

# Subsistence Gardening *in the* Modern World

For many people, subsistence gardening conjures up the idea of something old fashioned, and they wonder if it involves making an attempt to turn back the clock and return to a way of life without technology, or any of the modern comforts. This is probably to misunderstand the nature of subsistence gardening, and the contribution that it can make to finding solutions to the various problems with which we are faced in the modern world.

In the past, people from radically different cultures, in different parts of the world, and in different epochs, have all practiced subsistence gardening, demonstrating the flexibility of the model. In theory, therefore, it should also be compatible with a modern lifestyle, particularly in view of the fact that technology is meant to have given people more leisure time than they had in the past, and therefore should have more time to grow food for themselves, and to look after nature.

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A more interesting question is how much an individual subsistence gardener can do for themselves, and what they cannot. The essential features of subsistence gardening are that one only takes from the land what one needs for oneself, and one does not bring in any extras from outside. It is a system in which you look after the land, and the land looks after you; if the land starts to yield less, you take it as a sign that you are doing something wrong, and make changes in what you grow, and how you grow it. Although you might choose to work with other people in the garden, the important thing is that you yourself do the work that is necessary to produce what you need. No matter how good you become at gardening, however, there will always be things that you cannot provide for yourself. If you are working alone, or with one or two other people, you may be able to grow most of your own food, and fuel for the fire, and you may be able to generate some of your own building materials, but the amount of clothing that you can make for yourself will be limited, you probably will not be able to make all your own tools, and you will probably need some sort of vehicle. You will also be dependent on the legal system of the country in which you live, and will require that your neighbours respect your right to your land, and you will need money to pay the taxes that the government expects you to pay. If you have children, you will find that society at large has just as much influence on them as you have, and your children will expect you to find them a role in that society.

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In broad terms, all that has always been true for subsistence gardeners wherever they have lived in the world. What is different today is that modern society is not made up of people working the land; its norms are designed to suit people living and working in urban environments. Many aspects of modern society are quite antagonistic to subsistence gardening – such as the difficulty that young people have in finding some land for themselves, or the industrial nature of much of the land use. However, just because one does not like the modern world, it does not mean that one can dissociate oneself from it; probably, the reverse is the case, and that it is those people who try to live outside the system who find themselves most targeted by it. As an individual subsistence gardener, the most practical approach may therefore be to care for your garden on the one hand, and to do something useful for society as a whole (for which you are paid), on the other. From the outside, this may look as though you are living a modern lifestyle, as it may involve having a car, a computer, a phone, an internet connection, electricity, etc.; but it also leaves the option open of working together with other independently-minded, subsistence gardeners. And to work out what services you can provide for each other without compromising your individual independence.

The actual challenges that we face today, although similar in some ways to the challenges that people have always faced, are quite different in other ways. For example, in my own garden I have found that the areas that were once ploughed and treated with chemicals behave very differently from areas that were never subject to modern agriculture; my neighbours tell me that the weather is much more unpredictable than when they were young; the lack of biodiversity can give rise to plagues of particular pests; there is now a special problem with plastic waste that did not exist in the past, etc. It is quite likely that when subsistence gardeners start working together some of the solutions that they find to some of these problems will look old fashioned – people working together, and working by hand, people using natural materials, and making their own tools, perhaps – but they will also have to innovate and find solutions to the new problems. Subsistence gardening in the twenty-first century is less about turning back the clock and more about finding a new way forward.

*Gareth Lewis*

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