

Three Norfolk gardeners explain their for love for horticulture ahead of National Allotments Week



Elspeth Dutton on her

allotment with some of her produce at the Bluebell Allotments. Picture: Denise Bradley

[Stacia Briggs](#) Tuesday, July 29, 2014

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An allotment isn't just for National Allotments Week (August 4 to 10), it's for life. Slash your grocery bills, your food miles and your stress levels by joining the green-fingered allotment holders on their plots. STACIA BRIGGS speaks to three keen gardeners about why they love their allotments.

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Allotment Facts

- By tradition, the rent for British allotments is due on St Michaelmas' Day, September 29. Allotments have existed in the UK since the 18th century.
- By law, all councils in England and Wales – other than those in inner London – have to provide allotments. Local authorities are under pressure to provide 15 allotments per 1,000 households. There are an estimated 300,000 allotments in the UK.
- Each authority has different rules and regulations which range from having no barbed wire on site to no bonfires, no livestock (though some allotments allow bees), no buildings other than cold frames, no ponds and no overnight sprinklers.
- Celebrities who own allotments include Jamie Oliver, rock chick Anita Pallenberg, actor Charles Dance, newsreader John Humphrys, Alan Titchmarsh and, of course, poor fictional Arthur from EastEnders met his maker among his beets and spuds.

• Allotments are measured in 'rods' – one rod equals 25.29m.

Elsbeth's story

Elsbeth Dutton is a senior bookseller at Waterstones in Norwich and has had an allotment at Bluebell North, off The Avenues, since 2009.

“I shared an allotment with a friend while I was on the waiting list for the one I have now – so I knew what I was getting into,” she said.

“My family are all really into their gardening, particularly my brother – he used to be the only five-year-old who knew not only the names of plants, but their Latin names, too! When I was younger, I used to kill everything I touched, especially houseplants.



Elsbeth Dutton on her

allotment at the Bluebell Allotments picking runner beans. Picture: Denise Bradley

“My parents were trying to encourage both of us into gardening, so we each had a little bit of the garden which was our own. The only thing I grew successfully were weeds and nasturtiums, but it was in my blood – it just needed a bit of time to come out!

“Mum and Dad had a really big vegetable plot and my grandfather was a Conscientious Objector in the war and he worked the land, so my family have always been connected with growing. When I started to be a more successful grower, it meant a lot to me that I was continuing the family tradition.

“Just before I got an allotment, I was growing vegetables in my small back garden in pots. I started because I wanted to grow things I could eat – that’s always been the motivation! It’s amazing how much you can grow in pots – courgettes, runner beans, tomatoes – but I soon outgrew the space. It became a jungle.

“When I got my own allotment, it had been owned by a guy who used to be a fruit farmer so there was an awful lot of established fruit trees, which was absolutely brilliant. It’s a real cook’s allotment, with gooseberries, redcurrants, blackcurrants, cooking apples and eating apples, yellow plums, strawberries, raspberries and blackberries.



Shaun Lowthorpe and daughter Josephine at the start of his allotment adventure – you can just about see the shed behind their right shoulders.

“We can’t eat all the produce that comes from the allotment so I now make a lot of jams, jellies and chutneys and we’ve just bought a second freezer. People in my family are used to getting a pot of jam with their birthday present! I’ve really loved the preserving side of the allotment – so far this year I think I’ve made about 66 jars of jam and I’m nowhere near finishing!

“In terms of vegetables, I have courgettes, pumpkins, runner beans, rainbow chard, carrots, spinach, potatoes, onions, garlic and some pak choi which has failed, but probably gave the slugs something exotic to eat.

“At this time of year, I’d ideally be at the allotment every day, but real life tends to get in the way, so every couple of days is fine. We tend to go in the evenings, pick and then cook with the produce the next morning. It’s quite magical at that time of the day, and even if you come home tired from work and feel like you can’t be bothered to go back out, it quickly makes you feel better.

“All you can hear is birdsong. You see some amazing things, too: I saw a sparrowhawk chasing a blackbird just a few feet away from me, we see the swans flying over and watch when the birds migrate for winter and there’s an enormous fox on the allotments who we sometimes spot.



Marlpit Community Garden

Open day. Local allotment holder Louise Curtis digging up potatoes. Photo: Steve Adams

“The people there are great, too. There are doctors and lawyers, teachers, single mums, pensioners – it has a real community feel to it, a group of people who all love the feeling of growing something, knowing what they are eating and enjoying the feeling of working on the land, which feels as if it’s something we should be doing.

“I absolutely love my allotment, I really do. It’s a challenge, it can be hard work but it’s so exciting to bring home the fruit and vegetables that you’ve grown.”

Shaun’s story

Shaun Lowthorpe is publishing editor (business) at Archant:

“When I first got my allotment - off Sloughbottom Park in Norwich, it was more of a forest - waist-high weeds needed trimming, and it was quite a job to see the shed at the end,” he said.

