

THE FUTURE OF GARDENING?

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Gardening society membership numbers are falling steadily. Some societies are suffering more than others, and the HPS has fared better than most in this respect. We might ask why this should be: we have an ageing population and it is true to say that older people are generally keener on gardening than younger folk. In recent years there have been many more societies to choose from, so maybe numbers are spread more thinly amongst the wide range of specialist and more general gardening clubs.

The effects of the recent financial crisis have also been felt as people review their spending habits and give up their less favoured hobbies and leisure activities, resigning their memberships of the associated clubs and societies.

But is the decline in garden club membership something more fundamental than that? We now have a 'throw-away' culture which requires instant gratification and results. Are the simple, slow pleasures of working in a garden and watching it develop no longer appealing to many who want an instant garden? The phase of TV gardening makeover shows in the '80s and '90s, with programmes such as *Groundforce*, rather fuelled this trend.

However there is still hope: many schools, especially primary schools, maintain gardens and encourage students to participate in active gardening. The review of the national schools' curriculum stated that gardening is to become a mandatory part of it. Some schools, such as Worle Community School in Weston-super-Mare, where I work, even offer Land Based Science amongst their subject options.

Unfortunately, though, there is little practical gardening in the Land Based Science GCSE course, which is largely theory based, and the devaluing of the more hands-on Btec qualification in 'points' terms for school standings has meant that this is no longer offered at Worle. This is a great shame, as the Btec qualification at Level 1, or even Level 2, was attainable by many students of low academic ability for whom GCSEs are too difficult. It also appears that even the GCSE course is considered by some in government as too vocational for Key Stage 4 students.

Whether the resurgence of school gardening projects will result in a new wave of keen hobby gardeners remains to be seen - how many of us take up as hobbies things we are forced to do, however fun they may be? But maybe for some it will sow a seed that lies dormant; germinating, growing and blossoming in years to come. Maybe showing children that growing plants to eat, or simply enjoy, can be rewarding and isn't as difficult as they might think, could bring about an army of new and enthusiastic gardeners that we can welcome into our Society sometime in the future?

Of course, many schools don't have members of staff with the gardening knowledge and skills to run garden clubs. This is where YOU come in. Why not approach your local infant or junior school and offer your services? This doesn't have to entail much volunteering commitment on your part: most schools have lunchtime clubs running once or twice a week. If you could offer them just one hour of your time think what a difference this could make? You would most likely be supported by a member of staff responsible for discipline and resources to make the club happen so don't worry about your lack of teaching skills. Think of the personal satisfaction and reward you will receive for your efforts too when you see how much the children get out of growing plants. I know I do.