautiful and mesmerising native insects.

Start by making a rough design. Position benches and other seating so visitors to the garden can experience butterflies up close. Arrange your perennials in traditional long beds, perhaps either side of a gravel pathway, or get creative with island or raised beds, dedicating a bed to each season.

Planning your butterfly border or butterfly box

- ✿ If opting for a new butterfly border, seek a sunny site at least 3m by 1m
- ✿ Choose a range of nectar-rich plants for adults and larval food plants for caterpillars
- ✿ If planting a 'box' or container, aim for one which is at least 20cm x 50cm x 20cm and either plant a range of nectar plants, or allow a single type of larval food plant to fill your container to entice in egg-laying females (if they don't find enough food for their young they won't lay there)
- ✿ If planting boxes, see if you've space for at least two – one providing food for adults and one for their young, following the above advice.



SHARON MEHTA

Main image

Friends of Ham Lands is working to protect and improve butterfly habitat.

Below

A comma spotted at Ham Lands, one of the 86 species of butterfly and moth recorded at the site.

Plants for moths and butterflies

- ✿ Spring: primroses (*Primula vulgaris*), sweet william (*Dianthus barbatus*), bugle (*Ajuga reptans*), forget-me-not (*Myosotis sylvatica*)
- ✿ Summer: cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus*), French marigold (*Tagetes patula*), greater knapweed (*Centaurea scabiosa*), scabious (*Scabiosa*) and purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), hemp agrimony (*Eupatorium cannabinum*), bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*), and many herbs, including wild marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*), thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*), lavender (*Lavandula*) and sage (*Salvia officinalis*)
- ✿ Autumn: flowering ivies (*Hedera helix*), asters (*Aster* and *Symphotrichum*), ice plant (*Hylotelephium spectabile*).

Plants for caterpillars

- ✿ Lady's smock (*Cardamine pratensis*): good for wetter soil and attracts orange tip butterfly
- ✿ Bird's foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*): common blue
- ✿ Common sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*): small copper
- ✿ Fescue grass: meadow brown
- ✿ Yorkshire fog grass (*Holcus lanatus*): marbled white, speckled wood, and small skipper
- ✿ Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*): holly blue
- ✿ Ivy (*Hedera helix*): holly blue
- ✿ Nasturtium, (*Tropaeolum majus*): large white, small white, and green-veined white
- ✿ Stinging nettles host comma, peacock, red admiral and small tortoiseshell caterpillars, but need large swaths.

Protecting butterflies in the capital

Ham Lands, a 200-acre open space on a bend of the River Thames on the western edge of London, has a rich and varied history dating back to Neolithic times. Once a gravel pit, it's now a treasured green oasis – for both the community and for wildlife. It's now so biodiverse, under the care of Friends of Ham Lands (FoHL), that it's been declared a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation and a designated Local Nature Reserve. The flora and fauna count totals more than 1,100 species.

FoHL is working alongside Ham and Petersham in Bloom volunteers, Richmond Council and local conservationists to protect the some 86 species of butterflies and moths recorded on the site. Those spotted, include the comma (pictured below), whose caterpillars enjoy hops and nettles, both in good supply at the site, and the Biodiversity Action Plan priority species, the white-letter hairstreak.

On the advice of experts, the group has begun clearing scrub and invasive plants to create sheltered glades – ideal butterfly habitat.

Volunteers are invited to join in working days to create a new butterfly haven, and learn more about these fascinating creatures at the same time.

