

How Gardening and Nature changed my life

BHUPINDER SOHANPAL (EDITED BY LYNDA BROWN)



Bhupinder Sohanpal is a long-standing BDA member and rising star in the gardening world. She is currently presenting the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) videos "Get Set, Grow!" as well as studying for her RHS Horticultural Diploma and will be starting a major project in Kitchen Garden magazine in the New Year. Watch out for features from her, too, in Grow Your Own and Gardeners' World magazines. We are delighted to announce she's our new ambassador for London for biodynamic gardening and is available to help with running courses or garden tours.

Bhupinder explains how she won a place at the RHS Community Allotment Programme, and how becoming a gardener lifted not just her spirits but improved her life and wellbeing.

There was an explosion of joy like a seedling emerging from dormancy, having heard from RHS Garden Wisley that my application for their acclaimed RHS Community Allotment Programme for beginners was successful.

In my introductory presentation, I used the *Helianthus* (Sunflower), a metaphor for a period of physical trauma which cracked wide open my life, which laid bare loss, grief and devastation. It was not something I anticipated at an early age, it forced me to reevaluate my beliefs and values, something many of us are now undertaking during the COVID-19 lockdowns. RHS Garden Wisley is playing a pivotal role on my road to recovery.

There was enormous uncertainty during this tumultuous period - an emotion that many people may have and be experiencing during the pandemic. I lacked assurance as to how I was to reconcile and navigate my way through this, especially having had a successful career and being a keen mountaineer - my proud moments of climbing Mt Kenya, Mt Kilimanjaro, and a trail run up Mt. Snowdown and Mt. Helvellyn. For a time, my innate *joie de vivre* fell into a vortex of loss, grief and bewilderment. My saving grace was - and still is - that I have always had great reverence and love for the natural world, greatly enhanced by the fascinating subject of biodynamic gardening which instills in me that we truly are custodians of this beautiful planet.

The RHS Garden Wisley Community Allotment Programme turned out to be one of my greatest life teachers. Every Tuesday I travelled to Wisley, a commute of 2.5 hours each way, regardless of weather and attended my training sessions under the tutelage of RHS Garden Wisley horticulturalists. Gradually, a new rhythm and resilience began to emerge from participating in the project combined with a deep sense of hope and wellbeing.

It seemed inexplicable at the time but the more I read about the subject of gardening the more I understood how our human DNA is inextricably linked to nature.

This is one of the primary reasons why so many of us have found solace in gardening, walking and being in nature during the lockdown periods, it holds restorative qualities for our brains to help recover from life's challenges and stresses.

The new RHS Hilltop the home of this project became my place of stillness where I cultivated my own inner strength and peace, through sowing, weeding, dealing with pests and disease and harvesting my produce, engaging my senses in all elements of weather including rain and snow. It provided a sacred pause amongst the sea of modern life and became an island of oasis that I looked forward to each week.

For the first time I proudly grow sweetcorn and excitedly anticipated harvesting it the following week as they were not quite ready to only to arrive to find they had been decimated and eaten by the badgers. Obviously, I was not the only one salivating at the thought of eating homegrown sweetcorn. One of many fond memories that I hold is seeing an abundant number of bees on Russian Sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*) planted by one of the students. The soothing buzz and their proficiency in collecting pollen hypnotically held my gaze. Nature has fashioned bees as beautifully as flowers and together they are one of nature's finest of arts. Interspersed between vivid splashes of vegetable colours grew *Helianthus* (sunflower) a favourite plant of mine with goldfinches devouring the sunflower seeds in late autumn.

Though the entire programme was a memorable experience, one particular memory that I cherish was observing the metamorphosis cycle of the ladybird. Grabbing a nearby

It seemed inexplicable at the time but the more I read about the subject of gardening the more I understood how our human DNA is inextricably linked to nature.

student I quizzed him as to what all these copious number of bugs were that were stuck to my plants and my netting. He said they were ladybird larva and pupa which delighted me - I had never witnessed this before and each week I monitored their development with glee. For me, the magic of the natural world has the power to generate euphoria and joy.

