

**Guy Barter**

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Thanks for the invitation from Nicky [Gavron]. I am really pleased to speak. The RHS has a number of campaigns that are relevant to our discussion this afternoon, one of which is Greening Grey Britain, where we are working with community groups to green the environment. Wildlife in gardens is very important to us in particular, and we are also very keen on the health and wellbeing that is engendered by green spaces and gardening and horticulture in particular. Therefore, all these are relevant and the green belt delivers a lot of these benefits.

In the UK we are about 60% self-sufficient in food. London, despite a considerable amount of farmland, is going to be much less self-sufficient. London has been the biggest market for food arguably for centuries and that is not going to stop any time soon. We have just seen a shortage of courgettes that brought the country to its knees. To my mind the green belt and food consists of two areas. One of them is the peri-urban area, which is the wider green belt, and the other is the urban area, which is particularly relevant to our Greening Grey Britain campaign where the towns in the wider green belt and the areas of cities to join the green belt have a lot of particular opportunities for food production.

There is no technical reason why you cannot grow food in the green belt and, in fact, there is historical precedence. A lot of RHS members write in or ring in about the care of pear trees. They live in places like Isleworth and Twickenham and their houses were built in the 1930s on old orchards, that was a market gardening centre for London. Before that Chiswick was the market gardening area and a long time before that Chelsea was, therefore, there is a long tradition of food production around the city, even though we have brought food across the water for centuries from Holland and Poland and other places like that.

In the last 50 years this has all changed and it has been driven by changes in retail and in logistics. You can move food much more easily now. You can bring it from Spain or from New Zealand, whatever you like really, at a price. Also by changes in agricultural technology. Food production has moved from around a city to areas where there is low-cost production and brought in, transported in. These areas might have better soils, like Lincolnshire, and a better climate, like Spain, or they may just have more light. At one time the Lea Valley was the centre of glasshouse crop production for London. There is still a lot of glasshouses there but production has now largely moved to the south coast where the light levels are much better.

What can be done about this? One way is to increase the value of the food production from the green belt and, obviously, proximity to the city means things can be fresher, can be healthier, you can perhaps persuade people to pay more for that and there is proximity for markets. Where I live in north Surrey there is a market gardener who is in Laleham, which is near Chertsey, and his most profitable crop is salad onions. These are not just any salad onions, they are salad onions that are like leeks they are so big. He will not say how he grows them but he has a magnificent market in the Asian restaurants and supermarkets of London.

Also in recent years, high value outlets have proliferated. There are farmers' markets, there are farm shops, often in rather un-farm-like environments like garden centres and, of course, there are restaurants, a trend in eating out. To add value a lot of food could be produced that is organic that generally costs more. Pick your own establishments appear to be having a revival as people use these as a form of recreation, often driven by communities perhaps that we have not catered to before. However, there are also non-cash benefits and research in the last few years has shown that although agricultural land areas are not particularly good for biodiversity, to put it mildly, in some cases horticultural establishments, because they had much smaller fields and, has to be said, rather more weeds are generally much better for wildlife than broad acre agriculture. Horticultural crops account for about 10% of the value of British agricultural output but only occupy 2% or 3% of the land. That does not include potatoes because potatoes are not considered horticulture.

To my mind - I am biased, obviously - I like a farmscape but I think that peri-urban horticultural and agriculture areas can have good visual amenity, they are quite good for leisure and for health and wellbeing. A point was made earlier that there is not a lot of joined-up thinking between the woodland, the leisure areas, the agricultural areas and horticultural areas and I think that is true. One can support the other, you do not have to have everything of one thing. A woodland surrounded by a farmscape is often more diverse than the two separately.

It has to be said that one of the reasons that food production has moved away from the peri-urban is that costs can be lower further away when there are different environmental conditions. I think there is a scope there for reducing the costs. For example, backyard farming has had a bit of a revival and often combining part-time farming with urban jobs is a good way to carry on. I have spoken mostly about horticulture because life-stock enterprises round towns are always vulnerable to theft and also dog worrying. This used not to be the case. South London was covered in poultry farms that supplied eggs to the city, for example, but these are no longer a significant part. I think horticulture has the greatest amount to offer.

Other areas that are not exactly commercial but at least increase food supplies, perhaps not to a significant amount but also arguably increase awareness, which is also valuable, and that comes into the community gardening and school gardening, which the RHS supports through its campaign for school gardening, for example. Allotments are like other horticulture enterprises. They are particularly good for biodiversity and recent studies have pointed this out. We would also like local authorities to provide allotments. My own borough in Woking uses planning gain to increase the number of allotments that it can provide for the residents.

I think that potentially a peri-urban horticulture can be quite circular as they say, using the outputs like a composted municipal waste to maintain fertility and have a much lower impact on the environment. Finally, of course, the community agricultural policy is going to be renegotiated and is up for argument. It may well be valuable, it seems to me that peri-urban areas could have a similar status as, say, least favoured agricultural areas like Wales and Cornwall that would entitle agricultural enterprises in those areas to have more support for their benefits to the wider environment.

**LONDON**ASSEMBLY  
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Those are my quick thoughts on growing food in the green belt. Thanks for your attention.