

Future gardens.....

an essay by

Jane Gibbon

We're truly into the 21st century now and I wonder about the changes that'll take place in gardens in years to come. It can hardly be expected to be business as usual for gardeners while the world and its problems pass by, and as the key issues forecast to have a rapid impact on our lives are resources and energy, there seems little chance gardens and gardeners will not be affected.

As far as resources are concerned let's take the situation that's referred to as 'peak oil'. A term used to cover the fact that oil supplies are at the stage where future extraction will soon become problematical due to dwindling reserves or difficulty of access. No sector in our modern age is immune from its implications and shortages usually mean one thing: higher prices, and, in extremis, rationing. But gardens are all leaves and flowers, so what's peak oil got to do with that? Well, rather a lot. Not on the part of nature, of course: it's us. We take a lot of things for granted and the contribution oil makes to our garden lives is one of those 'things'. We've surrounded ourselves with plastics and other oil-derived materials - pots, netting, (right) fleece, twine, hoses, chairs, cold frames; an endless list.



So one change could be that these items either become not worth it, or an investment buy requiring second thought before good money's put on the table. There's no denying how useful plastic is, and I doubt it'll disappear, but it may well be needed more urgently elsewhere. Quality not quantity could become the norm, with attention paid to design, function and longevity - and that of itself costs. And with that comes the question, 'Do I really need it?' and the answer might often be, 'No', and this indicates smaller markets, which also adds to prices. Of course, we could revert to natural

materials but at current consumerist rates of demand, the global environment would suffer even more than it has already; far better to pay attention to maintenance and learn how to repair. And then there's transport: it takes oil to fuel the miles and items get to be priced accordingly. Leaving aside the quantities of garden artefacts making their way from the Far East, many garden supplies are heavy, making for more expense at any mileage. And then there's the fuel for the lawn mower, the trips to gardens and garden centres ... could another change be the rebirth of the picnic rug and a proper appreciation of the local park?

Another resource we take for granted is fertiliser; our trusty N.P. and K. We only have to pick up a pack and pay at the till: but artificial nitrogenous fertiliser (N) is produced from natural gas and the UK's supply is nearly on empty. Will we be able to rely on imports, often from faraway and chaotic parts of the world? Phosphate (P) will be a problem too, as supplies of this are also predicted to peak and, just to aggravate matters, there are relatively few sources of this mineral. Think also of herbicides and pesticides. Last year's gardening boom saw a 50% increase in weed killer sales and the vast majority of these rely on hydrocarbons derived from petroleum for their manufacture. Perhaps we can console ourselves with the fact there's no prediction we'll run out of potash (K). So will green waste be a sought after material with municipal composting becoming a profitable business? Provided householders are willing to part with the stuff! People may even start to appreciate the value of excreta: one person's urine contains sufficient nutrients to produce at least half their food, and the global population excretes 3 million tonnes of phosphate a year. As for killing things, maybe the recipe will take on a new meaning as garden cures are sourced from the kitchen cupboard.

Regarding energy - and a lack of ample gas and oil would constrain supply of this - will our renewable energy be sufficient, and cheap enough, to support the use of our leaf blowers, shredders, patio lights, etc? And what will be the implications for the power needed to extract the materials and make all these items in the first place? What will be the effect on our patio heaters and barbecues? And, talking of heat, what will having a frost-free green house cost? Solar can't be expected to be a solution in the depths of a UK winter; bio fuels have already got a bad name; and relying on converting chip fat to diesel doesn't bode well for that healthy life style we're after. So hot-house plants could attract a