It was not only my devoted connection to the project and nature that I found beneficial to my wellbeing, but also creating new friendships with the other participants, staff members and conversing with the general

public was uplifting. Enthusiastically, explaining the tasks being undertaken each time they enquired about something, imbedded the new-found knowledge that I was implementing as a beginner to gardening. I received a plethora of compliments and many of the public and RHS Garden Wisley horticulturalists commented how they "could not believe that I was new to gardening" My sense is it's attributable to my dedication and new-found love. It just goes to show that gardening is as much about plants as it is about connections, and I can see now why Britain is known as a "nation of garden lovers".

My message is simple - nothing inspires hope like sowing seeds, the planting process is therapeutic. Horticulture can be a lifeline, especially during these uncertain times and remember, although the COVID-19 pandemic may feel an endless labyrinth, nature's seasons perfectly reminds us that nothing is permanent and that this too shall pass.

A favourite quote of mine is from Mahatma Gandhi

"To forget how to dig the earth and tend the soil is to forget ourselves". Little did I know how it was to change my life.

My verse of gratitude:

*"Earth, I perceive thee
Gently receive me
Feel now my feet
Lovingly we meet
With each step you carry me
Onwards most gently
My home here you give me
Earth, I thank thee."*

Get Set, Grow! Videos can be viewed at <https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/grow-your-own/get-set-grow>

Lynda Brown is the Consultant Gardening Director for the Biodynamic Gardening Club.

Step by Step Introduction to Biodynamic Gardening Courses Feb to July 2022

The courses are back and are being offered at 7 venues across the UK!

Comprising of **6 x 1-day sessions** from **Feb to July 2022** this course is a great way to learn about all the biodynamic principles and practices and enable you to put them into action in your own garden or allotment. The courses take place at Ruskin Mill Trust biodynamic gardens and are run by their experienced biodynamic gardeners. It is difficult to praise these courses enough, or the generosity and support of Ruskin Mill Trust for making them possible, who offer this wonderful learning opportunity for free.

Participants only pay **£30** for **6 x simple and delicious homemade biodynamic /organic lunches**. In return, they are asked to commit to attending all six sessions and fill in feedback forms which are part of their fascinating ongoing research into perceptions and understanding of biodynamic gardening.

Places are limited to 12 per venue so don't delay - book online via the BDA website: <https://www.biodynamic.org.uk/step-by-step-gardening-all-courses-2022-2/>

The venue and dates for 2022 are:

EAST LOTHIAN

Fairhill Rise, Pishwanton Woods, Longyester, Gifford, EH41 4FH

Dates: 13 February, 13 March, 24 April, 22 May, 19 June, 17 July 2022
NB this course takes place on Sundays

CUMBRIA

The Plot, Urswick Road, Ulverston LA12 9LL. & Brantwood, East of Lake Coniston

Dates: 27 Feb, 27 March, 24 April, 29 May, 26 June, 31 July 2022
NB takes place on last Sunday of the month (The Course is based at The Plot and begins there in February with visits to Brantwood in April and May)

NORTH EAST ENGLAND

Clervaux Trust, Jolby Lane, Croft-on-Tees DL2 2TF

Dates: 26 Feb, 19 Mar, 23 Apr, 14 May, 18 Jun, 23 July 2022

WEST WALES

Coleg Plas Dwbl, Mynachlog-ddu, Clynderwen SA66 7SE

Dates: 26 Feb, 19 March, 30 April, 21 May, 11 June & 9 July 2022

NORTH WALES

Trigonos, Plas Baladeulyn Nantlle, Caernarfon Wales, LL54 6BW

Dates: 26 Feb, 19 March, 30 April, 21 May, 11 June & 9 July 2022

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Upper Grange, Lovedays Mead, Stroud GL5 1XB

Dates: 26 Feb, 19 March, 30 April, 21 May, 11 June & 9 July 2022

WORCESTERSHIRE / SOUTH STAFFS

Valehead Farm, Compton Rd, Kinver, DY8 5NJ

Dates: 26 Feb, 19 March, 30 April, 21 May, 11 June & 9 July 2022