

# Look after gardens and they look after you: Cultivating wellbeing in a pandemic through a popular TV gardening programme

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## Abstract

Over the past few years there has been intense policy interest in the idea that nature-related activities such as gardening are good for wellbeing. Several studies have indeed found links between such activities and self-reported wellbeing. However, there are also sympathetic critiques of the limited conceptions of what kinds of activities are considered beneficial. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the social and cultural roots of the assumption that nature is good for us rather than treating connection to nature as an innate need. This article contributes to this task by showing how commonly held ideas about gardening and wellbeing were reproduced in the long-running and popular UK TV gardening programme *Gardeners' World* (GW) during 2020. As an exemplar of lifestyle programming, GW provides both information and entertainment and appeals to viewers to try out the techniques they observe on screen in their own gardens. Within the programme there is an emphasis on gardens as secluded havens from the outside world and on the attractive characteristics of individual plants. However, in many cases it is the work involved and the challenge that interests gardeners, as much as the qualities of the plants. Gardeners design a space and use it to express their identity. But the results of their actions are not guaranteed. Gardening can therefore be understood through a political ecology lens as a process whereby the social and nature constitute each other.

## Keywords

wellbeing, gardens, nature-based interventions, mental health, television

## Introduction

The Christmas 2021 Amazon holiday advert ‘Kindness, the Greatest Gift’ exemplifies many of the themes of this article.<sup>1</sup> It portrays a young, black woman living in an urban environment. She is apparently experiencing stress due to exams, loneliness and bereavement and the advert relies on

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a trope of urban life associated with loud, dark, busy and treeless city streets. The woman's neighbour (a middle-aged black woman) decides to help by surprising her with a gift of a bird feeder, purchased through Amazon's online app, after listening to a news report warning of rising cases of anxiety among young adults. The choice of a bird feeder reflects the neighbour's own experience of the simple pleasure of feeding starlings in the park. The advert ends with the pair sitting on a bench and sharing a joke together in the same park. This short video contains many ideas and assumptions about why nature is good for us and how its benefits can be unleashed. Certain types of interactions with the environment are promoted and normalised via popular media; such interactions with other living things are allowed to occur in certain types of green places such as public parks and gardens, places that contrast sharply with urban environments. While the capacity to be enchanted by these species seems to be universal – anyone can experience the effects – it seems that people need to learn to be affected by such encounters with the guidance of a more experienced nature lover. Since this is an advert from Amazon, of course, its overriding message is that the positive wellbeing effects of nature can be achieved by the purchase of a commodity, made simple and efficient by the multinational's algorithms and global distribution networks.

This article will address the way in which associations between nature and wellbeing have been reinforced in the public consciousness through the TV gardening series *Gardeners' World* (GW) during the 2020 Covid lockdown. This was a period when discussions of mental health, wellbeing and coping with stressful situations were particularly prominent within this popular TV staple (such themes have continued to appear in the programme subsequently). GW has been broadcast by the BBC in Britain for over 50 years and continues to be highly influential. Therefore, an assessment of the ideas it conveys is valuable, and more generally it is important to be attentive to the ways in which ideas about nature circulate through media such as television. After briefly discussing the renewed public interest in nature and wellbeing in the UK, this article will consider how media such as television reflect, reinforce and potentially challenge dominant understandings of the restorative potential of these activities.

## The turn to 'nature-based' interventions

Interest in nature and mental health among policymakers, not-for-profit enterprises and the public, while already substantial, increased during the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures. Nearly half of respondents (45%) to a survey conducted by the Mental Health Foundation (MHF) in 2021 said that visiting green spaces during the pandemic had helped them to cope (MHF, 2021: 3). A more recent study by UK government advisory group Natural England found that 90% of adults in England said that 'green and natural spaces' are 'good places for mental health and wellbeing' (Natural England, 2022). Gardening is thought of as a particularly beneficial activity for wellbeing, and there is a wealth of research demonstrating this. Chalmin-Pui et al. (2021) found greater levels of subjective wellbeing and lower levels of perceived stress among people who gardened more often during the week. Similarly, a review of studies into the effects of lockdown measures found that gardens were important in providing opportunities to 'experience nature' while remaining at home; such exposure was positively associated with improved wellbeing and negatively associated with depression, stress and anxiety (Labib et al., 2022).

