



## We must cherish our green spaces

We are so lucky living in Cold Ash. We are surrounded by green spaces, both wooded and open and most houses have a good-sized garden. Much of West Berkshire is the same. But it is a fragile environment which is being degraded and will be degraded further if we're not careful.

Living where we do, in such a rural environment, is so good for us. Scientists at the University of East Anglia have studied the effects of 'nature' on peoples' health, not just in the UK but across the world. Being out in the countryside makes us feel good and it really does make us healthier. Until this study, which was published in 2018, it wasn't clear what were the real benefits of green spaces. They showed that the stress hormone cortisol was reduced, heart rate and blood pressure were lowered as was cholesterol along with other key indicators of health. Consequently, the incidence of stroke, hypertension, coronary heart disease and asthma were also lower. There was also evidence that improved neurological condition, cancer-related outcomes and respiratory mortality were associated with being in green spaces.

According to the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), gardens and gardening make us feel better as well as giving positive health benefits. The exercise we get by gardening for 30 minutes can burn as many calories as playing badminton. Gardening helps to reduce depression and anxiety and helps prevent cognitive decline. Being outside in the sun helps us make vitamin D, which boosts the immune system.

Green spaces in our gardens, towns and cities provide many useful services. The UK Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) reported on the impact of these spaces on the environment (UK natural capital urban accounts, 2023). They capture a significant proportion of carbon dioxide, filter pollutants from the air, absorb sounds and keep built-up areas cooler. Trees and woodland in general are good at removing particulate pollution, especially particles of 2.5 micrometres in diameter, PM2.5, which can easily be inhaled and penetrate lung tissue causing significant damage.

Although we have these green spaces, we are not looking after them very well and the amount of space is shrinking year by year. We recognise the health benefits to ourselves but seem to overlook the effects we are having on wildlife. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world according to the State of Nature 2023 report by 65 organisations who take care of nature, including the RSPB, Marine Conservation Society, Natural History Museum etc. (see: [www.stateofnature.org.uk](http://www.stateofnature.org.uk)). Damage has been done by poor land management, unsympathetic construction of buildings and roads and pollution of land, waterways and sea. Climate change is also having a major impact.

This summer's weather hasn't helped but there have been fewer butterflies around. We are losing all sorts of insects fast, with fewer bees, butterflies, moths, flies, wasps and beetles. Each of these play an important role in the health of the biosystem, especially in

pollinating crops, as well as flowers. It is difficult to put a monetary value on this but it is estimated that pollinating insects are worth millions of pounds to farmers.

We can do quite a lot in our won gardens to combat climate change and boost nature. The World Economic Forum gives 10 tips for fighting climate change in your garden and these can be adapted to suit our gardens.

Plant (more) tree(s) – trees store carbon, provide shade and cooling

Collect rainwater – have water butts. A pump can be connected to these to allow the use of a hose.

Go peat-free – don't buy compost based on peat: peatlands capture and hold tonnes of carbon dioxide, and we're losing them.

Make your own compost – this saves fossil fuels that are used in fertiliser production.

Lift a paving slab, or more – growing plants that support insects is so important.

Plant for pollinators – the RHS has recommendations for all seasons

(<https://www.rhs.org.uk/science/conservation-biodiversity/wildlife/plants-for-pollinators>)

Use electric power tools – the RHS reckons the average petrol-powered tool emits almost a kilogram of CO<sub>2</sub> per litre of fuel.

Avoid imported flowers – these have a big carbon footprint, so grow your own, and grow native species.

Be a citizen scientist – the RHS has a tool that allows you to map your plants and build your understanding of biodiversity in your garden.

Eat more local produce – grow your own, share with neighbours, buy local.

You can even grow plants to help keep your house cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Fuchsia, jasmine, ivy, Virginia creeper, Viburnum and Russian vine will screen a house wall and shade it. Ivy, Viburnum and cherry laurel can provide a layer of insulation to help prevent heat loss.

Whilst we can see that there are fewer insects, below ground things are not as good as they could be. A lot of farm land is in poor condition with few earthworms and lack of microorganisms. Even our gardens can be in a similar sad state. Growing clover in lawns is good for the soil and the flowers are good for bees. Legumes, beans and peas also enrich the soil. We have some super native herbs and fruits that are good for the garden too.

Enjoy your garden, your green space, take care of nature, fight climate change.

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Want to keep in touch? Subscribe to West Berkshire Green Exchange WhatsApp group – just search for it in WhatsApp. Join Cold Ash Parish Greening Group: contact our chair, Richard Marshall:  
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