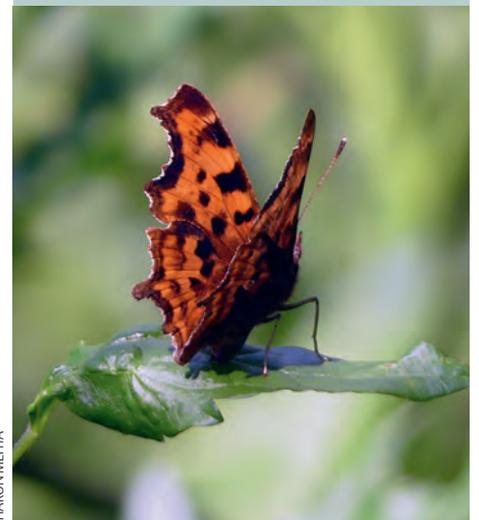
Activity ideas

- ✿ Could you encourage residents, schools or shop owners to create a butterfly box? Perhaps you could run a competition for the most creative upcycled container, or could you encourage young people to incorporate recycled butterfly themed artwork into their designs, with the boxes to be displayed in prominent locations?
- ✿ If you are planning a butterfly border – perhaps you could invite groups and schools to contribute a plant, or take care of a seedling that you supply to bring back to plant with the others when it is ready? This might help the

community feel connected to the final garden and enjoy in the satisfaction of creating a habitat for wildlife, helping to survey it for butterflies in the summer.

- ✿ Add your pledge for a butterfly border or a butterfly box to our online map and help inspire others to join in! Plus share your plans online with #WildAboutButterflies or via wildaboutgardens@rhs.org.uk. Please note, if you are sending us images, be sure that everyone in them has consented to them being used in this way, and please don't share any which include children.

www.wildaboutgardens.org.uk



SHARON MEHTA

What's in your wild garden?

Monitoring wild visitors to your gardens and green space is a great way to engage the community, measure your impact and to contribute to national records. Danni Chalmers, nature reserve officer with Cumbria Wildlife Trust, shares her top tips.

Gardening for wildlife is important not only for local species, but for wildlife nationally, too – creating steppingstones across a mosaic of different land types can help species to spread, connect and ultimately thrive. Here's just a few examples you may well have contributed to:

- ✿ Hedgehogs' territories are expanding in urban areas as people work together to create safe green spaces and hedgehog 'doors' between gardens
- ✿ Butterflies and bees have experienced localised population booms as a result of communities creating 'pollinator corridors' and pollen-rich gardens
- ✿ More diverse bird populations are residing alongside communities due to an increase in feeding stations.

By encouraging wildlife into your gardens and green spaces, not only can you enjoy watching your visitors, plants can also be pollinated and you can record your observations to contribute to national research centres. These centres can be found in nearly every county, often hosted

by your local Wildlife Trust, and they are always encouraged to hear from people monitoring wildlife in their patch. Often it's these residential areas in towns, cities and villages that the national data centres don't survey, representing a missing piece in the jigsaw of British wildlife knowledge.

Working together in green spaces and community gardens to monitor wildlife can make the undertaking a lot more fun, and also, hopefully, more accurate, as more eyes can get better results. You can work together to plan the year's observations, and identify anyone in your group that may have specific skills or interest. If you involve young families too, then you have eyes at all levels – children are particularly good at finding caterpillars and butterfly eggs.

Getting started

It is a good idea to be realistic and progressive with what you undertake, perhaps starting small in your first year. You could first take part in some of the more well-known national recording events like



RHS / CHRIS BULL

the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch, then expand in future years to cover more species and in more depth.

Taking note of different species you see, as well as how these change throughout the year and year-on-year, will help you understand and manage the space better for wildlife. For example, when does frogspawn appear; redwings arrive; different trees flower; or the first spring migrants, such as swallows, appear? It can also be rewarding to keep a record of your wild visitors before and after any specific efforts have been put in place to attract and support them, remembering to do so at the same times of year, if possible.

The easiest way to contribute to wider efforts with your recording is to add your data to some of the many monitoring schemes or events already up and running – the Big Butterfly Count, National Insect Week, Moth Night, to name but a few. It's now easy to contribute your information to existing data sets, most of them now have user friendly web-based data forms which are simple to use and also show you local results pretty instantaneously too. By contributing data to a national schemes or Local Environmental Record Centres, you could also help to verify national trends, problems and solutions.