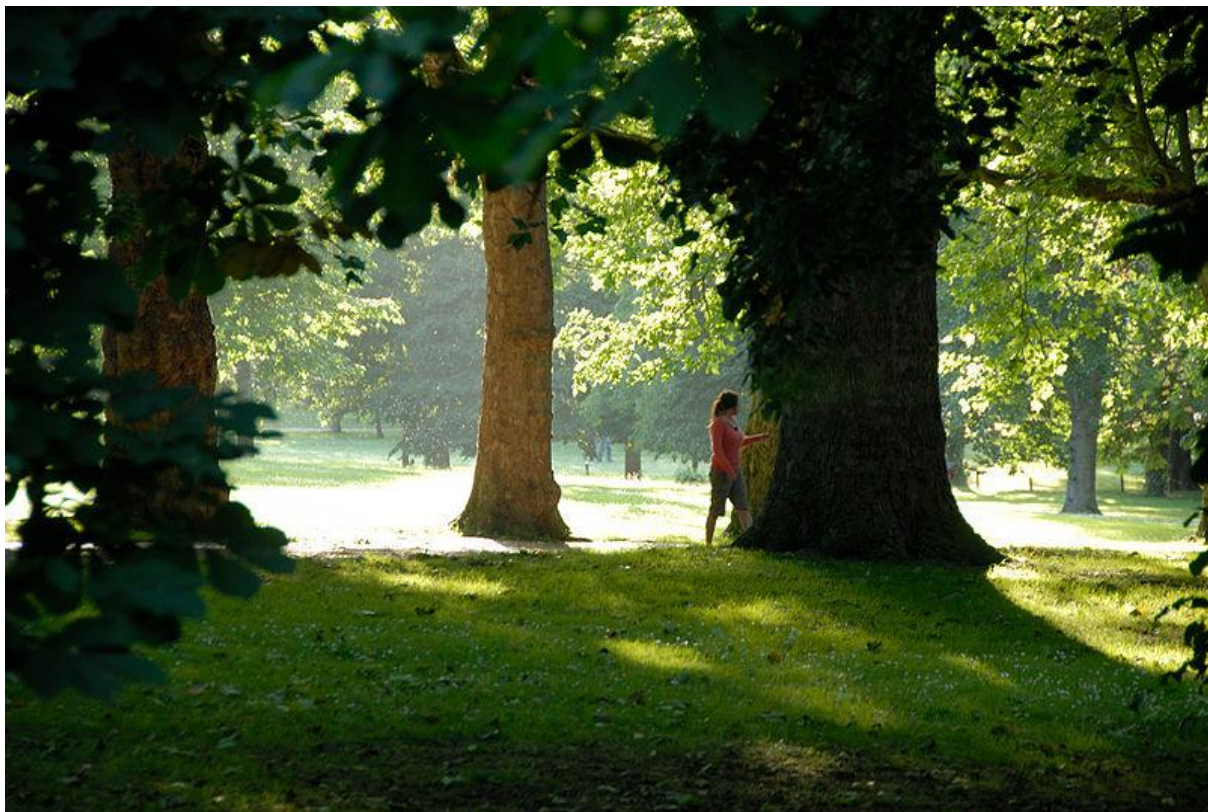
premium, the cost of nurturing tender plants for our containers might rocket, and garden centres prove to be an expensive supply option. All in all there are a number of costs that seed, plant and equipment producers and retailers could be passing on. But, I hear you say, 'My little gardening bits hardly matter'. Well, multiply your usage by the millions that form the overall picture. And also consider that although amateur gardening is big business we'll be at the back of the queue behind the international growing industry if things get tight. For that reason alone gardeners should aim to be in the vanguard of adaptation – survival lies in adaptation, it's said – and, if the predictions are anything to go by, the sooner we start the better. You may also be saying, 'Inflation will take care of things', but I'd reckon that dwindling resources put a brake on production and leave economies unable to grow their way out of the problem - but then what does a gardener know? To me gardens would be a very acceptable standard as an alternative to gold – concrete values instead of the virtual; fitting in with anthropological economics, perhaps, and apropos of our new millennium being called the anthropocene. Gardening needn't become an expensive business, though. If we carry on in the same old way, yes, but if we change our habits it could well prove cheaper.

But cheaper requires knowledge, simplicity and patience, not off-the-shelf fixes. Will this mean gardening skills rediscovering the status they've been lacking for nearly a century?

Perhaps attention will be paid to the health of the soil, and a sustainable version of organic growing become the new zeitgeist. Could it mean an end to the horticultural commercial rip-off? And what will be the new value on offer that keeps customers coming through the doors if they prove reluctant to head for the gift shop and treat themselves in the cafe? Will they be wanting to buy involvement and a sense of community instead? There's also another matter very likely to have an effect: food security. Quite apart from the impact of the above cost and availability issues, it's an uncomfortable fact that the UK imports the greater part of its food, even allowing for those items that see like products passing them in the other direction. At the same time foreign powers are buying up huge areas of fertile land abroad; the world's population is expanding; the climate is being far from friendly to some crops; Spain is running out of irrigation water; and many British farmers are due to retire.

