

Concern for the world around us (11-06-19 version, WH)

“Our natural world is under threat from loss of the accelerating decline of Earth’s natural support systems,” my newspaper told me the other day. Our food needs pollinating insects, healthy soil and all sorts of plants and animals other than cows or pigs. As it is, the vegetables and grains we rely on, form only a fraction from all edible plants. Supermarkets stock only a few of them, even though several unusual foods we didn’t know existed are now widely available: you can now buy quinoa, buckwheat groats or flakes and chia seed in the supermarket. All of these can now be grown in this country. But other food plants common in Victorian times are not found on the shelves, as they don’t keep that well. Perhaps we could grow them if we were so inclined, for instance: cardoon, skirret and salsify may be grown from seed (I did so).

Then there are several plants we think of as weeds, which are perfectly edible and tasty: the leaves of dandelion, goosefoot, plantain, chickweed and nettles – best eaten when young. You can add them to stir-fries, soups or some kind of vegetable mix. Did you know that Italians grow dandelions for their salads? (I personally think they’re nicer boiled than in the raw). Eating veg growing in your own back garden doesn’t need to be transported; anything grown at home – or in your own area – doesn’t raise your carbon footprint. Starting with a few herbs, such as chives, parsley and rosemary is quite satisfying; they are easy to grow from seed, or from a cutting – rosemary one of the fastest to take root. It also turns out that leaves of several vegetables, such as cauliflower, radishes and beetroot, which are often thrown away by people not in the know, are good to eat; formerly beetroot was even grown just for its leaves. These can be cooked in the same way as spinach! Another vegetable, favoured by the Japanese, is grown in this country for its attractive leaves and flowers – and nobody eats it here, even though it tastes rather like asparagus! It is called *hosta*. Eat it in early spring, when the young leaves are just unrolling themselves.

I make a plea for doing something to help preserve biodiversity. Perhaps putting up a bird box, simply boring a couple of holes in an old piece of wood, or bundling up a few pieces of bamboo or some other hollow stems: tiny solitary bees may well move in and make it their home. Difficult to see the potential inhabitants though, as they are so tiny. Bumblebees may prefer an old, earthenware flowerpot, turned upside down for their new abode. We have been thinking of different ways of encouraging biodiversity. Wild flower planting is one of the ways to do so. Another is: avoiding the use of chemicals. I suspect that much of the loss of biodiversity is due to the widespread use of insecticides and herbicides. One of the most widely used weed killers is Roundup. People can just buy it over the counter. Yet it is understood to possess carcinogenic properties, and its use is banned in France, Germany, Italy and my native Netherlands. It contains a cocktail of toxic substances that together are more potent than each one on their own. The European Union has decided not to license its main constituent, glyphosate, after 2022. Here in the UK, there has been little research on its impact on the natural world. More has been written about its effects in countries where it has already been banned. It appears to affect aquatic life adversely, so, please don’t regard it as something of no consequence. Apart from fish, frogs and newts are likely to be affected; according to the Soil Association possibly also the life forms inside the soil. The worst is that it may well get into the groundwater. A very simple way to give wild flowers some room is by setting the blades of the lawnmower at a higher gap (about 7cm off the ground) and moving the lawn once a month: soon the boring green is sprinkled with daisies, buttercups, eyebright and other small flowers.

Pesticides that are now known for their pernicious effect on nature are the neonicotinoids; these are all systemic insect killers, which means that not only the plant itself on which it has been sprayed, retains the substance but it also spreads to its roots, its flowers and even its honey. Any creature that sips its honey also retains it in its system. As it is water soluble, it leaks into the soil and is sucked up by other plants than the target ones. It has been discovered that much of the honey which is on the market has been contaminated with the pesticide as well. There are several neonicotinoid insecticides with names as 'imidacloprid, clothianidin or acetamiprid and quite often they are mixed with less damaging treatment substances into, for example, something like a 'whole rose treatment' or so. I personally think that gardeners can get by perfectly well without them. Even if your efforts to grow something edible are frustrated by depredations by hungry slugs, they can be deterred from making your veg plot by water infused with garlic. They don't like it! And mammal pests loath chilli. Since we smeared the bird feeder with a mixture of fat and chilli, the squirrels don't any longer dive into it to gorge themselves on the fat balls and peanuts left for less greedy eaters.

There are ways of getting rid of weeds other than by poisoning them. Apart from eating them (see above), you can get rid of weeds by starving them of light by smothering them with some dark material, cardboard or a tarpaulin for a month or so, or by the application of heat. A friend of mine pours boiling water on the weeds on her terrace. There are also hot foam systems on wheels that can be rolled over an area to be cleared, but they are fairly expensive. In addition there seem to be alternative weed killers, based on pelargonic acid, i.e. on a substance found in the leaves of the houseplant 'pelargonium' (called 'geranium' by many people, although that is really a common garden plant), which does not affect wildlife or people. I was alerted to yet another ecologically way of getting rid of grass when creating a wildflower meadow: "cut the grass short, buy yellow rattle plug plants, plant them fairly close together (maybe 6" apart in a grid pattern). Yellow rattle is semi-parasitic on grasses, so will reduce the grass thus allowing other species to thrive. Sow a load of seed as well at the same time, or buy wildflower plugs, and leave it to sort itself out." You can buy yellow rattle plugs at: <https://www.naturescape.co.uk/product/yellow-rattle-plug/>. Planting these at the same time as sowing the flower seeds does away with the waiting time needed with the tarpaulin method (hint from the leader of the project restoring the garden of Wallis House on Weoley Hill).

In fact, eating and growing organic vegetables is one of the ways in which the World Wildlife Fund suggests we may support the variety of life near to our homes. Clearly, to defeat the threat to the natural world this note began with, we had better take action and do what we can to make sure our children and grandchildren don't inherit a depleted Earth. Also, causing greenery, whether trees or more humble, unpretentious leafy plants to flourish, helps to lower the carbon. The reverse is true too: stabilising the climate, keeps the environment green. The climate crisis and the loss of biodiversity are really two sides of the same coin: the one augments the other.

"Out of all the fog, it shows us that the world's wildlife future now entirely depends on us" ('The butterfly effect', on the comeback of the Duke of Burgundy butterfly.)

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