

Learn how the garden experts got the bug

Was there a particular plant that got you hooked on gardening and the natural world? Seriously green-fingered folk tell Jean Vernon about their gateway to growing

It is believed that lockdown has created three million new gardeners. Chances are, though, that many were already nurturing a seed sown a long time ago; a cherished childhood memory of glorious gardens, perhaps, a secret den in a field, or treetop treasures discovered on a nature table at school.

We asked a selection of seriously dedicated gardeners to share their memory of the spark that ignited a garden, plant or nature passion.



JENNIE BOND
Royal correspondent

Fond memories of her parents' garden in Letchworth Garden City fired Jennie Bond's love of gardening.

"My father worked in London but every evening he was out there digging his vegetables. My mother was passionate about her flower borders. I do remember Mother always in the greenhouse taking cuttings of her geraniums. I still love geraniums, they are so easy to grow.

"We live in the South West, so my geraniums last a few years without much attention. I'm quite garish in my taste and so I have about a dozen flower pots that I paint in bright blues and greens and I put geraniums in those. I plant them in my borders too; they are so brilliant in a bed of flowers."

Instagram @jenniebondtv



MERLIN LABRON-JOHNSON
Chef

Michelin-starred chef Merlin Labron-Johnson was late to the gardening party, although early life lessons on the family farm in Devon left their mark. Food is his first love, but a new hobby came knocking when lockdown closed his restaurant, Osip, in the Somerset foodie hub of Bruton.

"Growing veg is a very recent thing. I was busy running the restaurant and never quite found time to get involved in any of the growing. It has become almost an obsession and something that I am now as passionate about as cooking. It provides a great kind of escapism and also there's something slightly therapeutic and relaxing about it."

It was while travelling in Peru that the seed was sown: Labron-Johnson was introduced to some plant ingredients that he loves to grow today.

"The ones that fascinated me were amaranth and the red and purple orach; it's the most beautiful bright pink/claret colour. You can treat their leaves almost like spinach, but you can also use the grains and the seeds and cook them like a risotto."

Labron-Johnson, like all gardeners, learned by his mistakes. He watched and read a lot on the internet, listened to local no-dig expert Charles Dowding and read Lucy Chamberlain's book *Step-by-Step Veg Patch*.

"Gardening is like cooking in the sense that it is relatively unforgiving. You are nurturing something and then if it does go wrong, it's devastating because you've put so much care and effort into it. But you tend not to make the same mistakes again."

Instagram @osiprestaurant



JOSHUA STYLES
Botanist

It was watching Monty Don on *Gardeners' World* encouraging people to grow wild flowers that sowed the seed for Styles. "I begged my mum to buy me wild flower seeds and I planted a small patch. I just remember sitting down for hours watching all the beetles, butterflies and bees visiting this tiny patch of wild flowers. I was hooked and dug up everything in the garden and replaced it with wild flowers."

After studying ecology, Styles founded the North West Rare Plants Initiative (nwrpi.weebly.com) to reintroduce plant species on the brink of extinction.

Instagram @josh_styles95



ANN-MARIE POWELL
Garden designer

Ann-Marie Powell first noticed the value of plants when they provided a convenient screen at boarding school.

"There were huge gardens, which were wonderful for meeting boys and drinking cider in the bushes."

But it was when she got a garden of her own and planted cuttings a friend had sent her that the penny dropped.

"Plants want to grow and even if you don't know what you are doing, they just guide you through it quite naturally, it's magic. It's still magic."

"I fell in love with alchemilla mollis and things that become virtual weeds in



your garden but are really good doers. Just because plants are popular doesn't mean they aren't good plants. Alchemilla is fabulous."

During lockdown Powell got back her gardening spirit and became the catalyst for a new project that has grown into a giant.

"I had time to get my hands dirty and I started live-streaming what I was doing in my garden. It kept me motivated and accountable and has grown into a community of virtual friends."

A book in progress – *My Real Garden* – will raise money for Greenfingers Charity, of which she is a patron.

Instagram @myrealgarden



WHERE TO FIND INSPIRATION

Follow garden experts, e.g. Monty Don @TheMontyDon and RHS horticultural adviser Guy Barter @guybarter on Twitter; Charles Dowding (charlesdowding.com)

Watch *Gardeners' World* on BBC Two.

Comb Instagram for gardening-related hashtags (e.g. #allotments, #cutflowers) to research areas that interest you.

Subscribe to the RHS.

Visit open gardens and flower shows and ask advice from the exhibitors and experts.

For fermentation advice, Merlin Sheldrake recommends David Zilber's Instagram channel and Cultures for Health's how-to videos (culturesforhealth.com).

*Jean Vernon's most recent book is **The Secret Lives of Garden Bees** (White Owl Books, £16.99)*

GAP PHOTOS: WIREIMAGE; CLARA MOLDEN; ANDREW CROWLEY



JONATHAN SHEPPARD
Political lobbyist

It was a brave move to the Lincolnshire countryside nine years ago that saw Jonathan Sheppard decide to take on a two-acre plot – with enough space to stretch his amateur green fingers.

He took advantage of the lockdown curb on commuting to indulge his love of gardening and revive childhood memories of one grandpa's sweet peas and another grandpa's bedding plants, which had always been on the back burner. But the very beginning of his horticultural passion was a visit to the Plant Heritage stand in the Floral Marquee at Hampton Court Flower Show in 2017.

“I'd never heard of a National Collection and I was also surprised to discover that there were plants that I liked, that didn't have one.