“Beneath the weeds, the soil was lined with plastic sheeting, there were tent pegs all over the place, glass stones, and more frogs than you could possibly imagine. I found an old bath tub, and a wheel barrow with a flat tyre.

“It needed clearing. It was a project, there was a shed, somewhere at the end... I was pushing 40 and this was something to get stuck into, all of which may have contributed to my new-found enthusiasm.

“Such was my commitment that I took a week off, hired an industrial strimmer - it had a steel blade - and got to work.

“After clearing the ground, I then faced my next battle - couch grass.

“The winter weekends were spent digging, forking, clearing this beast by hand, but knee deep in soil, and oblivious to the rain, I was not to be defeated. It was strangely satisfying. I found some sheeting of my own and marked out my patches to cover over winter - to fend off the couch.

“And then I waited for the spring.

“As the warm weather arrived, my soon-to-be-brother-in law expressed an interest in helping out; my daughter came along, planted some flowers, ran around a bit, got bored; my parents popped down to help with some planting, and such was their enthusiasm went home and created their own vegetable patch in their garden.

“This was the spirit of the allotment in action...

“In the evenings when I could pop down, I spotted a neighbour ending his gardening stint, with a nice glass of white. This was the life, I thought.

“I planted some potatoes.

“Future brother-in-law laid out some squashes and strawberries (he was clearly a better gardener than me, but I didn't say anything), parents put in lettuces, and onions.

“Meanwhile there was time to check out what the neighbours were doing - share some seeds (well they gave me theirs) and learn a bit more.

“Weekends were spent reading up on allotments and or course watching Monty (gardeners will know what I mean). I'm a Monty kind of guy (as opposed to Titchmarsh) – his laid-back approach, blue smock, wistful welcoming to the world of Long Meadow signal the start of the weekend and the journey into the gardener's world, so to speak.

“It was Monty that lured me into the allotment - or it could have been the slow approach of the Big Four-O.

“I'll admit after the initial fervour, a new job and baby have vastly curtailed my visits.

“But sometimes when it all gets a bit much, I close my eyes and step back on to the plot, and dream of when I can return full-time.”

Louise's story

Louise Curtis is community engagement officer (west) for Norwich City Council. Her allotment is a 1.3m x 10 plot on the new Marlpit Community Garden, on Blake's Field, the triangular plot between Hellesdon Road, Marlpit Lane and Hellesdon Road.

“I'd known about the plans for the allotments on what we called 'the horse's field' for some time and I knew straight away that I'd love an allotment. I've lived on the Marlpit for 32 years and the only garden I've ever had in my own home is the pots on my balcony.

“Before I got the allotment, I’d only really ever grown fuchsias and geraniums. As soon as the allotments were available, I signed up. It’s only £30 for a year and that includes plant food, plants and the use of tools. It’s a great start-up scheme for people who’ve never gardened before.

“I was quite daunted when I was shown my allotment for the first time – it was just a bit of the field covered in grass and weeds! Working my way through it was actually really hard work and I don’t think I realised at the beginning that the battle against the weeds would be quite so ongoing!

“Having an allotment is a real commitment. On hot days like the ones we’ve been having, you really need to be there every day to water your plot and you have to be able to give up several hours a week to put in some hard work. Luckily for me, I live six minutes away from my allotment so it’s easy to just pop in.

“It’s a lovely feeling to walk into the field, get to your plot and just enjoy the peace and quiet. It’s also nice to catch up with people while you’re there – I’ve made friends with the lady whose plot is next to mine and we often arrange to meet up on a Sunday morning to do a couple of hours of gardening.

“My Dad used to garden so I’ve always known how lovely it is to have a Sunday lunch using your own veggies but I had no idea of how much work went into putting them on the plate! If I haven’t been able to get down to the plot for a couple of days, it plays on my mind. I think ‘I’ve got to get down there...’ and I often think about what I’m going to grow in the future. You learn lessons, too: I didn’t net my strawberries properly this year and the birds got to them before I did! I was really looking forward to eating them, too!

“It’s so exciting when you see the first signs that your vegetables are ready – I hadn’t even looked at my sugar snap peas but when I looked, the plants were covered! You think to yourself ‘wow!’ – it’s really rewarding and makes you feel proud of yourself.

“I made a risotto the other day from my own peas, broad beans and onions and it was amazing. I think when you eat your own vegetables, somehow they taste better because you know how much effort you put into growing them. I find myself eating things that I never really liked before but because they’re mine, they taste good!

“Having an allotment also means you eat better and you start looking for recipes for the vegetables you bring home. I dug up baby beet the other weekend and instead of just putting one in a salad, now I’m looking for dishes where they’re the main ingredient.

“I’d recommend getting an allotment to anybody who is interested in gardening. I’d always wanted to be able to grow my own fruit and vegetables and now that I can, it’s everything I’d hoped it would be.”