In the UK, policy interest in these topics reflects a wider concern with measuring and improving the nation's 'wellbeing', especially since the 2010 Conservative-led Coalition adopted wellbeing as one of its priorities (Bache and Reardon, 2016). In 2020, the government announced a £5.77 million project to bring green social prescribing to seven sites around the country, providing activities such as walking, food growing and community gardening to improve both mental and physical health (Defra et al., 2020). This was preceded by the ambitious Ecominds project from the UK mental

health charity Mind, which funded 130 organisations offering various forms of ecotherapy between 2009 and 2014 (Farmer, 2014) and by efforts from The Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB to lobby for the introduction of a Nature and Wellbeing Act (Benwell et al., 2019). Research into nature-based interventions therefore has implications in fields as diverse as primary healthcare, public health, urban planning and the work of specialist NGOs delivering programmes to mental health service users. Such interventions can include social and therapeutic horticulture programmes targeted at those with an identified mental health condition such as those offered by the charity Thrive ([thrive.org.uk](http://thrive.org.uk)).

There are various theories as to why time spent in nature seems to be good for us. E. O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis suggests an innate evolutionary reason why people are drawn to particular types of surroundings (Mackerron and Mourato, 2013), and some have described a 'close relationship with nature' as a basic human need (Richardson et al., 2021: 9). For those influenced by attention restoration theory (Bhatti and Church, 2004; Kaplan, 1995), looking at a garden landscape can prevent rumination on things that may be troubling us. Similarly, Milligan et al. (2004) suggest that being in contact with beautiful natural environments makes it possible to reflect on one's problems and that such environments provide a sense of interest and recovery from the mental fatigue associated with everyday life. There are also theories that point to causes as varied as the presence of phytoncides released from plants and increased activity in the parasympathetic nervous system (Walton, 2022a: 94–98). Some of this research suggests that simply spending time in a place such as a garden and observing one's surroundings is enough to experience the benefits. However, the opportunity to manipulate one's environment and the creative process of working in the garden is clearly one aspect of gardening that distinguishes it from activities such as hill walking or visiting a park. Therefore, it is interesting that studies such as Richardson et al.'s (2021) found that interactions and engagements with nature were more strongly associated with wellbeing than more passive experiences of spending time 'in nature'.

The use of nature-based activities to promote wellbeing has also drawn sympathetic critiques. Such approaches arguably push the responsibility for achieving wellbeing onto the individual, who in some cases is also asked to consume more products or services to improve their lives, while at the same time the wider causes of their distress are neglected (Walton, 2022a). Nature-based interventions suggest a model (neoliberal) citizen, one who manages their own health and wellbeing by proactively seeking out solutions and engaging with service providers in appropriate ways. One of the reasons why there is so much policy interest in nature-based solutions is their potential to save money for bodies such as the NHS in Britain. Samantha Walton points out that Mind's Ecominds was promoted to a 'suspicious', austerity-driven government as something that would both reduce costs to the health service associated with treatment for mental illness and lead to service users gaining employment opportunities (NEF Consulting, 2013; Walton, 2022a: 210–211). Although Walton is interested in the potential for labour to forge new connections between people and the land, she is critical of the narrow emphasis on 'work experience' associated with some approaches.

Furthermore, inequality of access to gardens, parks and other green spaces is one of the many social fault lines exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Even in cases where people are technically able to visit spaces such as public parks, the meanings that people attach to green space are social and cultural (Dinnie, Brown and Morris, 2013). Research has shown that not everyone will find these spaces welcoming or relevant to them (Whitten, 2022). This raises the question of whether the proposed solutions to mental distress are reliant on a set of practices (such as gardening, walking the dog and visiting the countryside) that are more typical of affluent Western European consumers. Bell et al. (2019) have cautioned that more attention should be paid to the diversity of people's embodied experiences of nature rather than trying to identify a normative, 'healthy' way of relating to nature. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the social and cultural

roots of the assumption that nature is good for us rather than treating connection to nature as an innate need.

