

How socially distanced gardening brought a community together

Like many people, when we went into lockdown Norwich-based conservation writer Kate Stephenson needed a way to keep her young children entertained. She had the idea of working on their garden to nurture their love of nature - and with the help of their local community in Eaton who have donated plants and cuttings it is flourishing. She tells **Emma Lee** more.

Where did the idea for your gardening project and involving the community come from?

I anticipated that spending weeks, possibly months, in lockdown with two young children would be hard (my daughter is two-and-a-half, and my son turned one during lockdown in April). My daughter had just started nursery in March and was enjoying new independence and a break from her younger sibling, so I knew it would be hard for her to return to being at home with him all day, especially when he requires a bit more attention, being younger. I wanted her to have something of her own, that would create some space for her to learn and spend time with us separately.

A garden seemed a great idea, as we hadn't had a chance to sort the flowerbeds or rockery since moving in - there were a lot of spiky bushes and overgrown weeds - and I have a great love for learning through nature and the outdoors. We figured she would not only learn about flowers, seeds, and growing things - including growing food through a veg patch - but also about the birds that visit the garden, and how to help bees and butterflies. It seemed ideal, but as the shops and garden centres were closed at that time, and we only went grocery shopping for essentials we didn't know how we could achieve such a project.

We had a handful of plant pots in a cupboard from earlier house plants, and I wondered whether it might be something the neighbours would like to help out with. We'd established a regular routine of having picnics in the front garden at that point, and my daughter was often waving and saying "hello" to passersby, and a few people began joking about our front lawn picnics, so a bit of a rapport had already started. We didn't know anyone's names, or whereabouts they lived, but a few people had told us about missing their families, and young relatives or grandchildren - so I think our little chats were beginning to mean something to people.



The Eaton community has donated plants to Kate and her family during lockdown

Did you know many of your neighbours before you put your sign up and left the pots out for people to collect and return (in a socially distanced way) with their cuttings?

We moved to Norwich from London a year ago, just two-and-a-half weeks before my son was born, and living in a new place with a new baby and toddler in-tow made it hard to get out and meet people. We'd got to know the people we live across the road from after introducing them to the new baby when we moved in, but no one else in the area. I don't think we'd actually spoken to any other neighbours until lockdown.

What sort of plants did they come back with? And how are they doing in your garden?

We've had all sorts; strawberries,

sunflowers, courgettes, radishes, a tomato plant, geraniums, French marigolds, yellow daisies, lavender, thyme, a lily of the valley shrub and a buddleia bush to name a few. And lots of seed packets. People have been so generous - we've even had children's gardening tools, books, a bird guide, gardener magazines and a garden fork donated to us. We started this project with zero tools or equipment!

It's looking wonderful now. The veg patch is full - we've started putting the radishes in our salads, and some of the flowers are coming out now too - the French marigolds, lavender and busy lizzies. All of the seedlings have been moved from pots and into the soil now, so we're hoping to see some flowering over July and August.



Kate Stephenson has been teaching her children about nature during lockdown by

How have your children responded to the garden project? Lockdown has its challenges for everyone - has it helped you and your family, and if so in what ways?

It's helped our family with feeling less alone, and a bit more in touch with those immediately around us. I'm originally from Thetford, but had spent the last 10 years living in the London area - we moved back to Norfolk for the birth of our second child, as we wanted to be closer to family and a support network. Although I enjoyed being a very close knit unit with my husband and daughter during her first 18 months, we missed having the chance to share her milestones with my family. It was a bit of a shock at first to find ourselves back in the situation of being unable to see relatives again, and I

felt sad when we had to cancel the first birthday party we had planned for my son, and the family gathering planned for my 30th birthday recently, too. We also missed my grandmother's 90th birthday, which is two days after my son's.

Realising that we don't have to feel isolated, and we now have lots of people around us has been invaluable, especially with both my husband and I being self-employed and losing our main incomes the last few months. It's helped to take our minds off of everything that's going on, and focus on how other people are doing too.

The garden has helped us to invest our time and energy in something interesting and rewarding, and has helped keep our children entertained. It's also



Above, Kate's garden is flourishing thanks to the sunny weather. Left, plants getting established in Kate's garden

creating a garden with the help of their local community Pictures: KATE STEPHENSON



Plants take root in Kate's new garden during lockdown

given us motivation to get outside every day, and pay attention to what's happening in nature. Seeing different phases of plants, different species of wildlife visiting the garden and how their activity changes throughout spring and into summer, has kept life from feeling stagnant.

What plans do you have for your garden and the project in the coming weeks and months?

We can't wait to see how things grow and change, and what colours and flowers we might see. We've built our own butterfly feeding table, and hope to attract some more insects to it – and we've made a 'hedgehog highway' space too – so hopefully we'll get some more visitors! Since the shops have reopened, we've

bought some fairies and hidden them around the garden, for passersby to enjoy looking at! I'm hoping to make it into a fun 'fairy hunt' with a check list of what to look for and I'm hoping to raise some money for the Bumblebee Conservation Trust and RSPB with this. This time next year, I plan to take cuttings of my own and hand them out to all the neighbours who've made life so much better during this time, so that they can take something different back to their own gardens, too.

How do you think this time has changed people's relationship with nature and what are your hopes for what this will mean for the future?

I think everyone has been forced to slow down during this time,

and as the space we inhabit has been restricted, there's been more chance to notice and value the presence of nature within our own lives – and see how it can benefit our mental health and physical health. From fresh air, to countryside walks, growing vegetables to feeding the birds, I've seen more people than ever consider what's happening around them. As humans have had to slow down and step away, but wildlife has continued as it's usual pace; at a local level, it has been flourishing.

Kate Stephenson is a freelance conservation writer and a trustee of the Born Free Foundation. Read more on her blog, kateonconservation.com