

Slugs and dandelions: *the future of gardening?*

Coping with climate change, promoting sustainability and improving mental wellbeing will be the focus of next year's Chelsea Flower Show, says Ciar Byrne

From parterres to perennials, grottos to gazebos, fashions in gardening come and go. Since it was founded in 1804 the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) has been at the vanguard of these shifting trends. But in the wake of climate change a different sort of gardening is called for, one that promotes sustainability, resilience and recognises the contribution gardens make to our mental wellbeing.

Setting out its predictions for the coming year, the RHS has announced that sustainable and restorative gardens will take centre stage at its flagship Chelsea Flower Show next May. RHS director general Clare Matterson believes this summer's drought has made people realise that climate change is really happening here. But she firmly believes that with more than 30 million gardeners in the UK we are in a good position to change our green spaces for the better.

The RHS is leading the way. At RHS Wisley in Surrey it has constructed a new lake to help water conservation. As part of its commitment to going peat-free by 2025, the RHS has appointed its first ever 'peat-free fellow', and this month is hosting a seminar to help commercial growers switch to more sustainable growing media.

'There is this huge spike in interest every year in gardening,' says Matterson. 'We have to make the most of that – to encourage people to garden but also to get out the message about how to garden sustainably. We have to think about the long-term environment if we are to be resilient into the future.'



The Conifer Lawn at RHS Wisley



Dandelions are regarded as weeds but are a great source of nectar for bees



Wildflowers at RHS Harlow Carr

PICTURES: ADOBE STOCK; RHS/JERRY HARPUR/CHRIS GORMAN/NEIL HEPWORTH

JUST A MOW

We British love our lawns, but this summer many of us looked on in dismay as they turned from green to parched brown. Matthew Pottage, the curator at RHS Wisley, believes this is something we will have to learn to accept as global warming alters the climate. 'We need to move away from saying "my lawn has died" because lawns just go temporarily dormant, and we've all seen how quickly they bounce back after a dry spell.'

Mini-meadows are the way forward according to Leigh Hunt, the RHS's principal horticultural adviser. 'I think it's interesting that meadows and wildflowers have become more popular,' he says. 'I don't think this is by accident, because looking at a brown lawn can be quite unsettling, but the tapestry effect of grasses can counteract that feeling and is very positive in terms of the insects and wildlife that are coming in.'

He believes we need to reappraise plants that we used to consider

weeds. Yarrow and clover are low-growing, so can be mown, but remain green when the grass turns brown. Dandelions are also an important early source of nectar for pollinators. Is it time for us to learn to find them beautiful?

At Wisley this year the Conifer Lawn was left unmown, so that by mid-spring it was covered in a carpet of dandelions. 'When it was flowering in the early spring it was golden, and it was interesting hearing reactions to that,' says Pottage. 'A lot of people would weed out dandelions, but they are great for nectar and we thought we would go for it.'

'Of course, this had a knock-on effect. When the flowers were gone we had all these amazing dandelion clocks, and the seeds went everywhere. We're now getting dandelions coming up in the crazy paving around the laboratory, but we're not spraying anymore. We just need to get better at pointing all the cracks in our paving.'



Caterpillars are just as much part of the ecosystem as beneficial insects

LOVE BUGS

Dr Hayley Jones, senior entomologist at the RHS, explains that the summer drought sent some insects into hibernation rather than killing them off. But it also had an impact on their lifecycles and their ability to reproduce. 'Insects are cold-blooded, so the warmer it is the better their metabolisms function,' she says. 'But there's a limit to that for insects that are adapted to UK conditions. When it gets too hot there's a risk of them overheating, especially things like bumblebees. We saw very quiet periods during the summer, with insects hiding out to avoid the heat. That means they weren't been able to be out and about gathering resources and reproducing as much as usual.'

Slugs are an example of how wildlife reacts to drought. During hot periods they hide underground, re-emerging quickly when the rain comes. Not all slugs damage plants, and many are beneficial. Rather than killing them, Jones recommends gardeners pick them off plants by hand and grow larger plants that are less susceptible to being eaten. 'We are shifting towards the idea that not all slugs are bad,' says Jones. 'Even the ones that are damaging your plants are all part of the ecosystem, so you're going to have to learn to live with them to some extent.'

Another important thing we can do to promote wildlife – or rather not do – in our gardens is to not be too quick to tidy up. 'Less tidying is better for the wildlife,' says Jones. 'Any leaf litter and debris you leave provides habitats for wildlife. You want a diversity of plants for visual appeal, and the more plants you have, the more wildlife you'll see.'