These discussions raise broader questions of what constitutes health, distress and wellbeing. Indeed, some assert that most people will experience mental distress at some point in their lives (e.g. Rose et al., 2022: 122), therefore recognising that grief, loneliness, low mood and anxiety are rational responses to the way society makes us feel, the lack of provision made for our needs and the uncertainty associated with events such as the pandemic. While mental distress can be viewed in medical terms, some scholars have advocated for a shift from a medical model towards greater emphasis on the social and cultural facets of wellbeing and distress (Ferguson, 2023; McGeachan and Philo, 2017: 33). Likewise, the concept of ‘wellbeing’, although notoriously subjective and difficult to quantify, generally implies a more positive and holistic meaning than simply an absence of ill health. Wellbeing can encompass hedonic notions emphasising pleasure or happiness and eudaemonic forms of wellbeing, experienced when someone finds purpose in life or realises their full potential. Both conceptions are critiqued for their tendency to abstract individuals from their social context and for the underlying assumption that understandings of wellbeing are universal across cultural contexts (White and Eyber, 2017). However, as this research addresses the everyday experiences of people who may not have a diagnosed mental health condition as well as some who do, I have generally used the word wellbeing, while recognising its limitations, and only referred to mental health in cases where these words have been used by participants.

As well as discussing traditional spaces of medical intervention such as asylums and other healthcare facilities, geographers interested in mental health have engaged in discussions of ‘therapeutic landscapes’ (McGeachan and Philo, 2017: 40). Places are discussed in terms of their cultural and social meanings that can be generative of healing. Some have emphasised how the attributes of natural places participate in the healing process, for example, Jennifer Lea’s account of the use of the natural environment to promote wellbeing in a yoga retreat (Lea, 2008). This article will contribute to this body of work by discussing how gardens in particular are portrayed as restorative spaces.

## **Gardens at the interface of society and nature**

In the UK, around half of the adult population is estimated to take part in some form of gardening activity, and there are around 24 million domestic gardens (Chalmin-Pui et al., 2021: 1). As distinctive types of places where people practice relating to the living and non-living aspects of the biosphere (Bhatti and Church, 2000; Crouch, 2003) gardens have, hardly surprisingly, proved a fruitful area of research for geographers in the more than 20 years since Bhatti and Church (2000) noted their apparent absence in the social science literature.

In a useful intervention, Michael Classens (2015) points out that discussions of urban gardens tend to be either celebratory or critical of their radical potential.<sup>2</sup> Much of the garden scholarship has been oriented towards addressing the social and political function of gardens in neoliberal society. For example, the editors of a recent collection (Tornaghi and Certomà, 2019) describe the potential for urban gardening to act as a political practice through which people assert their claim to the city, contest neoliberal urban planning and even work towards an ‘ideal future city’. Others are more sceptical, suggesting that alternative food networks help to sustain neoliberalism by filling a void left by the retreating state (see Bach and McClintock 2021; McClintock, 2014). These discussions of gardening and neoliberal capitalism build on existing accounts of the social role of gardens. Bhatti’s and Church’s work (2000) addressed how societal norms around gender were reflected in ideas about different roles in the garden. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2010) has also argued that gardens ‘reflect prevailing social relations of power, culture, race, class and

gender' (p. 499). She reviews studies of such varied topics as how transnational migrants use gardens to express their identity, the role of Mexican migrants in doing gardening labour in cities such as Los Angeles and the funding of an elite garden by Chinese donors in the USA and what this can tell us about China as a rising economic power. Furthermore, the way in which people garden and the aesthetic ideals aimed for are circumscribed by cultural norms that define what kinds of green spaces are considered 'good' and the ways in which people are expected to engage with them (Angelo, 2019; 2021). So we might expect commonly held assumptions about what a garden should look like or be like to have implications for the types of green space and types of activity seen as beneficial as a therapeutic intervention.

In contrast to these more social constructionist takes, Power (2005) has questioned the analogy of a garden as a 'reflection' of the society in which it exists, proposing that it is untenable to treat gardens as 'simple reflections of human cultures and understandings' (p48). Power and others have attempted to make room in accounts of gardens and gardening for discussions of non-human nature (Lawrence, 2022). For example, work influenced by actor-network theory has further drawn attention to the active role that non-human species (plants and others) play in producing gardens (Power, 2005). It has addressed the ways in which organisms are *lived with* in the garden rather than focusing attention on questions of representation or how people feel about their gardens. Hitchings (2003) concludes that understanding gardening by starting with the people leads to the impression that the garden itself is an inert space that can be manipulated at will. However, an alternative view, one that centres the capacities of plants, highlights instead how their attributes – such as the attractive colours of the flowers or shapes of the leaves – enrol gardeners into caring for them.

