

# FOR THE GOOD

Adopting sustainable approaches to gardening can have a positive effect on the planet and your pocket

Permeable surfaces, wildlife habitat and a small vegetable patch are just some elements of a sustainable garden.





**S**ustainability' is one buzzword that has come to the fore in gardening over the past few years. It's a catch-all term referring to the demands our gardens place on the earth's resources, as well as the part they play in fostering biodiversity and encouraging our own good health.

"Gardens have traditionally relied on a constant stream of resources to maintain them in a steady state, but these all come with environmental footprints," explains designer Darryl Moore, whose book *Gardening in a Changing World* (Pimpernel)

**Above** An holistic view is essential to gardening more sustainably. It can seem daunting at first but even small changes can make a big difference.

considers the effects of climate change on botanical life. Statistics about emissions and environmental degradation can be disheartening but the imperative to do our little bit of good where we are is upon us. And while as individuals we might be small, we are also many. Of the UK's 67.33 million citizens, an estimated 27 million are hobby gardeners. A study by Oxford Economics placed the 2019 contribution of the ornamental horticulture and landscaping industry to the national GDP at £28.2 billion.

It's arguable that in our rush to consume and to perfect, we've lost the sensitivity to natural things





**Left** Compost bins, whether large or small, are a way to connect personal consumption with the land.

**Below** Good gardening begins with good soil. Work towards fostering healthy soil life and plants are very likely to take care of themselves.

Boswall, designer and author of *Sustainable Garden* (Frances Lincoln). “Sustainability speaks to an older wisdom and going back to the ways we always understood. We mustn’t think we don’t know how to look after the land.”

Marian’s team applies carbon-emission and water-use calculators to each project they work on, as well as a checklist of the materials to use less or more of, depending on eco-credentials. Calculating your garden’s emissions might feel a bit like counting calories. It can help instead to see your garden as a green citadel to be cultivated and be part of, a place where micro-organisms, bacteria, fungi, plants, insects, birds and mammals can thrive equally.

### Soil

Start from the ground up. Healthy soil makes for healthy plants better able to resist pests and drought. With healthy soil, rich in life working to remove waste and deliver nutrients to plants, it’s unlikely

that we might once have had. Sustainable gardening involves returning to that. “One of the first things to do is turn from a to-do list to a connection, to understand how you fit in with the land,” explains Marian

### Sustainability Snapshot

## MARIAN BOSWALL



**K**eeping a little wormery or bokashi bin to take care of kitchen scraps will show you how much you throw out and it should change how you buy and eat. You’ll begin to understand that the closed loop is the Earth itself – it’s the worms and fungus and microbes that will break it down.

Get yourself a bird app such as Merlin Bird ID and a good plant app. Merlin Bird ID is wonderful because it presents your garden like a stage and identifies the players. It helps us ask what else is living in our gardens.

Enjoy what is already growing. When people don’t know how to garden, they reach for the to-do list but it’s fun to see what’s living there already and work out why it’s there. Weeds are hugely beneficial to the soil and can tell you a lot about its condition. For example, thistles thrive in compacted soil but their long roots are very good at breaking it up.

**Marian Boswall**  
Landscape Architects,  
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## SUSTAINABLE GARDENING

you'll need synthetic fertilisers, many of which contain salts and are derived from fossil fuels.

Start by making your own compost, either with a heap or, if space is limited, a bokashi bin for kitchen scraps.

