

SOWING THE SEEDS OF



REVOLUTION

Sharing land to grow food: what could be simpler? Even as demand for allotments outstrips supply, a pioneering scheme could offer fresh hope

Words by Cate Devine Photographs by Kirsty Anderson



It might not be Michelle Obama's new White House kitchen garden, or the Queen's newly dug allotment at Buckingham Palace, but a sorry-looking Georgian walled garden near Stirling is slowly coming back to life. Thirty years of neglect have decimated its original box hedges, caused its 18th-century walls to crumble and covered its acre of fertile soil in impenetrable turf—while, in the nearby orchard, plum, pear, apple and cherry trees, some 100 years old, are overgrown and fruitless.

Look beyond the decay, though, and it's just possible to spot the green shoots of recovery. Neat squares of dark brown earth are already bringing forth beans, peas, beetroots, potatoes, carrots and herbs. Plastic bottle tops and netting protect young plants and it's clear that, at long last, this beautiful old kitchen garden is returning to its glorious past.

"This used to be a wonderful garden full of seasonal produce and tended by a full-time gardener," says Pippa Maclean. Quarter, the house in which she and her husband Robin live, was built in 1753, and one high-profile former owner was Betty Harvie Anderson, the former Conservative MP for Renfrewshire East.

"When I moved in three years ago it was down at heel and in need of a lot of TLC, but we simply couldn't find anyone reliable to help us," continues Maclean, who was born into the family of Edmonstone of Duntreath and brought up in Duntreath Castle at Blanefield, Stirlingshire. "We were desperate." All that changed, however, when a friend steered the Macleans towards Landshare, an online project matching landowners with growers set up by the broadcaster, writer and food campaigner Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. Maclean posted an advertisement asking for growers, then sat back and crossed her muddy fingers.

"I got 25 replies in the space of three days," she recalls. "And within another day I'd met my four new collaborators. Now I can't imagine life without them. Landshare has given me the impetus to get this garden up and running again. They say it takes 10 years to make a garden, but I reckon we can do it in three."

Step forward Stenhousemuir postman Kevin Doughty, 45, and his partner Althea Davis, 37, along with Stirling immunology student Kirsty Robb, 26, and her partner, abattoir stocksman John Murie, also 26. They responded to Maclean as potential growers, and are delighted to have been given the opportunity to work the ancient land at Quarter. Aptly, the walled garden has been divided into four and each couple has a plot of around 100 square feet.

"This is beyond our wildest dreams," says Doughty. He is a vegetarian and Davis, an environmental historian and archaeologist at Stirling University, is vegan, so they are keen to grow all their own vegetables organically. The growing space they have at home is cramped. "When we signed up for Landshare, we thought we'd maybe be lucky to get someone's council-house back garden to tend. To get 100 square feet is every grower's dream," he says.

Robb and Murie also have limited space at home and have been growing potatoes in bags and carrots in wellington boots. "When I saw this place I was absolutely gobsmacked, as it's much bigger than we anticipated," says Robb. "It's great to work alongside another couple because we can buddy each other at ▶

Landowner Pippa Maclean with growers Kirsty Robb and Kevin Doughty, and farmer Henry Harris. Thanks to Landshare, they are restoring a fine Georgian garden to its former glory

REAL LIVES

► this initial stage, when there is so much work to do. Pippa is great, too, because she keeps us motivated.”

Indeed, the six have become firm friends, delighting in the knowledge that they would not have met without Landshare. “We weren’t intimidated by the house or garden, just surprised,” says Doughty. “We never knew the house even existed. The first thing friends asked us was, ‘Is it not a nightmare to work up there?’ but we don’t think so. It’s a fantastic opportunity. Pippa is so enthusiastic but we all manage together.”

They began work on their plots only last month but already they have made significant progress. “Since we started late in the growing season, our plan is not to plant everything this year,” says Doughty. “Once the turf is all dug up, we’ll plant green manure to help recondition the soil.”

Horse, cow and slurry manure is being supplied by Henry Harris from his organic farm at neighbouring Wellsfield, while Ivor Scott, a stonemason, is repairing the wall. Mike Bisset, a professional fencer, will construct fruit cages for the new raspberry and strawberry plants.

How did Maclean choose who to work with? “I just got the vibes,” she replies cheerfully. “I felt they wouldn’t have been serious if they hadn’t registered on the Landshare website.” A detailed contract was signed by all parties, which states that no money can be exchanged between growers and landowners. The Macleans will receive 25% of the produce grown, and it will be used to feed family, friends and guests in the B&B business Pippa runs from the house. “It’s a win-win situation for us all.”

Up the road in Inverness-shire, Tim and Wendy Dearman’s rural cottage garden near Alness has three neglected vegetable plots being tended by computer engineer Tom Busza, who lives in a flat above a pub in the centre of Inverness. Once again, they found each other through Landshare.