RHS / JULIAN WEGALL



Far left
School pupils identify insects at the garden of Bloom group, Burncross Action Team in Sheffield

left and below
Monitoring wildlife is a great activity for all ages.



RHS / HELEN YATES

Taking it further

If you want to delve deeper into your area's wildlife, you could invite your local naturalist group or Wildlife Trust to work alongside you. If you need something more official, for say a report or funding bid, you could contract an ecologist to produce a report for your area. The Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management is a good starting place.

There are also lots of ways to build your own skills too, especially if you have discovered a passion for a particular species – the Field Studies Council has courses in everything from botany to butterflies. The Wildlife Trust also has some great resources you can download to help you observe your visiting wildlife with all ages. www.wildlifewatch.org.uk

National monitoring schemes

- ✿ BTO's Garden BirdWatch – monitor a few bird species throughout the year. www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw
- ✿ The RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch, each January www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/
- ✿ Living with Mammals survey – run by The Prince's Trust for Endangered Species in March. <https://ptes.org/get-involved/>

surveys/garden/living-with-mammals/

- ✿ National Moth Night – autumn event run by the Butterfly Conservation Trust. www.mothnight.info
- ✿ Woodland Trust's Natures Calendar – track the impact of climate change on wildlife where you live <https://naturescalendar.woodlandtrust.org.uk/>

There are also several apps and online tools that can be used to monitor your visitors while contributing to national records. iSpot, iNaturalist, iRecord and BirdNet (birdnet.cornell.edu) are all good options.

DANNI'S TOP TIPS

- ✿ Do you have a pond? Counting amphibians at night by torchlight is the best way to see who lives there.
- ✿ You can be safe in the knowledge that correct ID isn't everything. Any of the data centres that receive your information will look at the whole picture, if it is an unlikely sighting for the area or for the time of year, it will be verified before it is published.
- ✿ In spring, make a rough map of your garden and record any nest boxes in use, or nests you see being made, check your map next year to see if they are being used again and if it's by the same birds, if it's possible to identify them.
- ✿ Consistency is key – for national events, such as the Big Garden Birdwatch, there are forms to download to make things easier for you. When recording for yourselves, it's a good idea to set out a form first that everyone in the group can use, with fields such as: date, location, species, number of animals, male or female, name of recorder, etc.
- ✿ Make a footprint trap – most of the mammal inhabitants will come into your garden at night when you're not about to see them, so consider putting out a large tray with damp sand on, with a little plate of wet dog or cat food in the middle before you go to bed. If you have any visiting nocturnal mammals you will hopefully find tell-tale footprints (and an empty plate) in the morning. Do this a few times a year as mammals will be looking for food at different times, but not over consecutive nights so as not to attract less wanted visitors.
- ✿ You can watch butterflies and moths to see where they spend the most time, looking carefully to see if these are nectar plants, or egg-laying sites (larval food plants) that have attracted them. Use this information to help grow their colonies in future.
- ✿ Hold biannual meetings within your community to invite data sharing with other groups and residents, so you can then co-ordinate your planting.

Seed saving – RHS advice

Seed saving can be a great way to propagate your plants for free, to help protect rare and important plants, and makes for a perfect activity for groups and volunteers.

Food production once depended on the manual collection of seed, a practice largely since replaced by industrial-scale processes. Despite this, it remains important for the preservation of rare crop cultivars and is central to global plant conservation. It's also an ideal way to learn and share knowledge about how plants grow and reproduce.

Seed saving and re-sowing can mean another flowering year for hardy annuals, such as cornflowers and marigolds, while a new wildflower meadow could be sown with seed collected from a suitable donor site (make sure to check with local conservationists if taking seed from another site). Collecting seed is also a great way to boost existing wildflowers in a meadow or

long grass, growing the seed on in modules to plant back out as young plants.

