



Vicki Couchman

From left: the Castle's garden is tended by volunteers Frank Agnew (with flower), Victoria Power, Farouk Bhabha and Altaire Rodriguez. Inset: the Southsea Greenhouse garden

people for every 100 allocated plots.) Community gardens are easier to create on a "meanwhile" basis, and people feel supported, rather than having to take on a large space on their own.

Julie Houghton, 46, has volunteered at Southsea Greenhouse garden since the run-up to its launch in April this year. The co-operative grows produce to sell to locals on a formerly disused plot near Cumberland House, Portsmouth's natural history museum. "I was nervous at first," she recalls, "but I soon got stuck in. Now I volunteer on the garden once a week.

"I've started cuttings, made up hanging baskets and helped to identify 'mystery' plants. Being involved has given me the confidence to get my own garden into some kind of order, so I can grow a few veg and herbs for myself."

The project has had other benefits, too. "I'm not fully employed right now, so being in such good company, and working with a shared purpose, has helped me make decisions about where to steer my future."

Houghton isn't alone in deriving more from her community gardening experience than gardening skills and food for the table. Many of the new initiatives have an explicit social purpose, such as Earth Abbey, in Bristol, which works with asylum seekers, and Dig In Northwest, a project run on the site of the abandoned kitchen garden of a 19th-century estate in Preston, Lancashire, that aims to help war veterans battling post-traumatic stress disorder.

Elspeeth Broady, 55, a retired university department head, volunteers at the London Road Station community garden, part of Harvest Brighton & Hove. In 2011, her residents' association obtained permission from Southern

Railways to put two unused plots of land beside the 19th-century station to productive use. The group has since created an ornamental garden shaded by overhanging trees in one plot and, in the second, raised beds for growing edibles and herb planters, from which passers-by can pick mint, rosemary, sage or oregano. This year, they took over four weed-overrun planters at a local road interchange.

"I thought this would simply be an opportunity to make the area a bit nicer," Broady says. "And yes, we've transformed wasteland into something beautiful and productive, but the project has been enriching for the community in other ways. We've relished the opportunity to give, talk, interact and see the positive side in people. People come out of their shells and deep friendships have formed between neighbours who barely knew each other."

Community cohesion, especially in an age of increasing numbers of lone-occupancy households, might prove to be the greatest benefit from this boom in gardening together. A 2006 report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found increased neighbourliness to be causally linked to "health and wellbeing, child development, crime reduction and an overall feeling of safety, belonging and protection."

In the spirit of "catch them when they're young", schools are becoming more involved with creating their own gardens, with schemes such as the Royal Horticultural Society's Campaign for School Gardening and the Prince of Wales's Mygrove, which encourages children to blog about their growing experiences.

Theresa McManus, 46, co-ordinates the Slades Farm Community Garden project, in Bournemouth, which is holding its Big Dig day on September 29. She got involved in March 2012, having walked past an unused one-acre plot of land owned by the local authority on her daily commute to work as a projects manager for Dorset Energy Advice Centre. "Community cohesion was certainly one of our intentions," she says, picking caterpillars off Slades Farm's brassicas. "Gardening is that ice-breaker so many of us Britons seem to need. We have so many people involved in the project who wouldn't usually mingle — local families, students from local schools and universities, older people. There's a real sense of our local network being strengthened."

Like many of these initiatives, Slades Farm has two tiers of volunteers. "We have the arm's-length supporters," says McManus. "They can't be actively involved, because of their personal circumstances, but they like to be on our mailing list and come to events. Then there are 25 or so active members who come to our weekly gardening sessions. Everyone's involvement is welcome."

McManus is looking forward to this month's Big Dig open day as an opportunity to showcase Slades Farm's first — and bumper — growing season. "Our garlic and onions have been lovely and plump," she says. "Our peas were great, too. And our brassicas are fantastic. That's if we beat these caterpillars at their own game."

The Big Dig (bigdig.org.uk); **Harvest Brighton & Hove** (harvest-bh.org.uk); **Landshare** (landshare.net); **Southsea Greenhouse** (southseagreenhouse.co.uk/); **community-garden**; **Earth Abbey** (earthabbey.com); **Dig In Northwest** (diginnorthwest.org); **Royal Horticultural Society** (rhs.org.uk/schoolgardening); **Mygrove** (princeofwales.gov.uk/for-children/mygrove); **Slades Farm Community Garden** (transitionbournemouth.wordpress.com)

CUTTINGS

Garden experts

Can I grow apples on thin, chalky soil?

Chris Dunn, by email

Apples don't like thin, chalky soil, but try 'Gascoyne's Scarlet', 'Barnack Beauty', 'Charles Ross' or 'Fiesta'. Adding plenty of organic matter before planting will help. Feed with nitrogen-rich fertiliser and, if yellowing occurs, chelated iron such as Sequestrene. A vigorous rootstock may help: try M26 for a small apple bush, rather than the more typical M9.

Nicola Bristow, horticultural adviser, RHS, rhs.org.uk

What is elephant garlic?

Tom Anderson, by email

Despite its name, this allium giant is more akin in flavour to a leek. You can plant it any time between now and February, although the later you leave it, the smaller the heads will be. It's good for roasting and doesn't have the problems of rust and rot suffered by its garlic cousins. Harvest in the summer, but beware — if you eat bulb that are "green", there may be wind issues.

Colin Boswell, owner, The Garlic Farm; thegarlicfarm.co.uk

gardenexpert@sunday-times.co.uk



As autumn approaches, start collecting seeds to use next year. Instead of the usual brown envelope, which you'll find in a box and wonder what it contains, try these stylish recycled tubes from Burgon & Ball £6.95;burgonandball.com

News and views

The grass is always greener — and now you can go and look for yourself, as several urban gardens are taking part in London's annual Open House event next weekend. Find them at landscapeinstitute.org/events/openhouse.php.

Be inspired: Suffolk Plant Heritage is holding an autumn plant fair at Helmingham Hall, near Stowmarket, today, 10.30am-4pm. £6.suffolkplantheritage.com

cuttings@sunday-times.co.uk

Growing together

Join a community garden There'll probably be one near you that needs extra help in the next few months. Contact the relevant local organisations listed on bigdig.org.uk/cities.

Start small Plan to grow one or two things to start with. Salad rocket is an easy option and can be sown direct in September.

Go with what you like to eat It may sound silly, but make sure you grow fruit or veg that you know you like to have on your plate.

Grow from seed It may be easier to grow using plug plants, but starting from seed is more satisfying — and usually cheaper.

Use a compost bin Or use a wormery to make compost, which will give your soil a boost.

Just do it Don't get too bogged down in the detail. Plant a seed, add water and learn as you grow.

Don't panic If everything goes wrong, nobody is going to tell you off. Just learn from your mistakes and try again.