CULTIVATING WELLBEING

The RHS has long championed gardening for mental health and wellbeing, and in the wake of the pandemic this has become more vital than ever. In 2020 it recruited the UK's first 'garden wellbeing fellow', who in collaboration with the University of Sheffield is leading research into how we can develop a blueprint for gardening for rest, relaxation and recovery.

Professor Alistair Griffiths, RHS director of science, says her team are working on a couple of experiments and will share their findings in 2024. In the first they are deliberately stressing participants – with their permission – then putting plants in front of them to see how quickly they recover. Using wearable technology and emotion-recognition software they hope to identify which plants work best.

In the Wellbeing Garden at Wisley they are also measuring emotional responses at the Living Laboratory. 'We're working with the University of Surrey to look at the psychological aspects of gardens and our interactions with them. We are animals too, and we need to understand our ecology and our habitat better for our wellbeing,' says Griffiths.

This year, for the first time, a hundred primary school children from the most disadvantaged areas of London will be invited to the Chelsea Flower Show for a picnic, where they will be given tours of the show gardens. 'Children have an instinctive love of gardening,' says Matterson. 'They want to know what's happening, they want to nurture. When you're a teenager you might fall out of love with gardening a bit as you fall in love with other teenagers. Later in life, perhaps as you're setting up a home, that love of gardening can be reignited. For me, that is why it's critical to get children to start that journey.'

PICTURES: ADOBE STOCK; RHS/NEIL HEPPWORTH

WEATHER EYE

Matthew Pottage explains how the increasing number of extreme weather events brought about by climate change is testing our gardens. 'Casting our mind back to the start of the year we had Storm Eunice, which caused the most damage I've seen at Wisley in my 17 years here,' he says. 'Then there was the unbelievable drought. There were real challenges, with plants going through the sort of stresses we're not used to seeing.'

At Wisley, whenever the team want to try something new, he first asks them whether they can afford to use the amount of water it will require. The RHS national collection of rhubarb has recently moved from Wisley, where the garden is on sand, to damper, cooler RHS Bridgewater in Manchester. The national collection of gooseberries will also follow it north.

In July the RHS conducted a survey to find out which plants suffered the most during the heatwave.

Hydrangeas came top of the list, followed by Japanese maples, fuchsias and, more surprisingly, roses, although these enjoyed a resurgence in the autumn, with many blooming well into October and November.

But addressing hotter summers is not as simple as growing succulents, cacti and Mediterranean plants because we are also getting wetter winters, which are anathema to them. The key thing is to try lots of different plants to see what works best in your garden.

'Diversity in planting is crucial,' says Pottage.

Fritillarias in the wildflower meadow at RHS Harlow Carr near Harrogate



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2023 SHOW GARDENS

1. The Savills Garden by Mark Gregory

An intimate walled garden, combining ornamental and edible planting, that champions how growing your own food can be the basis of a healthy lifestyle.

2. Centre for Mental Health's The Balance Garden by Jonathan Davies and Steve Williams

This design will explore the importance of nature in the urban landscape, with wildflowers, weeds and 'food forestry'.

3. The Royal Entomological Society Garden by Tom Massey

An outdoor laboratory built into a hillside offering an 'insect-eye view'. During the week of the show it will be used for real scientific research, monitoring insects visiting the site. It will feature drought-resistant planting mulched with mixed recycled aggregates.

4. The Samaritans Listening Garden by Darren Hawkes

The garden represents a safe and secure place where

people can share their internal struggles. It will enjoy an afterlife in a permanent garden at Samaritans, Truro.

5. The Flora and Fauna International Garden by Jilayne Rickards

This garden will offer visitors an insight into the Afromontane landscape of Central Africa's Virunga Massif, and will celebrate the success of the International Gorilla Conservation Programme.

6. Land of Healing: Korean Mountain Light by Jihae Hwang

This garden highlights the rewilding of the remote Jirisan mountain region of Korea, where thousands of medicinal plants grow, and how this is essential for human wellbeing.

7. The Nurture Landscapes Garden by Sarah Price

A low-carbon garden that celebrates the art and craft of horticulture, inspired by the British plantsman Sir Cedric Morris (1889-1982). ♦ The RHS Chelsea Flower Show runs from 23-27 May 2023. For tickets visit rhs.org.uk