According to Classens (2015: 234), work that treats garden spaces as reflective of social forces is often critical of the role of urban gardening in actively reproducing neoliberal dynamics (as discussed, this is a critique that could also be levelled at therapeutic horticulture). Conversely, scholarship that emphasises properties and capacities of non-human natures can tend to treat these as inherently good. Such studies are likely to endorse the potential for gardens to act as a leisurely retreat from a 'too-social world' (also, as we shall see, highly relevant to the way in which gardens are discussed in terms of wellbeing). Although there is far from a total bifurcation in scholarship on urban gardens and actor-network theory doesn't simplistically fit into the 'nature-endorsing' camp, these tensions are nevertheless identifiable (Classens, 2015: 234). Classens (2015) locates the source of the problem in 'the highly problematic distinction between nature and society' identified by geographers such as Neil Smith (2008). Charting a course out of this impasse, Classens draws on urban political ecology and theories of hybridity to emphasise the ways in which the social and natural co-constitute one another. Such work might address the influence of neoliberalism while also accounting for the agency of both humans and non-humans; this would avoid overstating the reach of neoliberalism or treating environmental processes as fully subsumed within neoliberal restructuring (see also Bakker, 2010). Paul Robbins' classic study, *Lawn People* (2007), is a key example of such an approach. Robbins demonstrates how people and lawns mutually constitute each other such that people become turf grass subjects.

This points to part of the reason why gardens are interesting places to think about questions of society and nature. They are, by definition, cultivated environments that involve some curation by the gardener, including weeding out undesired plants, pruning and cutting the grass as well as choosing to grow domesticated plants that have themselves been adapted by artificial selection (Diogo et al., 2019: 3). However, this is not to say that gardeners have free reign over how their garden will develop. Instead, there is a negotiation between people designing a garden according to their desires and plants acting in unpredictable or unexpected ways (Hitchings, 2003). As Diogo et al. (2019: 6) put it, gardens can be seen as 'designed landscapes of mediation between nature and culture [that] embody different levels of human control over wilderness, define specific rules for this confrontation and stage different forms of human dominance'. Gardens are, and

arguably always have been, essentially designed to fulfil a purpose for humans, whether to produce food or in the pursuit of recreation. So, a critique of gardening for wellbeing cannot simply be based on a wish that ‘nature’ was valued for its own intrinsic worth. Rather, a starting point for such a critique might be a questioning of what kinds of nature are valued, what kind of relationships with nature are promoted to whom (and in what ways) and what kinds of citizenship are implied by such relations. The following sections of this article contribute to this discussion by addressing how assumptions about the types of relationship to nature that are good for us are reproduced through television and in particular through *Gardeners’ World*.

## Non-humans on screen in *Gardeners’ World*

*Gardeners’ World* (*GW*) has been shown on BBC TV since 1968. It is the world’s oldest gardening programme and one of the longest-running factual programmes of any kind (Search, 2003). The current format of *GW* is a weekly hour-long programme shown on BBC2 between 8 and 9 p.m. on a Friday evening with a series typically running from mid-March until late October, the busiest half of the year for UK gardeners.

Since 2003, *GW* has been fronted primarily by former businessman and journalist Montagu ‘Monty’ Don who presents the show from his own two-acre privately owned garden, Longmeadow in Herefordshire (Don plans to leave the show within the next few years – Saner, 2023). The programme offers practical advice on growing and maintaining various garden plants by the main presenter. For example, Don showed viewers how to grow tomatoes from seed in a series of advice segments across several episodes in spring 2020. Due to the nature of these segments – the need to be appropriate to the season and any unusual weather conditions – they are typically filmed in the week before they are shown.<sup>3</sup> These segments set in the main presenter’s garden are interspersed with features that showcase large gardens that are open to the public as well as numerous interviews with successful amateurs (including celebrities) in their private gardens or allotments. Short, self-filmed features sent in by members of the public in their own gardens also became a prominent element of the content of *GW* in 2020. Initially, this was for pragmatic reasons, a way of acquiring content during lockdown. But these videos continued to be elicited even when restrictions were lifted. *GW* is therefore interesting in that the public ‘speak back’ to the show by sending in their own content, challenging the assumption that television is just a one-way transmission of information, although of course the show’s producers curate this by selecting which videos they broadcast (see also Turnbull et al., 2023).

On occasion, features on *GW* introduce us to impressive collections of house plants. But whether indoors or outdoors, these are often private spaces – typical of how most gardening takes place in the UK. The show is very slow-moving and very formulaic. It always opens with close-up shots of nodding flower heads or bees amongst the flowers with the sound of bird song in the background, followed by Monty’s invariable intro: ‘Hullo...and welcome to *Gardeners’ World*...’.