So, seeing that producing most foods – let alone that biomass for fuel – requires soil it's likely the UK's 300,000 acres of prime growing land, currently labelled gardens or plots, will come to be viewed in a different light to that current in today's life-style magazines.

Unfortunately it's predicted that between now and 2020 we may well have lost over a million private gardens, which wouldn't be the best start. But, on the other hand, a house could gain value from having a large garden instead of it being regarded as a burden or a building opportunity. Will purely decorative plantings be consigned to marginal land and out of the way corners, or will a new aesthetic arise based on the productive? Will Chelsea produce ranks of artfully arranged fruiting trees, vines and wild fodder, or will bad-lands gardening become the new vogue? And if we no longer focus our need for the beautiful on a particular patch under our noses will a new aesthetic (*below*) be founded in the wider landscape?



We don't eat grass, so what will happen to that British institution, the lawn? Where will the children play if that's usurped? It may well be that the local park comes into its own there: kids meeting up with others in the neighbourhood who've been able to get there unaccompanied because there's far less traffic on the roads.....



Royal Victoria Park, Bath

In fact, what's wrong with playing in those traffic-free streets?

It would seem from the above that re-embedding horticultural skills in society is paramount, especially when half of adults say they've lost the practical skills of their grandparents, but, while the committed and enthusiastic gardeners carry on as usual, will the others jump on board, especially if our time-constrained way of living fails to change? Let's face it, there'll be plenty who just give up or who aren't in a position to act.

Could it be that there arises a new breed of professional gardener, not armed with a mower and a hedge trimmer, who stewards peoples' gardens or acts as a mentor?

Or will gardeners suffer the same fate as our present day unsung carers and their contribution only be recognised if they go on strike, which of course they never do. Whatever the outcome, gardening will very likely develop into a serious pastime involving the notion of pay-back for all the effort and investment. Low maintenance gardens may even become old fashioned. Might it come to be regarded as a heinous sin to leave soil unproductive, rain water uncollected and green waste uncomposted? Will garden designers study permaculture, act as custodians and gurus, and stick around to coach their clients in ongoing management? And the big question: will change be embraced or will it have to be imposed? It all depends on how quick we are to learn; how prescient we are ... I'm not holding my breath!

Remember that old adage 'don't put all your eggs in one basket'? Well, in diversity lies that vital ingredient resilience; be it diversity of supply, genes, methods, solutions, or location. Cottage industries could see a renaissance; indeed industry could actually be the cottage garden. If today business is seeing profit in the space on peoples' roofs for PV panels could there be a similar opportunity with regard to growing spaces?



The cottage garden... with solar water-heating panels....
© John Reed

Localisation could have a significant effect: less copy-cat garden culture; more eccentricity; the rebirth of local distinctiveness; recognition for local knowledge; an appreciation of fresh food, but it also has to be remembered that we're not all devoted gardeners. Only 80% of the population have gardens, a third of which are neglected, and it's reckoned only 40% of us grow anything at all to eat, let alone feed ourselves.

Will there be a sharing or a putting up of barriers? And science and technology? We've messed up the business of mastering nature on a global scale, so maybe we'll try understanding nature and working with it. When it's calculated that fossil fuels multiply the physical force of each human by 70% it seems sense to look around for more labour in gardens and we wouldn't have to go far if we only understood exactly what nature's microscopic creatures could do for us if we let them. Unfortunately 99.9% of soil micro-organisms can't be tamed in the lab, so maybe some research techniques will, literally, become more down to earth. As for technology, that provides us with a means of accurate monitoring and also communication. What possibilities lie in the latter: real-time and local information at gardeners finger tips; the waiving of petty regulation in favour of proper information; the power of word-of-mouth; an antidote to the possible insularity of localisation ... and other things we can only dream of? They say information is power!

History has shown over centuries how the changes in gardens reflect their

times; influenced by status, social values, knowledge, opportunity, and the prevailing aesthetic. However, it could be that in the future most of us fall below fashion's radar and end up climbing into the same boat as the cottager of old who mainly gardened out of necessity and whose garden therefore changed little in appearance through the ages. It's probably safe to assume there'll still be those with money to spare, but how will their plans be influenced? Will a new social ethic of providing for one's self influence a new look, or will the street-scene be spurned and wealth flaunted? One thing's for sure, fashion has a habit of repeating itself but it always comes back looking slightly different. Oh, for a crystal ball!

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Feedback on this essay to: belladarcy@gardensandpeople.co.uk - for publication in next upload

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