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velvet*



The OUT OF OFFICE Issue

HOMES | FOOD | CULTURE | PEOPLE | WELLBEING | STYLE

A LIFELINE TO NATURE

With plots opening to the public countrywide this month – to mark National Allotments Week, August 11 to 17 – Velvet's Melanie Taylor encourages you to find a local event and discover the wonders of growing your own...

With the popularity of gardening increasing during the pandemic, celebrities like Sir David Beckham and Kate Moss championing their gardening passions, and the cost-of-living crisis prompting us to 'grow our own', allotments are now more popular than ever. But the space to grow is getting scarcer with local authority allotment provision being something of a postcode lottery.

The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) estimates there are 330,000 allotments across the UK, but unfortunately, plots are like gold dust. An estimated 160,000 people are on allotment waiting lists, the average waiting time is about three years, and in some parts of the country, like Islington, it can be as many as 15. MP Sarah Champion recently tabled an amendment in Parliament to ensure more 'space to grow' is part of every spatial development strategy. "For the 8 million people without a garden at home," she said, "shared spaces such as community gardens are a vital lifeline to nature."

I was very fortunate to grow up in a Hertfordshire village where allotment plots peppered the lane at the bottom of our back garden. I spent many happy hours there helping Dad, mainly watering and picking tomatoes. Unripened ones would be placed with tiny fingers and a curious



Abbey People: Caitlin, second left, with volunteers

mind very carefully onto newspaper in an old chest of drawers. Nowadays, just handling tomato plants takes me straight back there, the green, earthy smell conjuring that same sense of wonder I felt each time I sneaked a peek inside.

Returning to the village last month, I was thrilled to bump into one of our old neighbours who has been tending his plot for more than 50 years. Roger was busy tying in bamboo canes for his runner beans and explained just how therapeutic he found his allotment during his recovery from a recent heart attack. "Over time I've been increasing the time spent and what I

can do on the allotment," he says. "It brings me so much joy, I can only do a little at a time, but it's great to be able to focus on the future."

As well as somewhere to heal, allotments provide sanctuary from being constantly 'switched-on'. They give us a chance to breathe fresh air and experience the patient act of tilling the soil, planting seeds, marvelling at nature doing its thing and then the unbridled joy of harvesting delicious food to eat. A whole new generation have discovered the freedom of cultivating anything and everything in their patch, from fruits and vegetables to cut flowers.

Interspersing crops and ornamentals on your allotment will not only help increase biodiversity, it also helps you to manage pests and diseases. Indeed, Sir David recently shared an Instagram photo of the wildflowers that he grows for cut flowers planted underneath the plum trees in his vegetable garden.

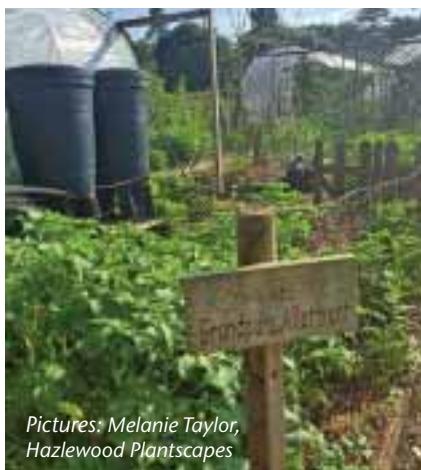
My advice would be to grow what you love eating and what otherwise might be expensive in the shops. Climate change is bringing hotter temperatures and longer growing seasons here in East Anglia, so why not experiment with heirloom and heritage varieties that have adapted and are generally more resilient to our changing local conditions?

The allotment year brings different jobs

**“The glory of
gardening: hands in
the dirt, head in the
sun, heart with nature.**

**To nurture a garden
is to feed not just the
body, but the soul” –
Alfred Austin, Poet
Laureate, 1896-1913**

The Barnsdale parterre garden



*Pictures: Melanie Taylor,
Hazelwood Plantscapes*

to be done as we follow the seasons, each one giving you a renewed sense of purpose as time advances. Allotmenteers can't afford to be fair-weather gardeners; there's always something to be done, whether that's preparing the ground, sowing or planting out.

I'm surely not the only one who listens out excitedly for the thud of seed catalogues arriving in the mail over winter. Filled with promise and ever more luxurious and aspirational, the catalogues are so fabulously styled that you just have to purchase something exotic. Geoff Hamilton's famous Barnsdale gardens in Rutland continue to be another source of practical inspiration to me and the nation's gardeners. Now

LOCAL ROOTS

Find a community gardening group near you.

- In addition to their allotment and orchard activities, **Abbey People** also run Teapots and Flowerpots sessions at the East Barnwell Community Centre and Garden on the first Friday of the month 1pm-3pm – abbeypeople.org.uk
- **Suffolk Mind** run a programme called **GreenCare** at allotments in Haverhill, Bury St Edmunds and Ipswich to which you can self-refer – suffolkmind.org.uk/services/greencare/#welcome
- The Friends of Midsummer Common (FoMC) run weekly volunteering sessions on Sundays. Email Orchard_Manager@protonmail.com for more info



**One of the allotment
plots at Barnsdale**

compost heaps.

If you don't have access to green space for growing or are way down the allotment waiting list, why not volunteer with a local community growing project? It's a great way to make new friends and learn new skills whilst benefiting your health.

Under the floodlights of Cambridge FC, the Fox Den Community Allotments are so named after the foxes who had their cubs in the allotment shed. Run by **Abbey People**, the charity aims to improve the lives and wellbeing of **Abbey** ward residents and allotment sessions take place on Thursday evenings and Sunday afternoons. Their Sustainability Co-ordinator Caitlin Herman also runs monthly community gardening sessions across the area. Fruit and vegetables grown are distributed amongst the volunteers and donated to the **Abbey Food Hub**.

I met some volunteers at the neighbouring **Margaret Wright Community Orchard**, who told me they find supporting the community very rewarding. Says one: “I feel like I am contributing to the health and longevity of the trees. If you come every month, it's nice to see the progression; it's different each time we come.” **Abbey** residents can hire the orchard space for free for events, there's a parent and baby forest school and the **Abbey Voices** choir rehearse there during the summer. Extra volunteers are needed to help dig more growing beds and create a wildlife pond, so get in touch via abbeypeople.org.uk. Speaking about the significance of National Allotments Week, **Mike Farrell**, Chair of the National Allotment Society, says: “Allotments have always been more than just a place to grow food. They are hubs of community spirit, wellbeing, and environmental awareness.”

Whether it's stress relief, solitude, friendships or plain physical exertion you're looking for, you really can't beat the sense of camaraderie, fulfilment and empathy gained from connecting with like-minded people, and the natural world around you.

To find out which allotments are opening visit thanas.org.uk/national-allotments-week

For help with and advice on growing your own in your home garden, contact Melanie by emailing melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk or visiting hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk