

Learning to Care for Your Environment During COVID-19

28 July 2020

Attended by 14 participants. Facilitated by Margaret Jackson and Julian Mellor with Georgie Burr. Speakers were Tracey Fletcher from The Kitchen Garden Café in Birmingham and Cath Fletcher an environmental worker with Welsh House Farm and Firs and Bromford.

Introductions

Each participant was asked to say what environmental actions they had managed during lockdown and whether their perception of their environment had changed during lockdown?

Bob Skipp, Leecliffe Big Local: Building a community garden and edible walkway.

Tarek Mrad, Haston Big Local: Gardening projects with supported living residents.

Kumaran Palaniandy, W12 Together Big Local: Distributed seedlings to people in neighbourhood. Trying to get people into gardening.

Yvonne Griggs, Birchwood Big Local: Last event before lockdown was planting for wildlife. Diamond Park, one of the early BL projects, became overgrown as volunteers were shielding so got local landscape gardeners in to do the maintenance. Location on edge of woodland means lots of wildlife coming into the park. Kids enjoying seeing the wildlife and that generates interest in what they want to do. Local schools have got in touch - so has helped build more relationships. Planning to get out and about more and start asking everyone what they want and whether ideas have changed.

Maggie Rowlands, Three Parishes Big Local: Late teenage early 20s hanging out in nature reserves so an opportunity to talk to them, find out what their needs are and what they want out of the area. The area has nature reserves, world heritage site, etc. Previously dog walkers made most use but since lockdown there have been many more recreational users. Been posting food for free recipes e.g. wild garlic pesto. Gets people to look more closely at their environment and also realise what they can eat for free.

Freda Eyden, Sale West Big Local: Quite a lot of green space so had projects in pipeline and been able to get on with them e.g. the Phoenix Garden. Also been able to get infant

playground opened and used a lot. Put in four picnic tables which are being well used - lots of people are really stuck and can't afford to go away so it's somewhere to go and enjoy locally.

Ralph Rudden, Sale West Big Local: Phoenix Garden is a community orchard built on the site of an old pub. 2 weeks ago commissioned community artist to paint the walls with a phoenix rising from the ashes. Were going to base it on COVID but didn't want the morbid connotation, so rising from the ashes was preferred. 20+ people stopped when design was being prepared and wanted to be involved. Apple, plum, pear trees. Will invite residents to come and pick. Nice to be able to sit and reflect. Reduction in noise from Manchester airport has been brilliant.

Helen Trueman, Grace Mary to Lion Farm Big Local: Seen a big increase in fly tipping so organising litter picks and skips in the area. Perception has changed to show that green spaces are more valuable than ever for wellbeing and benefits for people

Brian Dunn, KHL Big Local: Working on connecting all the woods with 15 mile cycle circuit. Will be putting QR codes up to identify flora and fauna in woods.

Lianne Havell, Mablethorpe, Trusthorpe and Sutton on Sea: Wildflower garden in Mablethorpe doing well. Gardens competition trying to encourage everyone to get outside and enjoy gardens. Beach care team have been out litter picking throughout most of lockdown - lots of PPE to pick up.

Edna Dunn, Hateley Cross Big Local: Been mowing grass verges as Council hasn't been doing it. Progressing better use of green spaces and nature area project. Litter picking team has been in isolation during COVID. Green spaces so important than they were previous to COVID especially for wellbeing - got to be able to go out and enjoy the green spaces.

Alison Samways, St Peters and The Moors Big Local: Litter picks have restarted and increased in frequency to fortnightly because have time to do it but also increase in use of green spaces has led to more litter. Ran a photography competition with gardening and wildlife themes. Giving out plants for people to take home - some bought, some grown from seed. Doing lots of planning for what's next. Perception change: How nice to have quiet roads, being able to cycle more was really nice. Also importance of green space.

Arfan Zamen, Palfrey Big Local: Starting on new plan and realise how important the environment is, especially the green spaces especially for people in flats. Places have been

trashed including with PPE dumped so need for litter picking. Also lots of fly tipping but not in the parks. Been sending out messages about dog fouling which has increased during lockdown. Allotment project has struggled due to shielding but volunteers are now back but a lot to do so they are demotivated by how much everything has decayed. Always done stuff around cycling but with big groups of c40 people (not 10 recommended by Cycling UK) so now doing smaller groups on maintenance with a view to getting people out again.

Pippa St John Cooper, Whitleigh Big Local: Got community allotment at start of lockdown but people now looking at what can be done with it. Also started working with Bioregional. Whitleigh has lots of ancient woodland around it so have started Friends of Whitleigh Woods group. Litter pickers have been out for last 3 weeks. Big community litter pick on Sunday. Set up competition with schools getting posters for litter picking which will be turned into signs on railings around the community. Strong sense of people growing things and getting involved. Guerrilla gardening starting.

Tracey Fletcher, Kitchen Garden Cafe in Birmingham

Three things that people can do that are inspiring, help people enjoy being outside and can be done during social distancing.

Living Green Walls

Living green walls are a way to make outdoor spaces feel lovely and natural; everything looks lovely covered by green climbing plants!



Lots of ways to do it. You can grow climbers over arches and fences or they love going up through trees. Need to get the right variety for the space so it doesn't overwhelm. Plants also

love climbing over things and twining around each other. A green wall can be a mixture of different climbing plants. A mix of evergreen and flowering plants will create a mosaic that changes every year depending upon which plant is dominating at that time.

Green walls are also brilliant for wildlife. Young birds will hide especially at fledgling stage so that they are protected from cats and magpies. Might need extra protection in nesting season so might need nest boxes as well. Thorney hedges are one of the best natural protections as they stop larger animals getting in.

Can also grow edibles in a green wall. Even courgettes can be trained to grow upwards!

Examples: Rambling Rector rose, Star Jasmin (evergreen), grapevine, passion flower, honeysuckle, Clematis Montana (can get very out of hand), Clematis Armandii (evergreen).

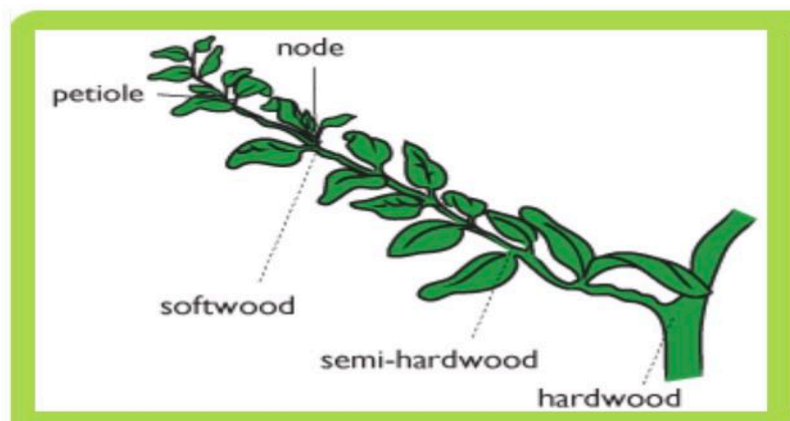
You can see an example of Arches Big Local's living wall at

<https://localtrust.workplace.com/groups/909133462780388/permalink/1079768302383569/>

Taking Cuttings.

Climbers are expensive to buy but it is easy to take cuttings.

- In the spring and early summer you can take from softwood at the tip (take in spring and early summer). Difficult to keep rooted if it dries out so have to keep in a humid environment.
- Mid summer take a semi hardwood cutting from the middle of the stem where the bottom is slightly hardened but the top is still quite pliable.
- In the winter, take the hardwood cutting of last years woody stem - just cut a piece about 15cm long in the dormant season and put it in the ground next to the plant. Take five or ten samples to make sure some take.



Clematis, honeysuckle and rose cuttings all root really easily at this time of year.

Cut just below the leaf node where there are lots of growth hormones that will stimulate the roots. Then go up two sets of leaves and cut off. Push into the soil up to the first pair of leaves. Put some grit around the base of the stem to help prevent rot.

Jasmine might have lots of little stems. Pull the little stem off (don't cut) the main stem to get a 'heal cutting'. Take off the lower leaves and any flowers. Put the heal cutting into the soil as asap. If you can't put straight into soil, put it in a plastic bag in order to preserve the moisture. Once potted, water really well and cover in a plastic bag. Use some sticks to prevent the plastic bag from touching the leaves of the cuttings which would cause the cutting to rot. Take the plastic bag off every few days, again to prevent rot. After a couple of weeks the cutting should have rooted so remove the plastic bag. After about a month you can plant out.

Lockdown Project: Take cuttings from gardens or places walked and hold a plant swap in order to increase green cover in gardens and community spaces, perhaps encourage green living walls in order to encourage wildlife.

Jasmine, honeysuckle, early flowering clematis are all really good for beginners - they just grow! To hide a fence or wall completely you want an evergreen. But two or three climbers will give good cover and give variety through the seasons.

Kokedama

Kokedama is the art of moss gardening. The plant grows in a moss ball, not in a pot. You can hang them or be creative in other ways to display, so long as the plant likes that setting. When kokedamas are hung together they are known as string gardens.

Really easy to make and an opportunity to get creative. Make a great workshop especially for people who aren't very mobile. They make great presents and are good as fundraisers - can be sold for quite a lot of money!