Top seed-saving tips

- ✿ Seed harvesting season runs from late summer to late autumn – with seed generally set about two months after flowering. While timings vary between plants, opting for earlier-flowering cultivars often means better results.
- ✿ If you gently hold the flowerhead and the seeds fall away, or if you hear the seedhead rattle, this is a sign they are ready to set seed.
- ✿ Some seed is collected when well-developed but immature and green, to avoid problems with dormancy that delay germination – such as the native wood

anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*), calendula and ranunculus.

- ✿ Edible berries are often not suitable for propagating from seed as they won't come true, but can be used to demonstrate germination.
- ✿ Only collect seeds from healthy plants.



RHS/PAUL DEBOIS

Seed swaps

If you are looking for particularly rare vegetable cultivars, keep an eye out for seed-swap events in your area. You could also consider hosting your own event or taking your seeds to share. Those interested in conserving rare vegetable cultivars could consider becoming a volunteer Seed Guardian with the Heritage Seed Library. Visit gardenorganic.org.uk/seed-guardians



- ✿ Avoid propagating seeds from a hybrid plant cultivar.
- ✿ Herbs are ideal plants for seed collecting. Coriander, dill, parsley, basil, and chives can all be grown from saved seed. Basil is easily cross-pollinated, so if growing two cultivars together only let one of them flower and seed.
- ✿ Most seed germinates best if sown as soon as it ripens, but some require cold or other treatments.
- ✿ Double flowers tend not to seed, while others could be sterile or lack a suitable pollinator. Others (e.g. holly) carry male and female flowers on separate plants; only females will bear seeds.

Types of seedheads:

Seed comes in many different packages following flowering, and some, such as those that are hairy or sticky, may need processing before sowing. Forms include: berries (such as holly); capsules (e.g. poppy); cones (e.g. pine); exploding seedheads (e.g. *Euphorbia lathyris*); nuts (e.g. hazel); pods (e.g. sweet peas) and winged seed (e.g. acer, sycamore).

Collecting seed

1. Collect ripe seed on a dry day, as soon as the seedheads (e.g. capsules or pods) ripen. This is often indicated by a change from green to brown, black or red, but must be before they open and shed their contents.
2. Pick the seedheads, either singly or on stalks, and lay them out in trays lined with paper, or in paper bags to dry on a greenhouse bench or warm windowsill.
3. If they don't open when dry, gently crush pods and capsules to release seed.
4. Release seeds from moist fruits and berries by crushing, washing and straining before leaving to dry on paper towels.

Nuts should be collected around the time they would naturally fall either by hand-picking, or by placing a sheet at the base of the tree and shaking the branches.

After extracting the seed, clean off any surrounding material (chaff) attached to them, as this material could rot and chaff can harbour moulds, pests and diseases.

Storing seeds

Some seeds, such as hellebore are best sown immediately as they acquire dormancy when dried. Many tree seeds, including nuts, acorns and beech mast also shouldn't be stored. Search 'seed storage' on RHS website for more details.

Seed saving for trees

The Tree Council's Seed Saving Season, held each autumn, encourages community groups to get together to save seed from their local native trees for replanting. Evidence suggests that trees that thrive in certain areas will be well adapted to the conditions and should be suitable for propagating. Visit treecouncil.org.uk

RHS / PAUL DEBOIS



Activity ideas for all ages

Go on a group 'seed safari' towards the end of summer to observe what is preparing to set seed in your garden or green space. Look out for tree seeds, drying seedheads and vegetables that have 'bolted'. Young people can be guided to collect seeds into labelled paper bags, or to use sticky strips in a grassland or meadow (a strip of double-sided tape on card) to collect as many seeds as possible. They may also find seeds collect to their trousers or shoes, making for a useful lesson in how certain plants spread.

Learning activity — what are seeds? (suitable for ages 5–7)

- ✿ Gather a set of objects, including different seeds and non-living things such as small stones, twigs and plastic, for young people to sort through, identifying the seeds. This can show that new life can come from something that may look 'dead'.
- ✿ Examine a range of dry seeds to

show variety in shape, colour, size and style (taken from flowers, vegetables, etc). You could also use dried foods such as rice, beans, fennel seeds, peas and popcorn. You might need magnifiers to look at tiny seeds, like poppy, up close.

