

It was encouraging to hear at our allotment open day recently how more and more ploholders are growing their food organically. Organic gardening has come a long way. Once ridiculed it's now widely accepted and now, enough time has passed for those who have been lifelong practitioners of organic techniques to see exactly what the effects have been and where it might lead. One such pioneer is Iain Tolhurst, a stock-free organic farmer who sells 500 boxes a week from a two acre walled garden and a further 16 acres of open fields on the Hardwick Estate in Oxfordshire. Known locally as 'Tolly' he has become one of the most inspirational experts on stockfree organic farming and advises regularly on his techniques both at home and abroad.

The Stockfree Organic Standards outlines a method of farming that doesn't rely on animal manures or by-products to fertilise the soil. It also restricts the use of 'natural' pesticides (except where the viability of the enterprise is threatened) that are still unable to discriminate between 'pests' and beneficial insects. Instead it uses a combination of green manure (sown as a ley crop where there is space and as a companion crop between vegetables) and long crop rotations to optimise fertility and reducing the damage caused by pests and disease to a manageable level. What Tolly has done is to remove conjecture from the equation. Over the last 20 years his methods have been tried, tested and honed to dispel the myth that animal manures are essential to maintain soil fertility. This closed-system that also buys and sells locally to reduce environmental impact is fast becoming a benchmark for organic farms across the country and around the world.

Tolly's decision to explore the stock-free method wasn't so much borne out of compassionate grounds but more from the difficulty some organic farmers have in sourcing enough organic manure to fertilise the land. The stock free approach means that farms can become almost completely self-sufficient in terms of fertiliser. By adding 'beetle-belts', overgrown strips of land between crops to provide food and habitat for insects, a natural balance evolves where predatory insects feed on slugs, aphids and other 'pests'. There are, of course, huge differences in terms of scale comparing a farm to an allotment or garden where damage caused by pests or disease is felt more acutely but Tolly's methods are proof that by working with nature, not against it, sustainable farming can leave both us and the environment in a win-win situation. In larger gardens and allotments green manures can be used successfully and in small gardens kitchen-waste and home made compost can offset the difficulties of finding a reliable source of organic matter.

The difficulty obviously lies in adopting organic methods in a large enough area to make a difference and relies on neighbouring gardens to avoid using pesticides and herbicides. Tolly reckons on seven years of organic gardening to achieve a decent balance. It might be safe to assume therefore that it might well take much longer in an urban environment. A sobering thought perhaps but with a noticeable reduction in the amount of insects in gardens these days there has to be a start. For example, encouraging architects to design green roofs for new developments to offset the amount of greenspace lost to concrete and tarmac. Government grants for homeowners would also help this fairly simple but effective compensation for urban sprawl become more popular. Those with larger urban gardens that back on to other gardens or green spaces should be encouraged to let the far end of their gardens go wild in order to form thickets of undisturbed vegetation. This would provide cities with more trees to help offset carbon emissions and green corridors or urban arteries to provide relatively safe havens and thoroughfares for wildlife to breathe new life into our threatened biodiversity.

It might be a wake-up call for those whose notion of a good garden is neatly mown lawns and tidy borders but gardeners are uniquely placed to actually do something about our immediate surroundings and make it clear to the government that any suggestion of treating gardens over 30m long as brownfield sites ripe for housing development is nothing short of irresponsible. Once again, our hopes for a sustainable future means addressing local issues and a more pragmatic approach to the way we use our gardens.

