Making space for bugs in your garden borders

Gardening to save the world

David Attenborough has highlighted gardening as crucial in battling the climate emergency. “The world depends on an understanding of the natural world. And where does that start? On our doorsteps, in our gardens,” he said as he received the 2019 Medal for a Lifetime Achievement at the Landscape Institute Awards, hosted by GWR presenter Arit Anderson. She tells us, “Gardens are mini-units of the wider environment. Everything we do can make a difference.” Mimic the natural world by growing organically, reduce waste and grow as many plants as you can. David Attenborough and his team are working on a new five-part series, The Green Planet, to be shown on BBC One. This will explore the behaviour, emotional stonies and surprising heroes in the horticultural world, offering a fresh understanding of the lives of plants.

Knotweed for good!

Japanese knotweed could be used to help gardeners. Environet, a specialist knotweed removal company, is working to develop a system that transforms waste knotweed into biochar, a charcoal-based soil improver. So, rather than sending it to a specialist landfill once it’s been dug out, knotweed could end up enriching gardens.

Exoskeletons on the brink of extinction

You can’t have too many woodlice, believes Dave Goulson, Professor of Biology at the University of Sussex. His new report, ‘Insect declines and why they matter’, reveals that insects help to break down compost and draw on research that suggests 41 per cent of the world’s insects are under threat of extinction. He warns against the use of all unnecessary pesticides to help insects. See more at bit.ly/insect-decline

Hope for robins

Our UK robin populations have ‘strongly increased’ in recent years, according to a new report* published by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The British Trust for Ornithology tells us this means populations are recovering from the series of cold winters that devastated numbers between 2008-12. However, birds such as greenfinches and chaffinches are ‘strongly declining’ due to the continued problem of trichomonosis. This is a gastrointestinal disease carried by parasites that is spread in food and water, and causes problems with the birds’ throats, making it hard for them to feed. The findings support our own Garden Wildlife Survey results, which reveal that there are 5 per cent fewer chaffinches seen than two years ago. Discover the wildlife picture in your own garden on page 40.
My gardening world: Raymond Blanc

Raymond Blanc is chef patron at hotel and restaurant Belmond Le Manoir aux Quat’Saisons in Oxfordshire. Over the past seven years, he has planted an orchard with ancient varieties of apples, pears and stone fruits in the hotel’s grounds. His new book, The Lost Orchard (Headline, £20), follows the project and features recipes for each fruit.

What’s your favourite fruit to grow rather than buy?
Cox’s Orange Pippin is the world’s best apple yet you don’t find it in supermarkets. It’s good for everything and offers an explosion of flavour, with hints of quince, mango, passion fruit and strawberries.

What does a chef need to know about gardening?
Chefs need to understand the importance of locally grown produce. When you help the farmer, you help your community.

What did you learn from your mother?
She taught me that you should not waste anything. We were poor, so we ate everything. If I killed a rabbit, I would use the liver and kidneys, and the bones for stock. My mother loved the animals and would cry bittersweet tears over dinner when we ate them.

Have young chefs lost a connection with seasonal food?
No – our young British chefs are well connected with growers and farmers, and understand the importance of locally grown produce. When you help the farmer, you help your community.

Have you had any special guests visiting your garden?
When I visited Prince Charles at Highgrove, I said to him, “You should come and see my garden, it is better than yours”, and he came (see above)! He enjoyed seeing the garden and we planted a tree together.

What has been your proudest moment in the garden?
After 17 years of trying, I successfully grew lemongrass. We found that it would always get caught by frost and rot away, but we discovered a variety high up in the Himalayas that we have been able to grow well here.

What has been your worst disaster in the garden?
I wanted to try going biodynamic. This would mean absolutely no chemicals at all, but it didn’t work. I’m now working with the Soil Association to come up with an organically acceptable spray for use in the orchard.

Pesticides in supermarkets

Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury’s and Waitrose are the supermarkets doing the most to phase out pesticides in their produce, according to a review by charity Pesticide Action Network UK. At the bottom of the category, Iceland and Lidl are ranked as ‘lagging behind’. Read the report and see the score cards at pan-uk.org/supermarkets

Naturalist and presenter David Bellamy OBE, who inspired generations of adults and children to help protect the natural world, passed away, aged 86, on Wednesday, 11 December 2019. His television career spanned 30 years and included programmes such as the BBC series Bellamy On Botany.