

GARDENING AND NATURE

IS GARDENING REALLY 'GREEN'?

Award-winning writer John Walker explores the reality behind gardening's environmental claims



EARTH-FRIENDLY GARDENING.NET

Writing about gardening is a solitary game. But using the pen to place gardening in a broader environmental context, to explore where gardening fits among nature, and how gardens affect the natural world – for good or ill – is a truly desolate place. In my experience, few wellies dare to tread here.

While composing an anthology of my 'enviro-gardening' writing from the last decade, what hit me hardest is how little has really changed. As concerns over climate chaos, the use of pesticides and peat, and our energy and resource profligacy mount, gardening – by which I mean both gardeners, and the businesses that serve us – carry on as if none of it matters to our enduring passion. As the natural world buckles, our green-fingered myopia thrives, and we toddle on, soothed by the equally myopic cries of marketing-types that 'gardening is green!'. Oh, I wish.

My garden has been on an earth- and climate-friendly path for a while. It is beautiful, productive, and brimful with wildlife. There is nothing hair-shirted about it: a conscious effort to lessen the negative impact of my gardening activities, through frugality, thinking local, attuning with nature and, when needed, making mindful, informed purchasing choices, gives me a garden that feels as good as it looks. For gardening to play its part in helping us live within our planet's limits, our short-sightedness must go, and the multimillion pound industry that supports us must truly 'green-up'.

'Growing plants is good for the environment!' is true in essence, but the devil's in the rootball. Blinkers off, we must ask those questions that matter: where have plants and products come from? How have they been grown or made, and by whom? What kind of 'footprint' do they leave behind? You only fail to spot the crushing irony of lauding a pollinator plant, grown using peat, heat and insect-harming pesticides, if you choose to. It is no longer tenable to treat the supply side of gardening like an unmentioned, embarrassing relative: we need to know all we can to be sure our shared passion for plants matches gardening's 'green' billing. There is little sign that business wants this awkward relation uncovered: perhaps too many skeletons lurk in gardening's shed. I'm up for a bit of horticultural bone-rattling, but it's no fun doing it solo. So, don your wellies, and let's get digging. ●

FURTHER READING
Digging Deep in the Garden: Book one, by John Walker, Earth-friendly Books; July 2015, £4.99; ISBN 9780993268355

WINTER WARMERS

BEST SEASON FOR SWAPS AND GIFTS

The *Garden* columnist John Grimshaw on good winter reads, and ferns to brighten the darkest days

December is famously a time for giving, and it's well known among my friends and family that my favourite type of Christmas gift – both given and received – is a book. Excitingly, I've just heard that a kind person has bought me the sumptuous new *Plants from the Woods and Forests of Chile* from the Royal Botanic Garden



RHS/NEIL HEPWORTH

Edinburgh. With its magnificent plates illustrating a rich diversity of fascinating plants, it will be a treasure of my library. My budget is less expansive, but there are lots of good books to choose from. I was particularly impressed this year by James Wong's *Grow For Flavour*, a genuinely innovative look at growing vegetables and fruit that brings a fresh approach to garden writing. Not everyone will agree with all he says, but nobody can say it is not different.

Gardeners are wonderfully generous and do not wait until Christmas to exchange gifts: cuttings, seeds, divisions, surplus courgettes (sadly asparagus seldom generates such a surplus) – all are freely exchanged. Through summer and autumn, a steady flow of packages of bulbs has arrived here, all in exchanges with like-minded friends. My claim not to be a collector of snowdrops is rapidly evaporating. One or two packages lately have contained ferns, which may be even more exciting than snowdrops.

Ferns are seldom thought of in winter gardens, but while some shrivel to nothing, many have persistent fronds that retain structure, and the true evergreens carry fresh green through the darkest days. Hart's tongue ferns (*Asplenium scolopendrium* and cultivars) and polypodies (*Polypodium* species and cultivars) are outstanding. I love *Asplenium scolopendrium* Crispum Group, in which the fronds are goffered like a choirboy's ruff, but crested selections can be attractive, too. They are all rosette-forming, in contrast to the polypodies, whose scaly rhizomes creep over the surface and produce sheets of fronds, forming broad patches of green to lighten winter gloom. Of *Polypodium* species and hybrids my first choice would be from the Cambricum Group, in which the frond divisions are expanded and more strongly toothed, giving a truly lush appearance. The first such selection, now called *P. cambricum* 'Richard Kayse' after its discoverer, was found in about 1670 on a Welsh castle wall. Grown in gardens ever since, and with an RHS Award of Garden Merit, it has been a gift of great worth from that time to this. ●