“I am not a professional gardener, but I thought it was interesting that no one was taking on hollyhocks. I like growing them, and it is a struggle, they do get rust, but if nobody else is doing it, well what's the worst that can happen?”

It hasn't been easy and Sheppard battled to keep some of his stock alive, but in September his motley crew of hollyhocks, all grown from seed, was awarded full National Collection status.

Twitter @TheJSheppard; Plant Heritage (plantheritage.org.uk)



ARTHUR PARKINSON
Influencer

Growing up, Arthur Parkinson was entranced by colour and drama in the garden, a passion he now shares with 40,000 followers on Instagram.

“My mum always planted the tulip ‘Queen of Night’ with a mix of ‘Persian Carpet’ wallflowers. The wallflowers were fabulous shades of orange, scarlet,

red and purple and these colours have stayed with me. Stained-glass windows, jungles, birds of paradise and coral reefs all inspire me.

“Tulips and wallflowers have remained favourite plants, I plant them in pots almost every year.”

A vibrant tapestry of pretty bantams with feathery pantaloons, quirky poses with flowers and chickens, all enriched with colour and flamboyance, has become his Instagram trademark.

“I love the noises, the smells, colours and life that gardens, farmyards and zoos have: it fuels my creativity as a gardener and florist. It is good mental juice against depressive demons and our world of concrete and mirrors. For me the garden is an escape.”

Parkinson's second book *The Flower Yard: Growing Flamboyant Flowers in Containers* (Octopus, £22) is out in March. Instagram @arthurparkinson_



MERLIN SHELDRAKE
Biologist

A Christmas gift of a “ginger beer plant” when he was a boy ignited a passion for fungi that has landed Merlin Sheldrake the distinction of expert status in this particular branch of the plant/animal kingdom.

“I was puzzled about this name,” he remembers. “How could the contents of this brown paper packet be a plant? Did it grow?”

Although often called a plant, what the young Sheldrake had been given was in fact a culture of microbes based on ginger and naturally occurring



yeasts. When fed with sugar the mixture ferments, and it was this process that got him hooked on fungi.

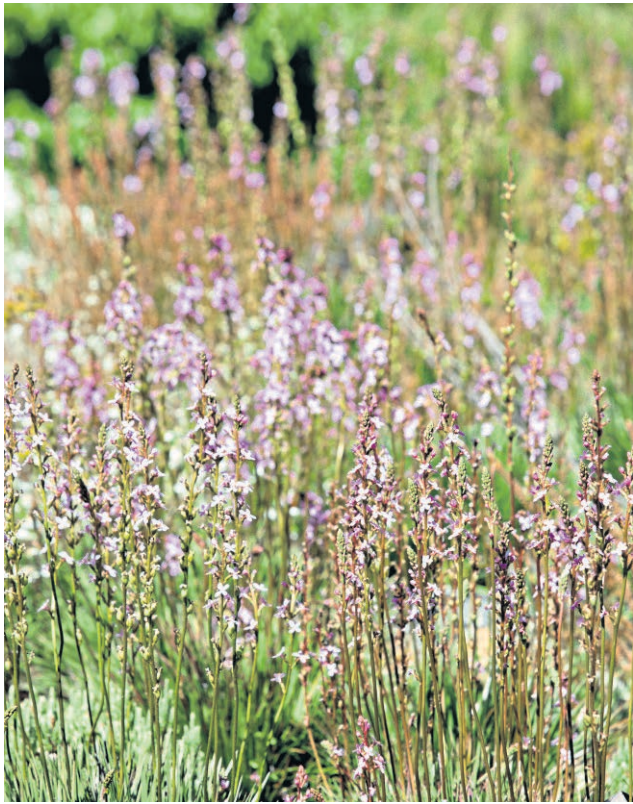
“Under my father's supervision we added the special paste to a mixture of water, sugar and dried ginger, and continued to feed it until it had woken up. We filled a few flip-top glass bottles and a couple of days later we opened one to check on the process.

“To my astonishment, a geyser of ginger beer shot out – covering the walls and ceiling in frothing liquid. The innocent-looking mixture had been transformed by the “plant” into a high-pressure jet that had made a huge mess.

“The genie never returned to its bottle. For years my brother Cosmo and I have been brewers and fermenters: beers, meads, pickles, sauerkrauts... the thrill persists.

“I see it as a sort of gardening, with populations of microbes taking the place of green plants. Fermentation is a way of domesticating decomposition – rehousing rot.”

Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures, by Merlin Sheldrake (Penguin, £20). Instagram @merlin.sheldrake (merlinsheldrake.com)



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JEAN VERNON
Writer

“When I grew up in suburbia we had an allotment. It was my own little world where I could help grow food.

“One summer vacation from university I worked at the Royal Botanic Gar-

dens Kew (kew.org) and in the Alpine House I met a plant that opened my eyes to the intimate friendships some plants make with insects.

“A very unassuming plant, the Australian trigger plant (stylidium) was in bloom. I was totally mesmerised as the curator gently touched the pale pink flower to mimic a bee landing. This activated a tiny pad, first loaded with pollen, that punches the bees up the bottom or between its eyes, delivering a dose of pollen. When the bee then lands on a more mature flower, the flower pad is now sticky with stigmas that collect pollen from the bee, achieving cross pollination.

“It's one of the fascinating plants that inspired my interest in the relationships between plants and pollinators.”

Instagram @addicted2bees