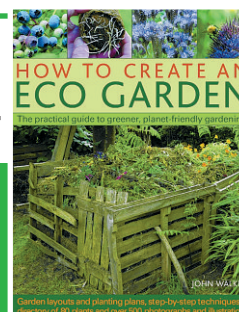


The eco warrior within

HELEN GAZELEY talks to the author of a new book that makes it easy to be “earth-friendly”



You may consider yourself just a smallholder, but are you really a “quiet but potent eco-warrior”? It’s possible.

John Walker, author of *How to Create an Eco Garden*, sees smallholders as occupying a unique niche in a strand that starts with gardeners and ends with organic farmers. “I’m convinced that as we start getting to grips with real ecologically driven challenges, such as food security, smallholders will become an even more vital part of a locally woven food, materials, skills web that will help buffer us all against bumpy times ahead.”

If you think it’s enough, though, just to keep your head down and get on with things, you’re mistaken. “I have some sympathy for that feeling,” says John, “but if gardening has taught me one thing it’s that everything is interconnected.”

It’s a lesson that resonates throughout his book, which looks at every aspect of gardening and vegetable growing, and shows how to lessen our consumption of natural resources and energy, reduce waste, and make a positive contribution to slowing climate change.

John has learned the lesson gradually. He started gardening as a child and still vividly remembers the insecticidal “puffer” packs he used to zap aphids in his grandparents’ garden. “Without those early gardening experiences I don’t think my resolve to communicate a more earth-friendly way of doing things would be anywhere near as strong as it is today. These days I’m as beguiled watching hoverflies lay their eggs among aphid colonies, as I once was watching aphids writhe after I’d dusted them with powder.”

Surprisingly, for someone who rails against the use of what he describes as “dangerous and unnecessary synthetic chemicals”, John distances himself from the organic label. “Being ‘earth-friendly’ requires an instant evaluation of whether what you’re doing is for good or ill,” he says. “I would go as far as to say that not all organic gardening is earth-friendly, especially when it comes to buying stuff. Any honest climate scientist will tell you that a huge chunk of our carbon emissions are driven by consumerism en masse.



■ A simple pond made from a large bucket

Earth-friendly gardening is inherently kinder to the natural world because it encourages minimal consumerism.” Climate-friendly gardening is covered in the book and, canny smallholders will have spotted, an approach that saves you money.

Although John’s book is titled for the gardening market, there’s plenty to engage

the smallholder. The temptation is to graze the pages; they’re beautifully laid out, with illustrations that burst with information and instruction, especially the delightful garden and allotment plans, all designed by John. As he points out, food is at the heart of a successful eco garden, and among the “green-prints” (the eco version of blue-prints) is a five-year plan to create a productive plot.

“The idea was to infuse the plans with lots of ideas that work as a whole, but which the reader can also cherry-pick to take a smidgen of a bigger idea to adapt for themselves.”

It’s a gentle approach that encourages you to look at individual projects, rather than demand all or nothing. John points out that adding a lean-to greenhouse can be a major undertaking, but that small changes combine to make bigger ones. He also points out ways to mitigate the impact of unavoidable decisions. You might find recycled materials for landscaping impossible to find, but buying new paving made from recycled ingredients, for example, does at least reduce the need for quarrying.

While the most basic novice is catered for, there is plenty for the more experienced reader to consider, in sections relating to



■ John Walker, author of *How to Create an Eco Garden*



■ John's book has a variety of delightful and informative plans, including the Eco Allotment

everything from soil care and composting, boosting biodiversity, controlling pests and weeds, to considering the materials you use and the plants and vegetables you choose. A directory lists a good selection of eco-friendly plants from fruit trees, hedging and vegetables to pond and bog plants.

John appears in many of the 500 plus colour photographs and has completed all the projects himself. Living in Wales, where he's developing a terraced garden from a formerly bracken-riddled bank, John grows all sorts of annual food crops and is planning to keep bees. He doesn't, however, ever see himself as self-sufficient. "I have flirted with the idea, but somehow I couldn't get the cabbage into the reply envelope when Ecotricity sent me a bill," he jokes. "For us all to be self-sufficient from our own efforts is probably an impossibility in terms of land area. That said, the sum of more and more gardeners, allotment-

holders and smallholders becoming more part-sufficient in home-grown food is going to be greater, especially in ecological terms, than the sum of its parts."

By the end of the book, it's almost guaranteed that you'll have started to think differently about your smallholding and the materials you use.

The downside of the environmental debate is often that we're made to feel guilty about everything we do and John recognises that constantly worrying about the impact of every material and method employed can be exhausting, though for him the positives outweigh the negatives. "Out of any 'exhaustion' through considering what I'm doing comes a much greater insight into the pros and cons of doing and/or having it. We're constantly told that gardening is 'green' and 'good for the environment', but when you peel much of this spin back it's anything but the case. Yes, you can end up worn out by constantly poking around and asking questions, but you don't half learn a lot along the way."

The beauty of *How to Create an Eco Garden* is, of course, that John has done much of the worrying for us. This is a can-do book, full of ideas of what can be done in small and not-so-small ways to create a productive plot that draws as few resources as possible from the earth.

"It would be easy to think that individual actions cannot make much impact," says John, "but there are tens of millions of gardeners and smallholders around the globe. Working together, in our own diverse, beautiful and abundant gardens, yards, and allotments, we can make a positive and rewarding difference."

In fact, we can be eco warriors. ■

■ *How to Create an Eco Garden* published by Aquamarine ISBN 978 1 903141 89 2

Perennimeter planting

PERENNIMETER Planting, which John describes in the book, isn't something you'll have seen mentioned elsewhere, as he's coined the description himself. "This is something I did on the last allotment I had before moving to Wales. It raised quite a few eyebrows, but also led to some interesting discussions about trying things differently and using mulch as part of a no-dig approach.

"I wanted to create a living perimeter of mostly perennial plants (crops and, for example, beneficial insect attractors) around the entire allotment, which would act as a 'bank' of all sorts of living things which would primarily benefit the more formal beds inside the 'perennimeter'.

"In a way I was going against the usual wisdom of mixing everything up and I think the idea will appeal to smallholders who find the 'mix everything up' approach hard to manage, either psychologically or practically.

"It's an idea that commercial organic growers increasingly use on a larger scale, but in a smallholding or garden there's ever greater scope to let rip with the imagination and have cut flowers rubbing shoulders with, say, currant bushes, which might have mini wildlife pond sandwiched between them.

"My garden is surrounded by wildness and much life that's beneficial just seeps over my terraces, whether it's lumbering toads or darting dragonflies." ■



■ A home-made strawberry tower is one of the projects described in John's book