# The learning curve

**Val Bourne**

I have been an organic gardener all my life so I've never used any chemicals. I didn't make a moral decision in order to save the planet, it was much less worthy than that. My strong survival instinct and my circumstances led the way. I wrote about the whole process in my book, *The Natural Gardener*[1], which is all about the plants in my old garden in Hook Norton.

My biggest influence was my grandmother, Lucy Elizabeth, a Yorkshire lass. A great gardener, she was seventy when I was born and had grown up in Victorian times so it never occurred to her to spray anything. Grandmother gardened like her mother – it goes to prove that a non-chemical approach to gardening is nothing new, it's the way our ancestors gardened.



Green gardeners want to preserve the planet for future generations

I came to gardening at the tender age of three because I was sent outside by six in the morning – before my tongue engaged – so that my twin brother could sleep on. We were still in the digging-for-victory phase, even though the war was long gone, and in those days Britain produced half its food from gardens, including half its eggs.

Grandmother's Yorkshire thrift is deeply engrained in my psyche, and I also inherited her stubborn streak. I follow my own course in life and when Percy Thrower mixed up his ICI brews on *Gardeners' World* in the early 1970s it went totally over my head. Finally, as a young woman, I worked in vegetable research where I handled fungicides like Benlate on a daily basis for five years. I felt rather vulnerable and avidly avoided them in my own garden. When two daughters arrived, with huge appetites, I found myself growing all our soft fruit and many of our vegetables for purely financial reasons. My crops flourished and my garden grew.

In 1995, when the financial responsibilities of children/offspring receded slightly, I began garden writing. Almost immediately I landed a spot called *Dig It* on a local

[1]Practical Book of the Year 2004

radio show. Listeners phoned up with gardening problems and I (along with another) dispensed sage advice. *Dig It* was my nemesis because I found that I was completely out of kilter with the other gardeners on the show. Their standard answer was "spray it" and my hands-on approach was considered completely whacky. I lasted a matter of weeks before being dropped.

However, I had noted down every question in my brief interlude on *Spray It*, as I now called the show, and I pledged to write a plant-led book about my garden. The trouble was I had no idea why my garden suffered so few problems, so I set out to investigate. It was a time-consuming process, particularly as I refused to read anyone else's work. I wanted to observe first hand – perhaps my years as an infant teacher were rearing their head but I had to experience it for myself.

**The three planting pitfalls**

Common sense says that the best way to garden organically is to avoid problems: when I analysed the questions posed it was easy to see that many gardeners make trouble for themselves. First they opt for weak varieties prone to disease, particularly when it comes to roses. Healthy roses do exist; they are not all martyrs to black spot: those bred by the German firm Kordes are really healthy. (They appear in the *Plant Finder* with the breeding name KOR in brackets.) Gallicas, albas, hybrid musks, most ramblers and rugosas are also ruggedly resistant to disease. When it comes to herbaceous plants, the RHS trial the finest for the Award of Garden Merit – shown by the letters AGM or a trophy logo. I serve on the herbaceous committee so I know it's packed with gardeners with experience, so you can rarely go wrong with an AGM plant. If still in doubt, ask for expert help from a specialist nursery: they will happily share information. But don't become a plant snob. That well-known orange and black superstore (B&Q) latches on to some of the finest plants in the industry – as do many major garden centres. Ask them for their delivery day and buy them before the staff have a chance to kill them off.

Secondly, put plants in the correct place! The 'Right Plant/Right Place' mantra (championed by Beth Chatto) is the keystone of organic gardening. I can clearly remember one lady telling me, for instance, that her lavender was sick even though she's put it close to a hedge. Dear madam… aromatic plants with Mediterranean roots need full sun. Thirdly, don't be obsessive about growing something impossible for you. If your phloxes go down with mildew every August your soil is trying to tell you something!

**Healthy ecosystems**

It was much harder to work out why pests were kept at bay in my garden. My first research was to observe the blackfly on broad beans. Almost immediately, small parasitic wasps (looking just like flying blackfly) arrived. They laid one egg in each aphid and mummified it into a brown dome. New wasps emerged from completely circular holes. Hoverfly eggs (cream rugby balls) soon appeared because at their predatory stage insects actively seek aphid colonies. Hoverfly larvae are parasitic, but

from above it's easy to mistake one for a bird dropping. One female ladybird obligingly lays 1500 mustard-yellow eggs in a year, in clusters of 30. But she will only lay them close to aphid colonies. This is a Catch 22 situation.

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Bumblebees love *Amberboa muricate*, a nectar-rich annual.

**We don't know enough**

Hundreds of small interactions go on in our gardens, many unknown to science. Recently a new species of parasitic wasp, *Encarsia aleurochitonis,* was discovered by Natural History Museum scientist Dr Andrew Polaszek. There are 7,500 species of wasp in the UK, 6000 of them parasitoid. The smallest parasitic wasp is less than a fifth of a millimetre (0.17mm) and most are host-specific, that is, they home in on only one thing. It shows that the natural world is a complex affair. I often refer to it as a living jigsaw.

**Plant diversely for all-year interest**

What came across clearly was the importance of the lower orders of invertebrate life. The best way to encourage them is to plant diversely. A mixture of trees, shrubs, perennials, annuals, bulbs, ferns and grasses will attract more insect life than a monoculture. It will also look better visually because trees and shrubs give scale to low-level planting. The other key factors are having a range of flowering plants from February until late into the year, to sustain insects and bees. Early winter flowers are vital for bumblebees, and annuals are tremendous for all pollinators. Try to mix flower shapes from the tubular, to the saucer, to the thistly dome, to the umbel.

Finally, don't use a pesticide, green mustard spray or washing-up liquid in an attempt to target a specific pest. You'll kill everything. The pests have rapid life cycles (the aphid could produce 40 generations in one year) whilst the much-needed predators often have just one or two. In fact, you can actively encourage aphids if you spray early in the year, just when your predators are emerging.

Whether you agree with the organic approach or not, the time is right because the EU Pesticides Review of 2002–2009 has decimated the range of chemicals available to horticulture. So you will have to be greener – whether you like it or not! Hopefully the planet will be healthier too.

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