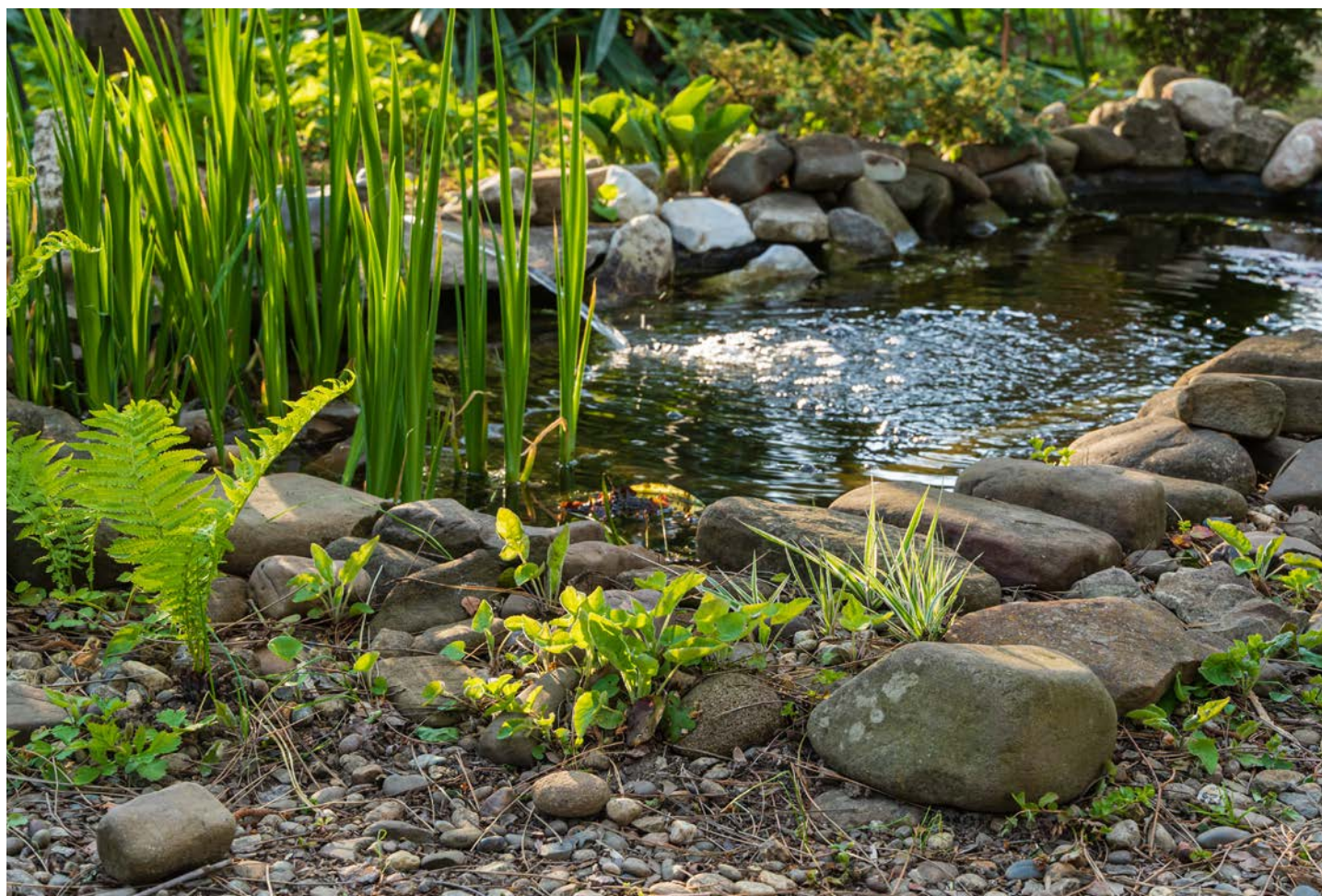
Marian explains this will connect your daily food consumption and waste to the garden – a bit like checking a bank balance to track spending. If you must buy compost, buy peat-free. Peat is banned from sale to amateur gardeners from 2024 and will be removed from professional horticulture in 2026. The RHS plans to be completely peat-free by 2025 and offers a list of peat-free nurseries by region: see [rhs.org.uk/advice/peat/peat-free-nurseries](https://rhs.org.uk/advice/peat/peat-free-nurseries). Use mulch to encourage soil life and discourage unwanted weeds. It will also help retain water in dry spells and help it percolate soil and so reduce run-off.

**Right** Growing your own vegetables isn't for everyone, but mulching, which has many benefits, should be.

**Below** If you suffer winter flooding, factor it in to your garden design. Ponds and swales also aid wildlife.

### Water

October 2023 was one of the wettest months on record, with England receiving 192% of its monthly rainfall average and many specific regions receiving much more. Yet July 2022 brought what the Met







Work towards a layered planting scheme, Marian Boswall advises. This will cover soil, create habitat and regulate water in your garden.