As a public service broadcaster, funded by licence fees collected from UK households who watch television, the BBC is mandated to act in the public interest. Famously, its charter commits it to ‘inform, educate and entertain’ (BBC, 2016). However, the nature of the entertainment, education and information offered to viewers has changed over the decades. In a study of the ‘8–9 p.m. slot’ on British television, Brunsdon (2003) notes that lifestyle programming – addressing topics such as cookery, fashion and home decoration as well as gardening – has become more prominent since the 1990s, having moved from the daytime schedule to being shown in the evenings. Brunsdon discusses whether the balance in some of the more lightweight lifestyle programming – garden or home makeover shows such as *Groundforce* and *Changing Rooms* – has shifted more towards entertainment than information. Lisa Taylor (2002) similarly attributes the growth of lifestyle programming to a turn towards addressing viewers as consumers

rather than citizens, whereby lifestyle programming urges people to adopt practices into their everyday lives by exercising their agency as consumers. Interestingly, she also describes the quotidian practices associated with lifestyle programming are a way of coping with social change (p. 482).

Although of course *GW* predates the 1990s, it is a garden lifestyle programme shown in that 8–9 p.m. slot and is mentioned by both Brunsdon and Taylor. However, in contrast to some of the more ‘makeover’-oriented programming, *GW* still promotes itself primarily as informative. According to its website, it is ‘packed with good ideas, tips, advice from experts and timely reminders to get the most out of your garden, whatever its size or type’.<sup>4</sup> In the earlier episodes, *GW* used didactic methods of instruction whereby demonstrations of growing techniques were often accompanied by a continuous address by the main presenter that could take up to 20 minutes (Brunsdon, 2003: 10). However, there have been various attempts to modify the format. In 2016, new producer Paolo Pronto introduced a more diverse range of presenters alongside Don and included more features with ‘passionate amateurs’ to emulate the success of amateur baking competition *The Great British Bake-Off* (Foster, 2016). However, this is not to argue that the oldest episodes were unengaging for viewers; rather, both change and continuity have been evident in *GW* through the years. Inspiring viewers with luscious visual imagery of the type of garden they might create has always been part of the show’s remit – for this reason, a gardening programme was considered the ‘ideal subject matter’ for colour television when it began in the late 1960s (Search, 2003: 8).

*GW* is likely to appeal to an audience who are predominantly female, over 35 and in the ABC1 social grades (based on readership demographics of the associated *Gardeners’ World* magazine, Statista, 2021a). These are also the demographics most likely to spend time gardening (Bhatti and Church, 2004). Much has been made of the fact that younger ‘millennial’ adults in their 20s and 30s use streaming services and are much less likely to watch scheduled TV than those over 65. Under 25-year-olds watch the least TV of any age group (Ofcom, 2022). Nevertheless, from personal communication and interview-based research, it does seem that at least some of the intended audience for *GW* still watch as it is broadcast on a Friday evening rather than via a streaming service. The fact that the programme features a seasonally appropriate ‘jobs for the weekend’ advice segment also suggests that the producers anticipate that viewers will be watching in its scheduled time slot. Its former producer Pronto has also mentioned the Friday evening slot, drawing on stereotypes of middle-aged female leisure time: ‘most people who watch it on a Friday crack open a bottle of wine...’ (Foster, 2016).<sup>5</sup>

There is much that could be written about the race, class and gender dimensions of garden ownership as represented by *GW*, including the choice of a white, middle-class man as main presenter (another element of continuity with the show’s history). The first female presenter, Mary Spiller, joined the cast in 1982, and in recent years two black women, Arit Anderson and Advolly Richmond, have been added as regular presenters. *GW* has employed physically disabled presenter Sue Kent since 2021 after she first appeared on the show during lockdown in 2020 (Hallam, 2023). Brunsdon argues that contemporary lifestyle programming with a diverse range of subjects can ‘make a considerable contribution to changing ideas of what it is to be British’ (Brunsdon, 2003: 13). Featuring a range of different garden experts is one way in which lifestyle programming encourages the viewer to feel they can emulate what they observe (Taylor, 2002). It is notable in the context of this article that Don has at various points discussed his own experiences of depression (see Kellaway and Hoby, 2009; Saner, 2023), which was alluded to in *GW* – for example, in Episode 14 of 2020, he describes mental health as a part of life that we all have to deal with. But despite these efforts to diversify the presenters, the opportunity to own a garden the size of Longmeadow would clearly be beyond the reach of most viewers.