“The beds have been redundant for ages because we’re so busy running our coach company,” explains Wendy. “We are on old, original croft-sized land situated near a river with woodland, so it’s a mild climate for growing. Having Tom has motivated me to repair and maintain the greenhouse. He’s already got one of the plots up and running, and has started clearing the docks and weeds on the others. Brassicas and aubergines growing in the greenhouse are almost ready for him to plant out.”

Busza, 59, is also growing broad and runner beans, leeks, onions, courgettes and sweet-corn, and plans potatoes for one of the plots. “I spend all day driving around the country and sitting in front of computers, and gardening really gets me away from it all,” he says. “I only have windowsills to grow on at the flat and it’s great to have this space. There’s no mobile-phone signal here, which is an added bonus.”

Wendy is delighted with the progress so far. “More and more people are growing their own vegetables, as we all did during the war,” she says. “People are gradually coming back to real food and cooking nice things with fresh produce, but we still know some young people who don’t know that peas are grown in gardens, not tins.”

Landshare was launched by Fearnley-Whittingstall as a solution to the problem of Britain’s lack of allotments, on a rising tide of enthusiasm for growing vegetables. Almost 38,000 people have registered online already, and comments posted on the website testify to



the increasing desperation of would-be growers, who outnumber landowners by approximately two to one.

Living in Stenhousemuir, Kevin Doughty falls under the Falkirk Council area – which is unique in Scotland for having no allotments. Two years ago, he formed the Falkirk Allotment Society with the aim of changing that, but has had little success. “We have 70 people signed up and another 100 notes of interest, and we hoped to put pressure on the council, but nothing has happened yet,” he says. “I’ve spent the past two years on committees trying to persuade the council to release land, and yet within hours with Landshare we got our fantastic site just up the road.”

In Glasgow, only 27% of the population has access to a garden, yet in some areas of the city there is a nine-year waiting list for an allotment, and the situation is similar in Edinburgh. Glasgow has 24 allotment sites, translating into 1320 plots; the most recent survey, in 2007, showed 652 people on waiting lists.

Glasgow City Council’s Allotment Strategy and Action Plan, approved on June 12, states a commitment to improving allotment sites and increasing their availability, but it also concedes that new funding will have to be found. “We know how important allotments are in Glasgow and the contribution they make to the health and wellbeing of the local community,” says James McNally, executive member of Land and Environmental Services.

In the Gorbals area of the city, though, there is just one allotment site: Oatlands Leisure Gardens, which has been working successfully since the late 1980s. The council has given a property-development company a 99-year lease on the surrounding land, for regeneration and the construction of luxury apartments. As part of the agreement, the allotments are to be moved to a smaller site, and the number of plots reduced from 20 to 14.

When surrounding buildings were demolished last year, the plots were exposed to the elements – and to vandalism. Greenhouses were smashed, sheds were razed to the ground, the storage area and clubhouse were burned out, tools were stolen and the poly-tunnel was ripped apart. Meanwhile, the



Clockwise from main picture: Pippa and Robin Maclean outside Quarter, their 18th-century Stirlingshire home, where the garden has a new lease of life; grower Nick Doughty, who says that having land at the house is beyond his wildest dreams; chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, the man behind the new Landshare website

PHOTOGRAPH: PAUL STUART



move to the new site has been postponed, because of a slow-down in the regeneration process caused by the downturn in the housing market. “Allotment holders feel disheartened,” says Judy Wilkinson, secretary of the Glasgow Allotments Forum. “They feel that with the downturn in the housing market and the increase in demand for allotments, they should not accept a smaller, new site but instead should get a new site in addition to the original site. The evidence is all around us that people are desperate for land to grow on.”

Across town, a piece of green land in North Kelvinside is also to be turned into housing. The council-owned disused space between Clouston Street and Kelbourne Street – the area of the former Clouston Street playing fields – is to be sold to property developers for the creation of 115 flats and houses, for a rumoured £10m-£12m. The land has never



had housing on it, and a community campaign to turn it into a multi-use green space for the people of Maryhill was launched last October. Some 20 local families from surrounding tenements have established productive raised beds on the site, and a substantial community orchard has been started.

The council's proposal for the redevelopment of the area includes a small park, and a spokesman points out that capital from the sale of the site is being used to fund the construction of a new playing facility at the corner of Queen Margaret Drive and Maryhill Road. Douglas Peacock, chairman of the North Kelvinside Green Space Initiative, doesn't think this is enough.

