

Focus on the Food Chain

'If everyone does a little, the wave will gather strength'

'Gardening is certainly one hundred times better than a dose of HRT. In fact, on the basis that in the summer months, you can stretch to 12 hours of pleasure a day out of it, I'd even rate it better than sex' - I was standing at the most fantastic stall of hardy perennials at the farmers market and the lady in front of me was expounding the virtues of gardening and being outdoors.

The therapeutic value of successful, or even *not* so successful, gardening is age old and yet many of us seem to have lost the connection between gardening for pleasure and growing our own food. There is so much focus on low maintenance, off the shelf gardening with shrubs and flowers and less on the benefits of a great vegetable plot. Decades of corporate food have left people with limited knowledge of what they're eating or where it comes from. Human nature will often make us go for what's easy – so ready made, pre-packed meals, with a label saying 'healthy living' will be much more attractive to a generation which doesn't know any different.

So what can be done to reverse the trend? We all need to gain a better understanding, perhaps just question or remember where our food comes from, and why certain foods are so important for our health. We need to understand too just how the give and take relationship works between nature, and farming and gardening.

Which begs the question of *who should be doing the educating* – family, schools, professional organisations, supermarkets? Well there's room for everyone here and perhaps this is one more instance where that well-worn but perfectly valid message 'if everyone does a little, together we'll achieve a lot' can apply, if we're to see the mutual cumulative benefits, to people and nature alike.

Pockets of change

There are some great projects out there – all over Scotland we're seeing enormous efforts being made at local level to elicit a better understanding of what we're eating and where food comes from.

Grow your own in school – There's lots of help up for grabs

There are numerous initiatives which aim to support schools in growing and eating their own vegetables, educating both in sustainable gardening and where food can come from. These in addition to the support of Eco-schools, Grounds for Learning and Health Promoting Schools include:



Plot 2 Pot - a pilot run by Highland Environmental Network (HEN) in 2006 successfully introduced and supported a small number of schools to growing and eating fruit and vegetables in their own school grounds. A full-time project officer gave help and advice. Food diaries were encouraged as an introduction to healthy eating.

"A great experience for the children and it cannot be replicated by reading a book or searching the web!"

Local Food for Local Schools run by Skye & Lochalsh Horticultural Development Association is working with five primary schools in a project which also aims to raise awareness of the availability of local

produce. Two guides – one for growers and one for schools a 'Guide to creating a productive school garden' have been written as part of the project and will be available on CD. For more information visit www.slhda.org.uk.

Planting to Plate - Action 4 Sustainability will work with the Crofters Commission during 2007 as part of this project, teaching children traditional food growing skills.

Going it alone

Many schools quietly go about cultivating vegetable plots without the support of a specific programme. The Royal School of Dunkeld boasts a productive organic plot the results of which find their way to the school kitchen. They make their own compost and growing comfrey to produce organic liquid feed. In 2004 they

began trials to investigate the advantages of using different growing mediums and specifically the benefits of rock dust as a means of re-mineralising the soil.

Seeds to Stomachs – it really works

It's all basically a bottom-up approach to getting children to understand that green beans and carrots don't grow out of a plastic bag in the supermarket. They plant the seeds, they watch them poke through the soil, develop and grow into a recognizable vegetable. They get to do the nurturing and in theory, they learn a little biology to boot.

It's the gardening equivalent of 'Salmon in the Classroom' - the difference being that kids get to close the loop by picking and eating the produce – a true 'seed to stomach experience'.

Do they learn and take it all home? All these projects are designed to involve other people – both parents and community, so we hope so. There is however, some evidence that some schools suffer from lack of community support. One expert also commented that some schools lack support, local authority guidance and consistent information on preparing and eating their own produce. All of which makes it easier to avoid the issue altogether.

Toni Clark, Project Coordinator for Plot 2 Pot in Highland *'P2P definitely revealed a huge interest in food growing and healthy eating issues in schools in Highland. This was evident in the large number of participants at the post project event which alone, was one very successful aspect of the project - the identifying and linking together of the many related projects and support groups has increased schools' confidence to look at growing food and hopefully eating it too!'*

What about kids over the age of 11?

This is all fine at primary school level. What about High School children and the rest of the community. Restricted by the curriculum in what time they can spend out of the classroom, we're told that High School pupils get very little input on the subject of healthy eating. Addressing this whole issue for High Schools takes much more radical thinking and full 'whole of school' backing.



The **REAL** (Read Education Active Lives) project is one to look out for. Launched in May 2006 the venture aims to develop a sustainable business growing and marketing organic vegetables, starting with an acre plot of school ground. Run as a commercial venture it aims to move away from the three year funding pitfall, after which so many projects grind to a halt. Under the management of Iain Clyne, ex Geography teacher with the school, the project offers practical business and development skills, together with work experience to a small number of pupils.