Office terms an ‘unprecedented’ heatwave, soon followed by hosepipe bans. Installing a pond, swale or soakaway to collect water will help control flooding. To avoid using expensive potable water on the garden and collect run-off, install multiple water butts. Consider, too, an integrated system: water-management company ACO ([aco.co.uk](http://aco.co.uk)) delivers domestic systems that capture run-off from drives and buildings to store in underground tanks. The company calculates the average annual London property run-off to be 65,550 litres, and estimates Londoners use an average of 11,000 litres of drinking water on their gardens a year.

### Hard landscaping

If you can do without it, then you probably should. “Think about where it will be in a hundred years’ time,” Marian suggests. “Put things in that will meld back into the land. Look at the underlying geology of the garden: if it’s on limestone, use York stone, if it’s near an oak forest, use oak.” Concrete is attached to heavy carbon emissions and as an impermeable material increases run-off. Neither does it foster soil or plant life. Design firms with a sustainable ethic, including Tom Massey and Harris Bugg Studio, are looking at cement alternatives, and are re-using on-site bricks and rubble to reduce

### Sustainability Snapshot

DARRYL MOORE



**A**void peat, pesticides, plastic, fossil-fuelled tools, and reduce disruptive interventions. Work with the conditions of the site and its natural processes, viewing them as a dynamic ecosystem.

Try to reuse and recycle both inorganic and organic materials in a closed-loop system within the garden. Everything has a re-use value, you just have to look for it, so avoid bringing in new materials or features and try giving free reign to your creativity, reimagining how existing materials can be re-contextualised.

Ensure that the right plant is in the right place. Plants have evolved in specific habitats, so studying the natural plant communities where different species come from is important to ensure they are planted in the most compatible conditions with plants with similar needs. As a result they will be more robust and self-sufficient and need fewer inputs from you.

**Darryl Moore Design,**  
[darrylmooredesign.com](http://darrylmooredesign.com)



## SUSTAINABLE GARDENING

landfill. Aim for a loose, permeable construction that allows water to percolate and plants to grow in cracks.

Take an holistic view of the materials. Cheap stone can cost in child labour and shipping – look to the Ethical Stone Register ([ethicalstoneregister.co.uk](http://ethicalstoneregister.co.uk)) for suppliers of responsibly sourced stone. Similarly, look for the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) mark on wood you buy.

### Plants

Propagate and share as much material as you can, and consider perennials rather than annuals, which, propagated each year, can be expensive and resource heavy. Try to buy from local growers to reduce transport emissions and costs, and limit the chance of introducing disease. Plant Healthy ([planthealthy.org.uk](http://planthealthy.org.uk)) represents growers committed to maintaining high standards of plant health and bio security.

Diversity is our hedge against a changing climate, so support specialist suppliers of unusual varieties. Garden Organic ([gardenorganic.co.uk](http://gardenorganic.co.uk)) runs the Heritage Seed Library, a repository of rare, heirloom, open-pollinated vegetable seed, that is an invaluable resource to individual gardeners and seed wholesalers alike.

Foster biodiversity by growing plants that are good for everything passing through it, from worms to pollinating insects to birds. Lawns that are left longer and contain a range of species will be far more resilient in dry weather than a green baize. ■

**Right** Meadow planting at Great Dixter is a step away from a traditional striped lawn. Even leaving a small section of lawn unmown will benefit wildlife.



## Sustainable Buys Reduce, reuse, repair and recycle, then buy items that will last



### Electric

If you're replacing a tool, opt for electric over petrol or diesel, and use solar power where you can. Cobra Electric lawnmower MX3440V, £232.99, [cobragarden.co.uk](http://cobragarden.co.uk)



### Renewable

Seek out peat-free compost. Dalefoot is sustainably produced from sheep's wool and invasive bracken. Dalefoot seed compost, £7.99, [dalefoot.co.uk](http://dalefoot.co.uk)



### Repairable

Buy tools that can be repaired. Felco will service worn tools and supplies replacement parts, so tools will last for life. Felco 4 secateurs, £57.59, [swiss-store.co.uk](http://swiss-store.co.uk)



### Plastic-free

Avoid plastic. Use cardboard, old food containers or opt for sustainably produced rubber trays with a 30-year guarantee. Seed tray, £13.99, [wildlifeworld.co.uk](http://wildlifeworld.co.uk)



### Recycled

Look for products made from recycled materials. New EcoFlex gloves are made from ocean waste and recycled plastic. From £5.99, [townandco.com](http://townandco.com)