

opinion

GUEST COLUMNIST - CLODAGH MCKENNA

Growing my own veg cut my food shop by a third



Just over four years ago, my husband Harry and I moved into our home, Broadspear, in Hampshire. It is an 80-acre property with beautiful woodlands and trees that date back over 300 years.

I had at last made the big move from bustling London to the very quiet countryside and the task of getting a garden going was overwhelming. I had never grown anything in my life – well, not successfully anyway.

Close to the house lies a walled garden built in the 1700s as a menagerie, but it had been neglected for more than 100 years. Being a chef, I always dreamed of growing my own fruit and vegetables, so we started the garden renovations in the overgrown walled garden. We levelled the entire space and built raised beds to grow a wide variety of vegetables, herbs, salad and soft fruit. My Google searches went from “best martini in London” to “what is an annual plant?”

I must admit that the beginning of my new life was hard. The silence, the waiting for a seed to germinate. But then there was a change – in me that is. I will never forget the first broad beans that I grew successfully. Those mighty stalks with delicious pods filled with juicy green beans. And I grew them, from little tiny seeds! We ate so many that month – pan-fried in butter, in tarts, pureed, a million different ways.

The feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment was addictive. But it wasn't just the eating; it was the fact that I had created my own food from a tiny seed – no supermarket, no food miles, no plastic packaging. In my own little way I felt I was making an impact, and I loved that feeling, it was like nothing else.



TIM ALDEN

What was also becoming addictive was the feeling of the soil in my hands. You can really feel the energy that is in good soil. When I go into the garden now my mind just switches. There is nothing more important than caring for my plants. They depend on me and I depend on them – it's the best meditation I have ever done.

I have become so connected with the ecosystem, I am part of it. My goal in life has changed: I now want a simple, peaceful life. Gardening has given that to me, but it is a partnership – you get out what you put in.

The summer we moved we also acquired two beehives and added another three at the start of last year. Honey bees are some of the most beneficial creatures in our environment. They are natural

pollinators, which means they help our local flora reproduce and flourish – really important to the full circle of sustainability we are aiming for here at Broadspear. The bees now provide us, as well as our family and friends, with honey all year around. We will be harvesting our summer honey next week, and are counting down the days.

We have also planted a 32-tree orchard, a half-acre cutting garden and a wild flower meadow. This year we harvested our first plums, figs and apples for making juice.

Oh, and then there are the hens and ducks... our beautiful girls! We now have 18 laying hens and five ducks, a mix of Burford browns, old Cotswold legbars, olives and Dekalb whites. They bring so much joy and life to Broadspear, as well as the most



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delicious fresh eggs daily. They have such an important role to play in our sustainable cycle: their poo is brilliant for our compost. There is absolutely no waste.

Last April, we bought 10 Aberdeen Angus cows and raise them sustainably, 100 per cent grass-fed. We rotate them in different fields, so that they always have enough grass to graze on and the pastures are managed properly. The way the cows graze captures more carbon than the methane gases they omit, an important point to note when we are thinking of our ecosystem. It's not the cow, it's the how.

The amount of wildlife and wild flowers that have started living in our pastures since the arrival of the cattle is incredible to witness.

We now have a farm, which I take immense pride in. And it gives me so much to see Broadspear transform from a neglected property into this magical place that is a haven for wildlife, plants, trees, livestock and for me and my family.

Growing my own vegetables has reduced my food shop by a third. A pack of seeds costs about £2. Shouldn't we all be doing this? Take back control of how we spend our money, not to mention how much healthier it is for us.

So, yes, my life has changed dramatically over the past four years. My day starts and ends in the garden in the quiet stillness of the early morning and the early evening as the sun goes down. I feel mentally free, at peace. If we look after the soil, the soil will look after us. Buy yourself a pack of seeds, sow them, care for them and watch yourself grow with the plants.

@clodaghmckenna

This week I have been...

Chitting...

my potatoes. This is the time to get your potatoes ready for planting if you want to eat them for Christmas dinner. Most people buy special “seed potatoes” but this year I am using potatoes that I have grown myself. Hopefully it will work! All potatoes will benefit from “chitting” (forcing them to sprout before planting)



to encourage strong shoots, fast growth, and heavier cropping. Chitting is simple: just place the potatoes out in seed trays, shallow boxes or empty egg cartons, so that the roots are facing upwards. Then pop them in a cool, bright, frost-free position to allow them to sprout. I placed mine on the windowsill so they get the best light. Allow the “chits” to grow to an inch in length, and then

plant them out and you'll be thrilled with yourself come Christmas.

Picking...

blackberries. I went for a wild swim in a lake and walking home I came upon the most enormous bush of blackberries. I threw my towel on the ground, and into the brambly togs, now that is commitment... ouch, those thorns! I filled my towel with as much as it would hold and



brought them home to make one of the best desserts I have ever tasted – an apple and blackberry galette. I have posted pics and the recipe on my Instagram.

Presenting...

Every Monday, I leave Broadspear at the crack of dawn to get to Television Centre in west London. I cook live

on *This Morning* and absolutely love being part of the family. Being able to reach millions of people every week and teach them recipes that they can make at home makes me so happy. Last week, I cooked fluffy blueberry pancakes and a gorgeous (and very easy) creamy ricotta and spinach chicken.

Clodagh McKenna is a chef, TV presenter and the author of eight cookbooks, including 'In Minutes' and 'Clodagh's Weeknight Kitchen'