- ✿ Soak broad bean seeds in water for a few hours and let your learners peel off the coat to discover what's inside.
- ✿ To show germination in action, sow some quick-growing seeds in a tray, on damp kitchen paper, a few days before you need them. Use peas and runner beans to show the difference between hypogeal and epigeal germination respectively, where the former seed remains underground during germination and the latter is lifted above the soil by its developing shoot.
- ✿ Compare dried seed with germinating seed, to visualise clearly what happens with the correct growing conditions.
- ✿ Discuss what the seeds needed to grow (water, warmth, light).
- ✿ Demonstrate planting a seed, clearly explaining each step of the process.

Growing for food banks

Food growing can entice newcomers to gardening and bring in volunteers, but it can also be a way to share the rewards of your work.



RHS / MARK PINDER

Food banks have historically been reluctant to accept and offer fresh food donations, lacking safe storage spaces, staff capacity and the reliability to make it worthwhile. However, some innovative community gardeners are forging new links, helping to offer fresh, local food to the increasing number of people reliant on them.

And with demand for UK food banks now at the highest rate in history, the need has never been greater. Food banks are generally able to offer regular, nutritionally balanced parcels to clients, but increasingly services are now striving to provide more than this – from fresh food options to social events.

One fruitful partnership sprung up in 2019 in Gateshead, with community gardeners and a church group teaming-up as part of a 2019 RHS Greening Great Britain project to supply a local food bank. Children also learned to grow and cook with herbs from the garden as part of a ‘holiday hunger’ initiative.

Supporting others in Penrith

Penrith in Bloom — winner of the 2019 RHS Growing Communities award — is a key part of local food bank efforts, as co-ordinator, Joan Robinson explains.

The Salvation Army is the hub centre for the distribution of food parcels, and our raised beds outside the Salvation Army church help demonstrate what can be grown on a ‘table top’: you don’t need a lot of land to grow food.

We leave surplus veg from the polytunnel and raised beds and other food donations on a high wall every day, including bread, and people just help themselves. We can’t wash the veg for food parcels as this is considered a process and you need a licence and insurance for that, though when people collect the parcels they are also encouraged to take some veg.

People don’t necessarily want others to know they take the food, so they might come at end of day in the dark – it’s a small population here so a lot of people know each other. By the next day everything is gone.

People can have an individual plot in our polytunnel for £5 a year, but we ask that they give 10 percent of their produce away, either through us or through someone they know.

We know of at least two families that live off the donations. There is one mother of four with mental health issues reliant on the donations. She has since joined our group and now is an advocate in deprived areas for ‘growing your own’, she holds workshops and street parties to get people involved. She’s also set up a box on her estate where people can drop

extra food for others.

We provide food year-round but we couldn’t do it on our own, so we also rely on supermarkets. But it’s not our purpose to grow on that scale – we want to show people how to grow for themselves.

We find supermarkets are much more flexible than they used to be – there’s more awareness and so much was getting chucked out. You need to get friendly with the store manager. All the big names donate here now – M&S, Morrisons, Aldi and Sainsbury’s.

In winter we hold a soup and sandwich drop-in using cake and bread supplied from a local shop and veg from the supermarkets that would have gone to waste. We host it on the day that the parcels are given out to encourage people to stay for a bit.

More than food parcels

Tanya Yilmz from national food bank and hunger charity, The Trussell Trust, offers some tips on connecting with a food bank service in your area.

Many food banks in our network offer fresh food, such as fruit, vegetables, eggs and bread, but at the moment not every food bank can handle perishable food safely. The majority of food bank centres are based in churches in a 'pop up' way for a few hours, not built-for-purpose buildings – and the safety of people referred has to be our first priority.

