

Rock climbing may not be the usual route to growing vegetables, but it was how Ida Fabrizio came to manage the volunteers in the garden at the Castle Climbing Centre, based in a grand-looking former water-pumping station in Stoke Newington, north London.

A regular at the centre, Fabrizio, 38, had long been interested in growing food — her family are Italian, so they take their veg seriously — when she was asked five years ago to take on converting the one-acre site around the folly into a vegetable patch and community garden. “The centre was keen on being more environmental, and was already making compost from its kitchen waste, but it wasn’t using it in food growing,” she says.

Today, she and the volunteers — largely made up of locals and the centre’s clients — grow herbs and veg for the cafe there, in return for climbing credits and a free lunch. Also on the site are a forest garden, a pond and beehives, as well as an area set aside for use by Growing Communities, an urban market garden and mini plots for locals. And having lots of young, fit climbers around is not without advantages: “We’ll put up a sign saying, ‘Come and do a warm-up — move six wheelbarrow loads and we will give you tea and cake.’”

It’s not only strapping sporty types who have caught the gardening bug: digging in together has become cool. Visit an urban community garden on a Saturday afternoon and you’ll see hipsters hoeing alongside green-fingered neighbours as they discover their inner rurbanite.

Like most gardens, the Castle has had a great year for fruit and veg, which has helped restore spirits after two soggy summers. It is one of more than 200 projects across 20 cities that will open their gates next weekend as part of the Big Dig’s Edible Gardens open day. Launched in March last year, the Big Dig helps budding gardening groups to recruit and train volunteers, in addition to staging two annual events: a volunteering day in March and the harvest open day. It represents the outer leaves of a British veg-growing revolution that has seen the rise of allotment-sharing and land-sharing initiatives over the past five years, thanks to schemes such as Harvest Brighton & Hove’s Grow Your Neighbour’s Own and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s Landshare, which matches would-be growers across the country with owners of unused land. It has 72,000 members, with 20,000 users matched.

Although no national register is kept, in London alone 2,000 community food gardens have registered with Capital Growth, a food-growing network, since the launch of the lottery-funded project in 2008. Such communal carrot-growing hasn’t been seen here since the victory gardens of the Second World War, when about 5m vegetable, fruit and herb gardens were planted in private plots and public spaces — including bomb sites — to help the war effort and boost morale.

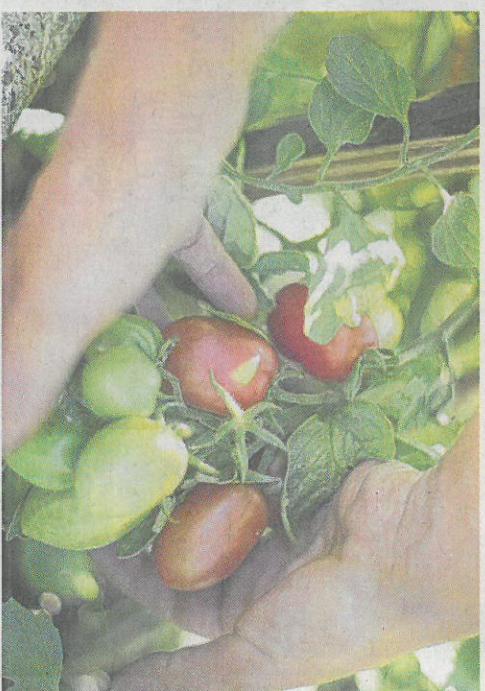
“Food insecurity and increased prices are driving Britons in greater numbers to want to grow their own veg,” says Seb Mayfield, the Big Dig’s national co-ordinator. “At the same time, there aren’t enough allotments, and it’s hard to create more with the laws attached to them. Britain has 152,000 allotment plots in 2013, with a waiting list of 52



Local heroes

As allotments become scarce, community gardens are catching on faster than at any time since the Second World War. Vegetables aren’t the only perk: they bring people together, says **Sally Howard**

Take a video tour with the community behind a Big Dig garden in Birmingham
thesundaytimes.co.uk/homevideo



From left: Ida Fabrizio; London Road Station garden; the Castle Climbing Centre’s garden; pupils from St Alphege School cook for Mygrove