Early on, the project was partnered by locally based business, MacLeod Organics, who helped participants develop their skills base and inspired the youngsters with a visit to their own site. By July 06 salad crops were being harvested and sold at the Inverness Farmers Market and in September, the first crop of potatoes were dug, graded and sold.

A phenomenal amount has been achieved in a very short time and quite aside from fantastic vegetables, one clear benefit seems to be the ownership and pride participants have in their business.



A farm manager (Iain Findlay) has recently been appointed whose primary role will be to mature the business, through the further development of the school site along with additional plots of local disused land.

Iain Clyne: *'We believe this project provides answers to generational problems'*

The message – psychologically, it's still the same thrill and quick win that hands-on growing brings to nursery children, with the huge added bonuses of increased teenage self respect, confidence and learning practical

and business skills for making a living. It's what nature can give to people. The spin off is what nature and society get back in the long run. Better quality people and better use of the earth's resources.

Benefits to nature

How quick is the win for nature? Does this depend on whether we choose to garden and educate with organic methods in mind? And how much do people really understand the impact of what they do and eat on the health of the soil, wildlife and our environment?

In August 2005, an article in the Scotsman reported that 'organic farms really do become havens for wildflowers, birds, insects and other animals, according to a study published today. However, they can be "isolated" within areas of non-organic farming, limiting the effect on animal populations. Scientists from five organisations worked over four years to compare wildlife on organic and ordinary farms. They found dramatic differences: organic fields contained up to twice as many plant species found on non-organic farmland as well as up to 50 per cent more spiders, 60 per cent more birds and 75 per cent more bats. The scientists, including experts from the British Trust for Ornithology, the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and Oxford University's wildlife conservation research unit, said their most striking finding was the abundance of wild plants on organic farms. "Organic fields were estimated to hold 68 to 105 per cent more plant species and 74 to 153 per cent greater abundance of weeds than non-organic fields," said their report, to be published by the Royal Society today.'



In terms of selling, we have almost reached the £3000 mark. Over the months we have built up a solid customer base, with a lot of people very interested in what we are doing. Many love that fact that we are growing the crops ourselves. Others are happy in that the food is truly local. The older folk tell us of when they were taught farming skills when they were at school. The Christmas stall was really busy. We sold out of just about everything! *REAL Blog site*
<http://real5142.blogspot.com/>

Our organic farmers may agree, but are also quick to point out the good work being done by the non-organic farms countryside. This view is also voiced by James Withers of NFU Scotland in the same article, saying 'While organic farming clearly delivers environmental benefits, the role of conventional farming is central to the protection of Scotland's unique wildlife and habitats'.

Community, allotment and home gardening

Many communities are actively moving towards improving their understanding of the diversity of nature around their gardens, personal and community, their allotments and greenspaces.

Some might say that 'Community Gardening' is really just a modern day variation on the allotment theme. The responsibility is just spread differently and ownership of space is less defined. Many community gardens manage to combine growing produce with wonderful artistic and themed greenspaces and are to be congratulated for the creation of a multi-purpose space all rolled into one – **Link to Ailie's Garden**. Equally, sharing common ground, in both senses, can better enable people from different backgrounds to get to know one another and create a bond.

The allotment, embedded in gardening history seems to offer it all. It's a breathing space: a place to escape; a meeting place; somewhere to find people with shared interest; nature's place (when caterpillars on cabbages remind gardeners who's in charge); a working place. All that healthy digging and exercise.

Whatever angle they come from, allotment holders and gardeners everywhere do seem to be in touch with nature in a way which we undervalue. Gardeners know what wildlife is in their area through all the seasons. They know what sort of soil they have and what they can grow in it. They know what to grow to attract more butterflies and birds, what vegetables to companion plant to minimize pests and when to give up the fight against bugs and disease and let nature take its course. Many people do use pesticides and non-organic methods, but as media hype raises awareness of more global issues like climate change, people are starting to be more conscious of the effect of local actions. They are sharing good practice on alternative more

'environmentally friendly' ways of gardening. It is gardeners on the ground who will be amongst the first to feel valuable for making a difference.

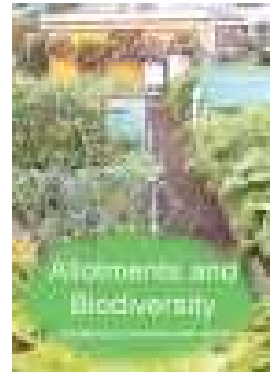
Allotments and Biodiversity Booklet

A new booklet which brings together ideas on how biodiversity can be enriched on allotments, has been produced as part of a successful partnership project between Glasgow City Council, Glasgow Allotments Forum, Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society and Scottish Natural Heritage

The booklet has been distributed to around 1000 plot holders in Glasgow with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of biodiversity in the City. It is hoped that it will guide and inspire by illustrating that it is possible to manage your allotment in the traditional way while still having plenty of room for wildlife.

