

The rise of the urban gardener

As London limbers up for Hampton Court Flower Show, down-to-earth Joe Swift, tipped to take over Gardeners' World, talks about the new-style city gardening



JOE SWIFT is striding through the vegetables. "I've never seen such healthy veg," he shouts. I spot all the usual English stuff — carrots, gooseberries, runner beans — and then a scattering of more exotic crops: pak choi, chilis, squash. We're standing in a large, neatly subdivided garden, with a traditional greenhouse, scores of raised beds, fruit trees of every kind (quince, plum, apricot, greengages) and a pretty pond at its centre — the kind of kitchen garden that might belong to a stately home in the depths of rural England. In fact it's on the Daldon-Bilington border, a stone's throw from the City.

ALISON ROBERTS



World War, sales of fruit and veg seeds are outstripping those of ornamental plants, while a recent survey suggested that a third of the population grow their own, and almost two-thirds, shocked by the 12 per cent increase in grocery staples this year, plan to start a patch in the next two years.

"The whole allotment world is getting younger. It's quite incredible. Up on my allotment, sure, there are all the old-timers who've been doing it for years, but then there's a completely new generation too. People used to see it as a kind of Good Life parody, a happy-ish thing to do. That's completely changed. Allotments are really quite trendy places to hang out."

Waiting lists for London allotments have always been long but they are getting ever longer. Swift's own allotment — a regular feature on *Gardeners' World* — is in Enfield, a 25-minute train ride away from his home in Hackney, where he has an average-sized, self-designed garden.

But what's driving this urban gardening craze? Is it thrift or something more profound? A dawning eco-awareness, perhaps, that values even the smallest green spaces? As people understand the equations, Swift believes, they're more likely to invest in a spade.

At the moment, 80 per cent of London's food comes from abroad and almost all the rest from other parts of the country

— barely any of it in the city. At the same time, WWF estimates that food production and its transport accounts for 20 per cent of the average Briton's carbon footprint — a higher proportion than that generated by either personal transport or domestic energy use. In 10 years' time, perhaps every neighbourhood will be forced to have a community garden like that in NI.

"I think supermarket prices will come into play," says Swift. "Though, to be honest, when you first start an allotment the amount of time you put in, you do think, 'Mimey, this carrot has probably cost me £2.00 in man-hours, and that's at the minimum wage."

"But of course it's crazy to be flying in this stuff from all over the world. Grow your own and there's no plastic packaging, either. That's what I can't stand about supermarkets, all that bloody plastic."

Though Swift describes himself as a "peeper" and occasionally sounds like an East End market trader, he actually grew up in Belsize Park and Hampstead. He is the son of actor Clive Swift — a founder member of the RSC, who's now best known for playing Richard Bucket in *Keeping Up Appearances* — and novelist Dame Margaret Drabble (who once described Joe as "the Nick Hornby of the gardening world"). His aunt, therefore, is A S Byatt.

GARDENS WITH THE JOE SWIFT STAMP



Cutting edge: left, sculptural alliums soften decking lights. Above, a solid expanse of timber is visually broken up. Below, Swift's own 50ft garden in NI



Swift is the charismatic co-presenter on *Gardeners' World* (and co-host of the Chelsea Flower Show coverage with Alan Titchmarsh) who — with Monty Don currently convalescing from a stroke — is tipped to become the "new face" of BBC gardening. If Diarmuid Gavin is the prima donna pin up, and Titchmarsh the middle-aged housewives' fave, Swift is the plain-speaking (except for Latin names) urban gardener's champion. He has already won legions of (largely female) fans for his unfussy approach to the traditionally posh and/or provincial business of gardening punditry. When he wore a blazer at Chelsea, he paired it with jeans and still looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Swift is also chief pro-seelytiser for exactly the kind of garden we're in. The King Henry's Walk Garden in NI, of which Swift is patron, was built on derelict land by the local community and opened earlier this year with 68 plots for cultivation by nearby residents. Priority is given to those without gardens and they can use them in any way they choose. Most have opted to grow food.

"Urban gardening has undergone a renaissance," says Swift who is 43 and has been designing gardens in London for almost 30 years. "People used to throw money at their gardens to sort them out, or they'd hire people like me to do them up and add value to the house. People saw gardens as another way of making money.

"But now people are starting to understand the value of their gardens from an organic and a biodiversity point of view. Gardens in the city are more valuable in that respect than they are anywhere else. And people are much more relaxed about what the gardens look like. It's taken us a very long time to get away from that suburban thing, with a neat lawn and very neat flowerbeds, everything raked and sprayed. Then everyone wanted a party garden, with tree ferns and gravel. Now, it's becoming a craft again, something to get into on lots of different levels. As long as you've got a tree, some vegetation and leaves on the ground just rotting away, you've got that connection with all the cycles in nature."

For the first time since the Second

When that came to nothing, Swift travelled, worked on a kibbutz (his father is Jewish) and eventually took a job as an assistant gardener with a north London firm run by an out-of-work actor.

When a friend of his mother asked him to design a garden, he realised he had no idea how to, and enrolled on a course at the Chelsea Physic Garden. A few years later, in 1996, Swift opened The Plant Room in Islington, a gardening shop that was then fairly radical in its focus on edgy contemporary design (he is particularly proud of its gravel floor), and quickly became a marketing tool for his own design company.

He is now design director of Modular Gardens, which will create a bespoke garden for you at a cost of anything between £5,000 and £50,000 upwards.

Swift's gardening philosophy — as far as he has one — is that anyone can, and should, have a garden.