The number of emergency food parcels handed out at each individual food bank within our network varies widely so it's best to speak directly with your local food bank to understand what items are most in need throughout the year. They can then specify any other specific requirements that might need to be considered. Food banks would be more likely to accept donations of items in

their 'pure' form, rather than food that has been pre-prepared or handled in some way. Another consideration would be around allergies.

Food banks are truly grateful for any donation they receive whether this is from a collection at a supermarket, church or school but also from local community allotment groups. Fresh produce that can be stored at room temperature, such as potatoes, carrots and onions, are particularly useful items that food banks are likely to accept in addition to other fruit and vegetables.

We also recognise that ending hunger is about more than food. We support and encourage our food banks to provide compassionate, practical support to people in crisis to help better address the underlying causes of poverty. From running holiday clubs to budgeting and cooking courses, many of food banks in our network also work to build local

connections to address the causes of poverty within their community. This may be something community groups such as yours can help with. As food banks are connected in the community, there may be opportunities to run shared events that help to bring groups that perhaps ordinarily wouldn't meet closer together.

Our new Fight Hunger Create Change partnership with Asda and FareShare will also support more food banks to safely offer fresh food alongside the standard parcel, helping with things like refrigeration and transporting food.

You could contact your local food bank about working together by using the Trussell Trust's online map (trusselltrust.org/get-help/find-a-food-bank).

You may want to connect with your local food bank as part of Grow Social (p3 for more), or make it part of your Big Soup Share! (p14 for more).



Gateshead foodbank benefited from a Greening Great Britain project.

RHS / MARK FINDER

Super ways with soup

Claire Frost from the RHS Campaign for School Gardening tells how a simple food-based event has grown into an impactful way to share the many benefits of community growing.

In October 2019, more than 2,900 groups and schools took part in the third annual RHS Big Soup Share, stirring up soup-tactular events using home-grown produce.

If you aren't familiar with the Big Soup Share, it's a chance to celebrate the work you do in the garden by harvesting your crops, then turning it into a delicious soup to share with others. And it has certainly been popular! Our feedback survey showed that 100 percent of last year's participants would like to hold a similar event in future, and 68 percent now felt they made stronger links with their community by taking part.

While the central premise is simple, we saw a huge variety in the ways that schools and groups adapted the event to suit their needs. Reasons for joining in included; finding new volunteers to help with gardening, supporting others in need, encouraging others to grow their own food, and raising money for gardening activities.

Soup was shared at all sorts of locations, including Parkruns, homeless shelters and food banks. It wasn't just the locations that were varied though; some groups even cooked outdoors over open fires!

Just a few examples of how you joined in...

Bishops Cannings Primary School invited residents to donate surplus vegetables that they had grown to the school's soup supplies. They decorated the school hall with autumnal colours for their event, and had to find extra chairs and tables for all the people who turned up! They said: 'The Soup Share is now truly embedded in our school curriculum and in the parish calendar – we are proud to be part of it.'

In the face of the climate emergency, there's a clear rise in the number of people interested in growing their own food, and some groups have been thinking about ways to make their events more sustainable too. Essington in Bloom served up butternut squash and sage soup (among other flavours!) in compostable soup pots. The pots were then reused for planting this year's vegetables with St John's Academy's after-school gardening club, Mini Diggers.



Pupils enjoying the Big Soup Share at St Gregory's Catholic Science College in Harrow.

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Essington in Bloom is also planning to help the school build a polytunnel to increase the number of vegetables pupils can grow. And if that wasn't enough, the money raised from the event was put towards delivering a trolley-load of food to the local food bank!

Essington in Bloom co-ordinator, James Slim said: 'They particularly enjoyed learning about growing different types of vegetables but the part they were most excited about was harvesting the veg and turning it into delicious soup! It gave the children an immense sense of achievement to be able to see and taste the end result of the work put into the allotment garden.'

