



The allure of allotments is growing

ROWAN MANTELL

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Whether you don't know your artichokes from your endives or adore everything about composting, crop rotation and sheds - there's an allotment scheme for you. ROWAN MANTELL unearthed an amazing community of gardeners on allotments in Norwich.

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The sun is shining, the seedlings are thriving, the soil is rich and the conversation is flowing.

And here, on land just off the Avenues, in a patchwork of vegetation and freshly dug beds, dotted with makeshift sheds and figures tending their plants, a pioneering project, a literally groundbreaking scheme, is taking shape.



Plant your own: Vicky Leconte gets to work on the communal area.

It began back in 2001 when Mahesh Pant moved back to Norwich and decided to rent an allotment.

Today he oversees around 15 allotments off the Avenues and the "Grow Our Own" group he founded to share his love of veg-growing has itself put down roots and is bearing fruit.

More than 50 people are part the allotment-sharing group, many of whom had no gardening experience before they joined up. Now they are part of a close-knit community, sharing skills, know-how, seedlings, tools and even a monthly meal based around the food they have grown.

The group have a large wooden headquarters hut, packed with information on how to grow, when to grow, what to grow, crop rotations and even recipes. Alongside, land that is being transformed into a picnic site and there are greenhouses, a compost area, a new composting toilet and the allotments themselves.

"I wanted to slow down my life," said Mahesh. "We have two children and my wife works full time. I was very interested in the whole idea of growing our own veg. I used to go to the supermarket, as we all do, but I was reading a lot about things like all the chlorine in salads."

He grew up on his parents' farm in Nepal, where the family grew almost all their own food, so already had a grounding in growing crops - although in very different surroundings.

Mahesh first came to Norwich to study international development at UEA. He returned after gaining a PhD at Sussex University and lives with his wife and two children, aged 11 and 16, near the allotments.

In Norwich he is still amazed at the richness of the soil, and loves the peacefulness of the Avenue allotments too.

"I love plants and growing things and looking after seedlings, and I really like food and cooking," said Mahesh.

"When I first started I used to go and ask people for tips - usually people from the older generation who were the people who were looking after their allotments really well."

Now he passes what he has learnt on to others. Every Wednesday and Sunday he is up at the allotments to help Grow Our Own members. He tends wave upon wave of different seedlings throughout the year, so that there is almost always something ready to plant out. Everything is organic and instead of everyone buying their own seeds (and throwing most away,) and their own tools (and leaving them unused for most of the time,) all the seeds are used and all the tools are shared. The idea is to help people with little or no experience of gardening grow their own fruit and vegetables. Allotment newcomers can rent a strip of land for as little as £10 a year, and once they become proficient are encouraged to share their skills with newcomers.

It can take as little as an hour's work a week. "Instead of going to the gym for an hour you can go to your allotment and you get a work-out, and home-grown veg!" said Mahesh.

Even in March the land is rich with parsnip and landcress. "Whenever plants are ready to go out I put a note up and there is more than enough to go round," said Mahesh.

On the last Sunday of the month as many as possible of the group work together on joint projects, and on the first Sunday of each month they meet to enjoy a joint meal, based around their own-grown veg.

Plans for the future include continuing to try new plants, as well as growing those which have proved successful in previous years, plus developing the groups' website and setting up areas for disabled gardeners and for children. However, Mahesh admitted his daughter's first foray into allotments had not been an unqualified success. "She and her friend planted carrots and sweetcorn, but it was me who ended up watering them, rather than see them wither and die!" he said.

Just about everyone else involved in the project fizzes with enthusiasm for the fertility of its allotments, its friendliness and the sustainable living ethos.

Ian Rycroft of Norwich joined the group in October. "It's fantastic," he said "I come up two or three times a week and it's such a wonderful place. I live in a terrace house with a very small garden and now I've got beans, shallots, even dahlias!"

Vicky Leconte said: "I live in a flat so this is wonderful for me. I like the fact that it's a community and I like the way it's organic."

Peter Anderson has taken charge of the groups composting, and become an official master



Compost king: Peter Anderson breaks down tough fibres to prepare for composting.



Waterboy: Mahesh Pant, of the Grow Our Own group at work.

composter. "I used to help a friend on one of the other allotments and I saw Mahesh and decided that I liked his ideas," he said. "It's not just about growing vegetables, it's very sociable too." Peter also has charge of a strip of allotment which he is using as a seed bank for traditional, and now rare, vegetables.

Over the past few years Mahesh's first allotment has blossomed into a co-operative with a network of plots across the Bluebell South allotments site, and a network of people sharing gardening tips, recipes and ideas for sustainable living as well as working the land together.

Anyone interested in finding out more visit www.grow-our-own.co.uk