"I do think it's about having fun and enjoying yourself, and sometimes, you know, the RHS gives the impression that it isn't. That instead it's about being judged, and knowing all the Latin names and getting your horticulture just right or you'll be laughed at. I hate that. It's rubbish. There shouldn't be any elitism in gardening at all. It's not an elitist



artist and songwriter. I played blues. We were all becoming rock stars, in our own minds."

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activity. But you know what? There is life outside the RHS."

He's anxious what the BBC is going to do with *Gardeners' World* now that Don has left the programme ("I saw him last week for the first time since before Christmas, and, God, he looked like a new man, completely stress-free, no wrinkles on his face") but I bet Swift will figure prominently. He has a book out

next month, and is co-hosting the BBC's coverage of the Hampton Court Flower Show (8-13 July), which is less of a cat-walk than Chelsea.

Swift is married to a lawyer and has two children — Stanley II, and Cornelia — who often feature on TV alongside him. When I mention a gardenless girl friend who watches GW just for him, he looks at me wide-eyed. "Me?"

Sitting pretty: garden designer and *Gardeners' World* presenter Joe Swift in King Henry's Walk Garden in NI, a community initiative of which he is patron.

Well, I get lots of letters from old ladies who've started knitting me hats for the allotment in winter. But I always look at the other male presenters and think, God, they're all really handsome. And have lots and lots of hair..."

■ *Joe's Urban Garden Handbook*, published by Quadrille, is out next month.

Harvest at dawn for a bumper cash crop

A LONDON LIFE VALENTINE LOW



EVERYONE has their favourite time on the allotment: Michael, for instance, likes to go in the morning, while Lucy appears in the evening after work. I go whenever I can fit it in, but my favourite time of all is at dawn in midsummer, long before anyone else has got up. The pre-breakfast allotment visit is an annual ritual when Mrs Low and I drag ourselves out of bed unfeasibly early in order to harvest vegetables for the school summer fair.

It started a few years ago, when we had a salad surplus and I thought it would be a good idea to flog what we didn't need at the fair. Since then we have felt unable to give it up, and so one morning a year find ourselves grubbing about trying to work out how much chard we can spare (lots — it always grows back) and whether it was a sacrifice too far to sell our new potatoes (too damn right: let them grow their own spuds).

An hour or so later and we had a pretty good haul, including beetroot, chard, spinach, peas, salad, spring onions, rhubarb, sweet peas, roses, poppies and carnations. We also liberated some perfect little courgettes — complete with flowers — from our neighbour's plot because we knew they were going spare, although we did check first: I am sure she didn't mind the 7.30am phone call from us asking: "Can we have your courgettes, please?" It is for charity, after all.

These things don't sell themselves, however, and it is the little marketing touches that make the difference: the hand-drawn labels by my daughter Kitty on the pots of chilli seedlings, for instance, and the edible flowers — nasturtiums and heartsease — in the bagged salad which meant we could charge an extortionate £2 a pop and still keep a straight face. Then there is the question of to clean or not to clean: we wash the spring onions, because they look good when they are pristine white, but not the beetroot because a bit of earth on the root gives it an authentic touch. It must work, because the entire beetroot stock went in about half an hour.

The only hiccup came when the dad who was giving kids rides on the back of his motorcycle for £1 a go was told by the police to stop: the fair is held in a paddock next to Kensington Palace and apparently Princess Michael of Kent didn't like the noise. I expect she is feeling a bit bad about that now because she probably didn't realise it was for charity. Perhaps she would like to come over and have a look for herself next year; if she gets her people to talk to my people, I could even put aside a bag of beetroot for her.

■ *One Man And His Dig* by Valentine Low is published by Pocket Books, price £7.99.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR CITY PLOT BY JOE SWIFT

STICK TO QUICK CROPPERS
You don't need lots of space to grow veg at home but you do need a sunny spot with decent soil. The plots at King Henry's Walk are six metres by six metres, and that's more than enough. Look at quick crops if you're pressed for space: salads, spring onions, beans, mangetout. It's not about getting staple cabbins out but getting a little bit of a fresh taste each week.

HELP BIODIVERSITY — DON'T BE TOO TIDY
Nor do you need to spend every free hour outside to have a great garden. Growing veg requires a time investment but maintaining an ornamental garden needn't take lots of work. I blitz my garden two or three times a year. Choose the right plants and give the whole place a clear out once in the autumn and once in spring — and that's it. A bit messy isn't always a bad thing, particularly for biodiversity.



Bamboo and steel: a Swift-designed pergola

WATER WITH CARE
Lots of professional gardeners don't water their garden at all. Watering little and often draws the root of the plant to the surface and weakens it. If you don't water, the roots go deeper and deeper in search of moisture and therefore cope

with drought better. If something dies off after a couple of years, replace it with another, more drought-resistant plant and you'll end up with a garden that's much more sustainable.

KNOW YOUR LIMITATIONS
If your budget is tight and you want to change stuff around, it's worth getting a designer in on a consultation basis only. You've been looking at the same thing for 10 years; he's got a fresh eye. Don't try to build walls or put in ponds by yourself — it's pretty expensive when it goes wrong. And don't "theme" your garden unless you're really devoted to the idea. You'll get bored with it.

FASHIONABLE ISN'T COOL
I ignore fashions generally. If you plant something because it's fashionable, by the time it looks good, it will be uncool again. All the same, the trend at Chelsea this year was the colour green and I don't see that changing for a while. People might tweak it, add little bits of colour, but there won't be a riot of colour next year.

