

GROWING SOCIETY CHANGING LIVES

The RHS stands for the good of people, plants and the planet through gardening. Here, in the first of a three-part series, a member of Council looks at how the Society's work is a force for good for the population as a whole

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Students from Broadmere Primary Academy (far left) together with local residents and RHS Community Outreach Advisor Kate Orchard (left) take part in a community planting day in July at the Sheerwater Estate in Woking.

Over the years I have found it sometimes helps to start an article with a bold and sweeping statement. Here is today's: gardening changes people's lives. There is, in my mind, absolutely no doubting the truth of this.

To most gardeners, isn't this 'revelation' pretty obvious? Doesn't everybody know that? Sadly, they don't. One of the most important purposes of the RHS is to convey that message to as many people as possible, and not only its **nearly** 500,000 members. The Society touches every aspect of life – from schools and communities, research and science, to libraries and outreach, and from qualifications to health and wellbeing. But this is not about dull lists and dry statistics, it is about people of all ages and backgrounds.

My own life was changed by horticulture. As a teenager I could not see the point of gardening. It was something dull my parents did at the weekends and involved being outdoors in the cold doing strange things with soil. Why would I want to do that sort of thing, except under duress? However, after I left school, I had a period best described as my 'misspent youth' which ended when I stumbled into gardening.

I began by digging people's gardens, then laying lawns and pruning roses. From there I learnt about design and now find myself being asked to write articles like this. I realised pretty quickly that being outdoors among plants was what I most wanted to do and it has made me happy ever since.

Inspiring young gardeners

The Society's peregrination through our lives begins with children. If we can introduce young people to the joys of gardening then we have planted a seed that will benefit them for the rest of their lives. Not only will they know where their food comes from, they will learn to appreciate how finely balanced this world is, and how gardens are the guardians of the planet. I visited a school in South London recently – just one of the 37,000 in the country that have signed up to the RHS Campaign for School Gardening in the past 10 years – where the children gardened every day. They grew vegetables and flowers, composted the remains of their lunchboxes and made a conscious effort to harm no wildlife. This final point is particularly interesting, as the rehoming of slugs and snails perhaps may seem alien to the grown-up gardener but it is important to teach about the preciousness of all life – especially given the rising tide of knife crime and drug abuse in many areas. The children have standard lessons in outdoor classrooms where possible and, although the journey is not always smooth, they end up taking great pride in their surroundings.

For families there is the phenomenon that is RHS Britain in Bloom. Now 50 years old and encompassing more than 3,000 groups across the UK, it used to be perceived as being all about hanging baskets and floral clocks but, while bringing colour into towns is important, it is so much more than that. There are hardcore urban areas growing vegetables, rural villages cultivating wildflower meadows, and whole neighbourhoods encouraging wildlife and smartening up tower blocks. This has proved to be an especially strong tool in bringing communities together, evidenced by the recent BBC television series on the subject. Bloom has thrown up some real local heroes – the ladies who transformed a rubbish-strewn alleyway in Liverpool into a flower-decked boulevard, albeit with some of the plants eccentrically sprouting from old lavatories and holey buckets. The Islington residents who colonise roundabouts and tree pits to grow vegetables. Or the newsagent in Birmingham who organised the planting of flowers to delight motorists waiting at the traffic lights outside his shop. »



Harnessing the power of people

The Society could not serve its members and charitable purpose without its 1,100 volunteers, and the RHS makes great use of these wonderful people. All of the RHS Gardens and Flower Shows are populated by the purple army: people of every age, clothed in purple shirts – some without their own gardens eager to get outdoors, others with wisdom to spare who have been gardening for decades. There is a job for everybody: it could be helping visitors find their way around RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show or getting stuck into the weeding at RHS Garden Wisley. RHS Gardens Rosemoor and Wisley are even opening up areas for allotment holders to grow their own (see [p84](#)).

One of the most vibrant volunteer initiatives is at the Society's newest garden at Bridgewater in Salford, Greater Manchester. Here there are 62ha (154 acres) brought to life by a battalion of volunteers who have spent many hours chopping, grubbing and hacking at the undergrowth so that we can provide a brand new garden in the North West for locals and members and alike. These volunteers are not just helping the RHS, they are investing in the future of their own community. After working for the RHS, some volunteers become so enthused they are struck by the impulse to change careers to become gardeners, in which case they may need horticultural qualifications – the RHS can help with that, too (see [p79](#)).

The benefits of horticulture to wellbeing are well documented, and the Society has partnered with the NHS to show the positive impact of gardening on mental health. This year's 'The RHS Feel Good Garden' by Matt Keightley was moved from RHS Chelsea Flower Show to an NHS Mental Health Trust in North London for the benefit of patients and staff, and more are being planned for the next two years.

Sharing the Society's expertise

Obviously the place where many of us feel most at home is in our own gardens and the RHS reaches out to us even in the sanctuary of our own borders. Need help to identify a plant? Find it on [rhs.org.uk](#). How do you garden in a changing climate? Got that covered. Swept away by an uncontrollable enthusiasm for irises or daffodils? The RHS has lots of Affiliated Societies which can put you in touch with like-minded enthusiasts. Want to do some research? RHS Lindley Libraries are full of extraordinary undiscovered gems: books, manuscripts, prints, paintings and artefacts. Problem with a pest? RHS Science provides the answer. This last one is really important as, tucked away in laboratories at Wisley, some of the world's leading horticultural scientists are working on groundbreaking research for the sole benefit of gardeners across the globe – the website had more than 19 million visitors in 2017. A key benefit of membership is the RHS Gardening Advice service with members and visitors seeking the answer to thousands of gardening questions every year. This science does not just cover diseases but entomology, soil, water management, peat alternatives and plant health. Around 250 people are involved in RHS Plant Trials. This is where different cultivars of plants are put through their paces and the best garden plants selected for a coveted Award of Garden Merit.

The perception of the RHS is sometimes of a venerable and established organisation. A bit posh and clever with lots of Latin, esteemed buildings and highfalutin Flower Shows that have no connection with the average home gardener. In reality, if you tickle the learned society a bit, you will find genuine, smiling people from all backgrounds who have been brought together by a universal interest in plants and gardening. They care deeply about this green planet of ours, are eager to share their knowledge and keen to learn from staff and members. The great thing to remember is that no one individual knows everything about horticulture but, if we stick together, one of us will always know someone who can answer every question. **O**

Gardening is all about people; the RHS believes horticulture is a force for good, capable of improving the lives of people across the UK.

Resources

For links to RHS Gardening Advice, Libraries, Education, School Gardening, Britain in Bloom, It's Your Neighbourhood and Affiliated Societies, see [p13](#).

Community gardening can have a huge impact for people and places. For more, visit [rhs.org.uk/communitygardening](#)

Find support and tools for community projects at [rhs.org.uk/communitygardening/resources](#)