"This land has been disused since the 1970s. It's a beautiful space, but the council allowed it to be used as informal dumping ground," he says. "We cleaned it up and turned it into a ▶

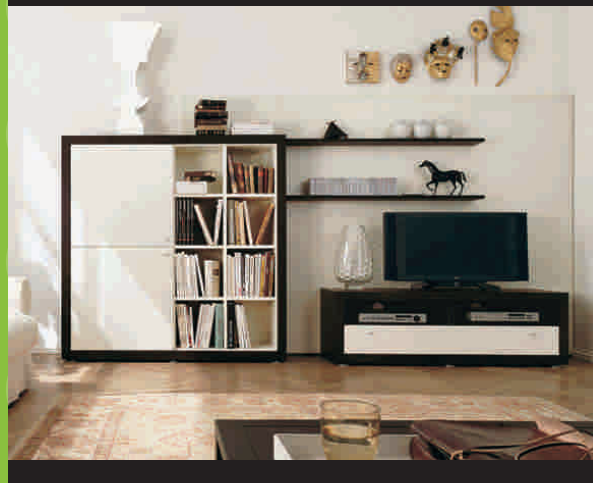
'More and more people are growing their own vegetables. People are coming back to real food'



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► community green space called the North Kelvin Meadow. There is a shortage of allotments in Glasgow as a whole and there is currently only one very oversubscribed allotment ground in the Maryhill and North Kelvin-side area. The North Kelvin Meadow would provide new allotment opportunities for people living in the local area." An online petition to keep the land as community space has attracted signatures from more than 340 supporters since it opened on June 3, including the authors Louise Welsh and Alasdair Gray.

Jim Mackechnie, the councillor for the area, has said: "I am afraid I do not believe allotments would add to the amenity of the locality. They would be visually unattractive, and would occupy land which I believe should be open and accessible to the public in order to maximise community benefit." He tells *The Herald Magazine*: "There is no trespass law in Scotland, but trespassing is what these people are doing. They should not be there."

Final missives are expected to be concluded by the end of July, and although building will not start before 2011, residents are unclear about when the new landowners will take possession of the land. "The council say they're keen to maintain and improve their allotment provision," says Peacock. "But the proof of the pudding is the decision they made on this site, which we see as a test case for their allotment strategy."

Karen Cheun, who lives nearby, is growing cabbage, leeks, onions, carrots and coriander in a raised bed on the space. "It'll be completely gutted to be evicted from this site," she says. "In the short time I've been living here it's helped me meet my neighbours, and it's become such a precious resource. It's become more than just a piece of land; it's a real community focus."

Six new growers have joined North Kelvin Meadow through the Landshare website, and new raised beds and organic soil have been ordered for them. "We're not stopping until the bulldozers move in," says Peacock.

Vacant and derelict land and gap sites are exactly what Eleanor Logan is looking for. The recently appointed head of Sage (Sow and Grow Everywhere) in Glasgow, her task is to identify sites that can be transformed into community growing spaces, and to solve some of the problems of producing food on contaminated land and brownfield sites.

The brainchild of the environmental arts charity NVA, the imaginative project received three-year funding from the city council in April. Logan is undertaking a scoping study on behalf of the eight local authority



In Glasgow, Karen Cheun and Douglas Peacock want to keep the land known as North Kelvin Meadow as community space where vegetables can be grown. They believe the city council could do much more in terms of allotment provision

PHOTOGRAPH: MARC TURNER

areas within the Glasgow and Clyde Valley Green Network Partnership, whose partners include Scottish Natural Heritage, the Forestry Commission and regional council representatives. Her report will be published in September.

In just one month she has already identified 10 potential sites in Glasgow – which, once matched with growers, will be supplied with a growing toolkit including specially-designed grow-boxes made from a range of materials. "It's becoming very exciting," she says. "I'm finding more by the day and it's a matter of trying to hold back the rising tide. There's been huge interest across the city, from Easterhouse to the south side."

Housing estates, backcourts and land earmarked for development but currently

'What's the worst that can happen if you allow people to grow on your disused midden?'

disused because of the economic downturn all hold potential for Sage. "People want to live close to where they grow their vegetables," says Logan. The organisation will test contaminated land – common in industrial cities such as Glasgow – and make it safe for planting before prepping it for production and handing it over to growers.

Logan does not see Sage reducing public demand for allotments; rather, she sees it as giving people the confidence to apply for a plot. "We're still pushing for more allotments in Glasgow," she says. "This project is about how land is utilised in an urban environment and it will be interesting to see if it changes the way land is used in the future."

Last week, only 152 Scots appeared to have registered with Landshare – although that doesn't take into account names that might have been removed following a match. Fearnley-Whittingstall, though, remains undaunted. "It could be better, but we have had some really good matches," he says.

"One of the things we've noticed is that people who grow food are also quite technologically savvy. They like to go online and talk to each other about what they've been planting. Landshare is the ultimate embodiment of that: people use it to communicate with each other. The idea is to continue and remodel the site."

The project is open-ended and there is no deadline for registering. "We would never want it to end as long as it's proving useful," he says. "We want to create shorter waiting times for land, and for it to become a basic tool for individuals, businesses and city councils to use to announce the release of land."

Through Landshare, the National Trust has offered 1000 plots – though none in Scotland – while the City of London wants to create 2012 community growing sites in time for the Olympics and will use Landshare to help. British Waterways will release hundreds, perhaps thousands, of plots through the website.

"It's not about shaming landowners into releasing land. It's more about cajoling them," says Fearnley-Whittingstall. "After all, if you allow people to grow on your disused midden, what's the worst that can happen?" ■

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