Rosstulla School – a school for children with special educational needs, based in Northern Ireland – said taking part in the event helped to raise the young people's self-esteem. Students shared their homemade vegetable soup, wheaten bread, chocolate and carrot cake with fellow pupils and staff, as part of their Certificate of



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Personal Effectiveness (CoPE) qualification, raising £90 for gardening equipment and seeds in the process!

Take part in 2020

If you joined the Big Soup Share in 2019, you should have received a packet of carrot and coriander seeds, which may help you on your way to creating next autumn's soup. If you've not already sown them indoors, carrots should now be able to be sown outside; coriander can be sown in summer.

To join in for 2020, you can register your interest, and download some of our soup-er resources and recipes at schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk/bigsoupshare

Growing resilience

Science teacher Dr Meryl Batchelder from Corbridge Middle School in Northumberland is a TeachSDG Ambassador and a UN-accredited Climate Change Teacher, as well as a 2019 RHS School Gardening Champion of the Year finalist. Here she shares what she has learned about gardening for the planet.

A few years ago, when Ofsted were visiting, one of the inspectors was watching pupils working in our school garden and was overheard calling it 'a picture of bucolic charm'. I'm not sure these would be the exact words I would have used, but I've seen how, as they get their hands dirty in that time-old way, gardening connects children with nature.

As the years have passed, I have become even more passionate about school gardening. My pupils' engagement with the natural world has grown too, they are happier in the fresh air and they delight in picking their own crops. But there is another motivator that has begun to loom large, the threatening black cloud of climate change. Human activity is causing global heating and destabilising natural systems; the resulting extreme weather events are already happening around us.

The changing weather patterns have made me realise that school gardening goes far beyond Friday afternoon fun. Having the skills to grow their own could make a real difference to my pupils in the future and may be critical to ensuring their long-term food security – or at the very least, knowledge to be passed on to the next generation.

Pupils can become more resilient and learn to respond to challenges and, as a society, we can gain resilience by being less reliant on food imports.

When I teach the science of climate change in classroom lessons I focus on the causes, effects, mitigation strategies and possible adaptation measures to thrive and live sustainably on our changing planet. We can do the same in our community gardens.

I tell them the main *causes* of climate change are burning fossil fuels for energy, which releases carbon dioxide and, increasingly, intensive animal farming that produces methane. These two gases enhance the amount of heat retained in our atmosphere. What we eat has a big impact – beans from Kenya or strawberries from Spain have a large carbon footprint compared with those that are home-grown.

The *effects* of climate change on

agriculture and farming are already being observed around the planet. In the UK, farmers and gardeners had a very dry summer last year which reduced crop yields, and we are looking at more intense rainfall in winter and longer dry spells in summer. Internationally, droughts and flooding can impact on food security – we saw a lack of lettuces and courgettes in the supermarkets last year following heat waves in Europe.

School gardening could also *mitigate* some of the emissions that lead to global heating – those beans and strawberries grow fabulously in our garden. Although we don't plan to compete with agricultural growers, our garden helps students understand the issue of food miles.

In autumn we can grow squash, spinach, kale and broccoli, which have an advantage over crops that would ripen during the summer holidays when we are not there. By composting the old growth, we lock up carbon and eventually feed it back into the soil, in turn feeding future crops. Finally, by encouraging pupils to embrace a more

plant-based diet we can reduce our own greenhouse gas emissions.

Adaptation to the warming world will require a change in habits and new skills. By growing their own fruit and vegetables, children learn where food comes from, how to select varieties to grow, germinate seeds, nurture seedlings, harvest crops and manage a garden. Self-sufficiency may be difficult for any individual but, by coming together to share produce, seeds, equipment, labour and skills, our lives could become something more wondrous all together. This social transformation will take effort, an open mindset, generosity and a sense of adventure, but there are many successful schemes that can act as road maps, including some run by the RHS.

In my humble opinion, school gardening is the very best form of education: tangible and tactile, sustainable and satisfying. It helps to build resilient kids today and for the future.

Visit schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk for more tips and resources.



Dr Meryl Batchelder shares her enthusiasm for the environment with her pupils.

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