Materials needed:

- Any type of compost mixed with perlite to absorb moisture, or cat litter as cheaper alternative to perlite
 - Moss to surround the ball - bought online or from florist. Sheet moss used in wreaths is very good. Or rake the moss out of your lawn. DO NOT gather wild moss as you might be destroying a fragile habitat.
 - Fishing line - to put around the moss ball
 - Fixed string for the hanger
 - The plant e.g. an easy plant such as a fern or ivy.
1. Mix perlite and compost and just enough water to make it really sloppy (you'll get mucky hands!)
 2. Take up to a third of the compost off the root
 3. Push the perlite mix into a ball around the root
 4. Spread the moss out into a flat matt and wrap it around the ball
 5. Wrap the fishing wire round and round until it all feels secure. Keep the ends free to tie together at the top
 6. For the hanger take two pieces of string, 2-3 times the length of the plant and ball
 7. Cross the strings, put the plant in the middle, take the strings up threading through the fishing wire and tie together at the top
 8. Mist everyday. Every fortnight dip it in water, drain and rehang.

If hanging outside you might not need to mist - depends on the weather and the needs of the plant.

Cath Fletcher, Welsh House Farm and Firs & Bromford

Cath is the Environmental Project Worker in two Big Local areas in Birmingham both of which are 1960s ex-Council estates. Cath works 3 days / week in F&B and one day in WHF.

In March all the planned events were cancelled so tools were put down and a huge number of zoom meetings took place to look at what could and should be done. The March launch of a new community garden at Rutley Grove in WHF was lost and regular garden sessions were postponed.

Within a month it was emergency response time with a focus on foodbanks and food deliveries so environmental work was put on hold. Then realised that the infrastructure and

systems created for food deliveries could also be used to give out seeds, drop off compost, pots etc that people needed. Instruction videos were made. A polytunnel at the Primary school became a distribution base.



From April Big Local money was used to buy in plug plants and grow them up while others were grown from seed. Some plants were left out to be collected during food collections and this turned into a bit of a plant swap which is still running.

Home growing and distribution networks have really taken off during lockdown - much more than getting people involved in groups at particular sites. A lot of innovation was taking place.

Lockdown gardeners were people who had never grown before. One person built raised beds from pallets. A sheltered housing scheme planted bedding plants and flowers as a tribute to NHS workers. It has helped make contact with new people who were growing at home but otherwise not engaging with Big Local.

At Rutley Grove, instead of laying turf, raised beds were installed planted to grow food to eventually put into the distribution network. The raised beds were made from sleepers and built by a contractor with a lot of consultation on the design. Brick planters were built with old bricks stacked up and the space filled with compost. Recent produce includes potatoes, strawberries and broad beans.

A 'remote garden' photo competition was held in May to give people something to do and focus on. As lockdown progressed the topics of the competitions were extended to include pets and creative writing through the summer holidays.



'Home Grow' is a good example of a Birmingham wide project - also known as 'Mothers Garden Network', a garden that hosts plants from which seeds and cuttings can be taken. Lots of groups have got involved over the last few months.



As lockdown eased it was possible to have a table outside the F&B Hub with plants. Volunteers came and did some work on the planters which had been rather neglected. They were meant to be doing a display at Gardeners World Live around edible plants and recycling of bicycles; 'Pedal to the Nettle'. The show was ultimately cancelled but as the plants had already been ordered and displays were being created they were installed in the planters anyway - a bit of fun and boost for everyone involved.

Last week was the public opening of the Rutley Grove garden. Children came in and didn't want to leave. Took some plants home to grow including chilli plants.

Now slow baby steps to group activities, weekly sessions. Not advertising too much but gently building up safe activities with bits of gardening, plant swaps and craft packs.

Gardeniser (an amalgamation of Garden and Organiser) is a pilot project funded by Erasmus to create accredited training for community gardens and urban farms. Hoping to open it up.

Prior to COVID, getting people involved had been really mixed. Big one-off events tend to be well attended but regular gardening is more hit and miss. There is a small core group in each area. In F&B there is an established partnership with youth work and community work

organisations which helps feed people in. At WHF it's more of a struggle beyond the big one off events.

Plant Identification Game

Name the 18 plants from the given description.

The three winners who identified the most plants were: Edna (18/18), Ralph (15/18) and Yvonne (12/18). Well done you guys! Small prizes will be sent in the post.

Wrap Up

Arches Big Local school with Living Wall was at Luton Junior School in Chatham.

Any ideas about other environmental topics that can be covered in online events let Georgie know.

Recording of the event:

https://zoom.us/rec/share/5_J8NanMy2FJb6_C7IPRf4saOr_nX6a8gCMYqPJcyBuxfw-wPzCzqJ5TD_BeIEPG