Opinion Gardens

Why gardening should be on the national curriculum

Groundwork has started in the UK and US on schemes that nurture children towards horticulture

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Like every skill, gardening does not come naturally. It has to be passed on. This weekend it is all very well having hunts for Easter eggs in the garden. If nobody draws the egg-hunters into gardening, there will be no gardens for their children to hunt in eventually. What are we seniors doing to teach it?

My track record here is feeble. My two children, now in their forties, never went much further in gardening than a flirtation with a tomato stuffed into a Grobag. My efforts have not improved with age. This weekend I will be taking my grandchildren to the races, not the greenhouse. They will be learning how to bet on horses at odds like 6/4. They will not be learning to sow spinach or lobelia.
All, as usual, is far from lost. Gardening has been billed by retail analysts and advertisers as a middle-to-late age pursuit. Much is conspiring to make it so: the high price of houses and gardens, the rush of working life and a chronic shortage of spare time. At ground level, gardening is refuting this stereotype. Many more school children are loving it as they meet it in programmes that were not on offer in the 1960s, the age, supposedly, of flower power. Far from dying out, gardening may be about to take off.

In the past 10 years, some big names in gardening have set about spreading it into schools. The groundwork was already being done in Britain, not least by The Sun newspaper, steered by its long-running garden columnist, the celebrated Peter Seabrook. The publication backed campaigns with names like Junior Petunia, encouraging the young to grow bedding plants. They also linked up with Grow Your Own potatoes, cleverly aimed at primary schools so that children learn that potatoes do not grow on trees (growyourownpotatoes.org.uk). Results of their encouragement have featured in exhibits at Chelsea Flower Show.

In 2011 the Royal Horticultural Society began National Gardening Week. This was followed a few years later by the National Children’s Gardening Week, started by Neil Grant, the managing director of Ferndale Garden Centre in Sheffield. Together, they now take place at the end of May, this year from May 25 to June 2.

As a prelude to the Chelsea Flower Show, the Duchess of Cambridge has teamed up with two designers and the RHS to stage a garden called Back To Nature. According to the RHS, it is “inspired by childhood memories triggered by the natural world”. The duchess hopes it will help to re-engage parents and children with woodland and nature.
In Pennsylvania, campaigns to attract young gardeners have become a priority at Longwood Gardens, which is co-operating with the American Society for Horticultural Science. Led by the gardens’ executive director, Paul Redman, Longwood has identified gardening’s needlessly low profile as a career, vital though it is to a country’s maintenance, beauty and productivity. It has collaborated with the ASHS on a Seed Your Future programme, to attract more takers to horticulture as a “green collar” working life. It identified 17 as the age at which parents have careers talks with their children, so the programmers decided to raise horticulture’s status at that crucial stage.

They then confronted a problem. Many Americans had no idea what the word “horticulture” meant. When it was presented to them through plants, videos and the options in a gardener’s life, they warmed to it, but asked for it to be renamed “plantology”.
I am happy to be a plantologist if the name helps to spread the skill. Last year, Longwood launched Seed Your Future BLOOM!, offering free videos, lessons and plans and linking with Scholastic to reach as many schools as possible (scholastic.com/BLOOM). In its first year the programme reached nearly 1m students and aims to reach twice as many this year.

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An initiative of the New York Botanical Garden is also making progress. The Edible Academy has just been doubled and magnificently restyled to cater for children who come in to grow vegetables and herbs in the Dig! Plant! Grow! programme. It is packed out.

In the UK, about 1.5m primary school children of the total 5m are now gardening. Even so, it is not part of the national curriculum, which it surely should be. It is also most prevalent among five to eight-year-olds. It should be followed up for older groups; I became a life-long gardener at the age of 10.

The RHS now has school gardening firmly entrenched in its mission (schoolgardeningrhs.org.uk). Membership fees support an excellent series of School Gardening Awards, progressing through seven levels, each requiring work to be submitted online. More than 6,000 secondary schools have joined in so far and as they climb the ladder they qualify for rewards, including free seeds and gardening vouchers.

An annual Green Plan It project encourages groups of pupils to devise a plan for a garden for their school or community and then to carry it out. Mentors from the profession help them with their ideas. Successes range from Suffolk to Salford, Sunderland to Somerset. Any school can join, even in grubby London. Last year, St Gregory’s Catholic Science College in Harrow won the school gardening team of the year. According to the RHS it has “made huge strides in school gardening”.
Schools can also find themselves in the soup. The RHS has been running a campaign called the Big Soup Share in which school groups are encouraged to make a soup based on school-grown vegetables and share it with their locality. Nearly 1,000 schools took part last year, cooking up pumpkin soup (a popular choice for Halloween), potato and leek and even a white tomato and coconut brew. There was also an alphabet soup with pasta lettering and a base made from pupil-grown vegetables.

These initiatives stress “wild” nature, gardens for “wellbeing” and “gardening for wildlife”, but there is far more to gardening than dealing with nettles and preventing grey squirrels from savaging plants. It would be good to hear more about curiosity and beauty as impulses for growing flowers.

Among charities now in this field, I recommend a look at Greenfingers (greenfingerscharity.org.uk). Its special mission is the making of gardens around UK hospices, centres in which some 7,000 children are receiving treatment at any one time. At Richard House Children’s Hospice in London the plan is for a new garden, inspired by “a mystical world” in which children can take a break from the ordeals of hospice life.

At Chestnut Tree House hospice in West Sussex, Hayley, the family liaison officer, speaks convincingly on video about what gardening and gardens can mean to child patients and their families. I will be explaining each-way doubles and accumulator bets to my grandchildren on Easter Monday, but as we advance on the bookies, I am aware of what lessons in seed sowing could mean to them, too.

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