A second 'recording' phase to the project is now being proposed, facilitated through new funding, which would aim to encourage and support allotment holders in monitoring key species on their plots.

The success in Glasgow has inspired a similar project in Edinburgh and the idea could easily spread to allotment holders and local gardening groups countrywide. The resources used by Glasgow, including the booklet framework and photographs can be made available to any group who would like to replicate the project. Contact: Carol MacLean, Biodiversity Officer, Glasgow City Council to discuss.



Can young people understand the value of organic methods?

'Just a single teaspoonful of soil can contain 4 billion living things!' Soil Association Scotland 'From Farm to Fork' workshop.

The Soil Association does a great job of introducing school children as young as 8 to the concept of organic farming through a programme of workshops and visits to organic farms. This may be done in liaison with Royal Highland Education Trust who also offer visits, resources and activities designed to help pupils get first-hand experience of the countryside – organic and non-organic.

What do children remember? We asked two farm managers what they felt had an impact on primary school children during a visit and then talked to a P4/5 class who had done a workshop and also visited an organic farm with the Soil Association.

Farmers:

Kids love the animals, cows, horses, hens and turkeys, particularly the small animals – even the dog was the centre of attention. They were amazed at the long lines of salad crops in the polytunnels, and the pumpkins, but I guess I was a little disappointed that no-one asked more interesting questions. I was surprised about what they did and didn't know. They all love being on the trailer ride out in the open. They're interested in the compost heaps and how manure is processed.



It was a shame they weren't allowed to drink the juice we made from the apple press – I think that would have been really great for them. (This is due to risk assessment which doesn't allow eating on farm visits)



And the kids:

'Turkeys, hens, the dog, the *heat* of the compost heap, seeing cabbages grow so big in the ground, eating apples – the farmer's hair!' They all knew the farm was organic and what that meant. They all loved the work they did in class with Claire Taylor, Education Officer for the Soil Association – and several also commented on learning about healthy eating, air pollution and how good the 'food miles' task was!

Claire uses lots of interactive games and materials and a gallery of great photos covering everything from bugs to wildflower meadows. Children role play as members of the food chain wearing character hats; 'battery hens' get hustled into a corner, 'organic free range chicks' get to wander the classroom free. Her presentation illicitly 'yucks' at the images of worms and bugs and laughs for the 'mooing milk bottle' At every opportunity she works in 'the importance of organic farming and gardening to producing healthy foods from healthy living soil.'

The whole thing is well pitched and memorable. More memorable than the farm visit? It's difficult to tell, but maybe the farm experience is just that, a good day out of the classroom – and going to the farm is terribly distracting. How could you possibly concentrate on the concepts of organic farming and the soil when there are animals to look at and steaming compost heaps to prod? Well, health and safety stops kids prodding, but they can see the steam coming off.

Are we starting to understand the importance of what we eat?

'We're jumping on a wave' - if you like, the Bernard Matthews effect' was one of the reasons for success given by Iain Clyne, REAL Project at Inverness High School. Well two waves to be precise. One covering every angle of healthy eating, local and organic growing, school food, school gardens, tackling obesity and exercise for healthy lives, and the other concentrating on global warming.

Nationwide campaigns hit the headlines as the wave takes strength. The country was taken by storm with Jamie Oliver's campaign to revolutionise school meals 'What we eat affects everything: our mood, behaviour, health, growth, even our ability to concentrate'. Early in 2007 Marks & Spencer began the explicit supermarket move towards managing their eco-footprint and television is full of reality programmes designed to demonstrate that 'we are what we eat' – swapping 'food' lifestyles monitoring the effects of ready meals versus home cooking. Even turning on Gardener's World is no longer about this year's new species of dahlia. February 2007 saw the start of a project to transform a derelict area into a community garden and admired the success of a school food-growing project.

We're all getting a good dose of the message: think about what we eat, understand where it comes from, learn to grow our own again, eat better, live healthier, then there will be less packaging waste in the world causing clouds of methane from our landfill sites and more biodiversity in our gardens.

But nothing is going to change overnight, having evolved over years, the reality is that it will take years for us to move on from the current way of life. This is one we're going to have to chip away at.

[Link to Royal Society Article on organic farming and wildlife](#)

[Link to BTCV/NGFI box?? – separate document](#)