## Geographies of television

Television is a medium through which viewers experience and are affected by places (Craine, 2021). Furthermore, geographies of television and other media have challenged the assumption that mediated communication is simply about the transmission of ideas and information from one place to another, instead embracing understandings of mediated communication as an encounter between two or more agents. Both presenters and viewers are thought of as participants who are potentially ‘transformed by other agents’ communications’ (Adams, 2017). In the case of *GW*, viewers are assumed to be interested not just in watching other people’s gardens but in taking up gardening themselves. Ironically, since this is a medium that is largely consumed within the home and during the evening, gardening programmes might influence how people feel about and engage with outdoor spaces during the day. As they try out the techniques they see on screen, we might expect that *GW* viewers gain a more embodied understanding of what they see during the programme as they experience the same sensations – the feel and smell of the young tomato plants that they are growing. Media representations can also potentially challenge audiences to consider their relationship with the real world beyond the bounds of a TV programme (Adams, 2017: 368). To give one mundane example, watching *GW* might encourage more people to stop using peat-based compost, discouraged by Don and the other presenters due to its association with damage to peat bogs (Defra et al., 2021). But this also raises the question of how, in more general terms, viewers might ‘learn to be affected’ (see Lorimer, 2015, Chapter 2) by non-human species and develop certain attitudes towards garden spaces by watching TV garden programmes.

Jamie Lorimer (2010) advocates that cultural geographers explore the potential of moving images in invoking human and non-human relationships, noting the ubiquity of such images in daily life for many of us (p. 251). Lorimer argues that moving images have a haptic and affective as well as a visual dimension and an ability to elicit emotions, including empathy with the people or animals portrayed on screen. Therefore, methodologies should treat moving images as being about more than just representation. The example of *Gardener’s World* is informative in understanding how filming techniques are utilised to create a sense of place on screen and how the capacities of non-human species elicit an emotional response in the viewer. Images of charismatic animals such as bees and butterflies as well as bird songs are used copiously throughout the show and give a sense of calm and secluded environments brimming with life. Simply watching programmes such as *GW* (whether or not one has access to a garden) has been discussed as a form of ‘therapy’ in itself during the pandemic – again the assumption is that the viewer is winding down on a Friday evening (Higgins, 2021). Indeed, one episode played into this mindful television trend by broadcasting a film of a lush and beautiful garden in Worcester lasting approximately 2 min with no voiceover to remind viewers that gardening is all about ‘just enjoying it’ (Monty Don, Episode 27).

This study explored these themes by utilising transcripts of *GW* obtained from Box of Broadcasts<sup>6</sup> for the full 2020 series excluding three ‘winter specials’. The programme was broadcast every Friday evening from 20 March to 30 October inclusive (33 weeks) with the first six episodes running for 29 min and a switch to a 59-min runtime from Episode 7 onwards. I systematically read through the material, dissecting sections of the text into an Excel spreadsheet in order to organise it into different codes that emerged from the text. I paid particular attention to people’s reasons for gardening, their emotional responses to taking part in this activity, the types of place that were viewed as being good for wellbeing and viewers’ thoughts about the non-human species they encountered and cultivated in the garden. This analysis resulted in a large number of basic themes which I then clustered into the three organising themes discussed here: the idea that people garden because it is useful to them, the assumption that gardens are places where we retreat from the social world and enthusiasm or passion for the non-human species that are encountered in the garden (see Attride-Stirling, 2001, on methods and Sexton et al.,



2019, for a similar approach to thematically organising data). Rather than relying solely on written transcripts, I rewatched the most relevant segments of the show to get a sense of the ways in which visual elements were used and how speakers used pauses and emphasis in their speech, the content of the script being only one aspect of the way in which ideas are expressed (Watson, 2023, takes a similar approach to analysing BBC radio broadcasts).

Among the 33 episodes of *GW* studied here, 10 included features specifically focused on mental health, making it a major feature of *GW* considering that this is not marketed as a health programme. However, this study looked beyond the explicit references to mental health and wellbeing found in *GW* to address how the programme portrayed the benefits of gardening more broadly. While people expressing the pleasure they gained from gardening did not always mention wellbeing as such, their accounts did nonetheless provide insights into why people seem to find it so beneficial. *GW* is not the only media source that has discussed the supposed relationship between gardening and wellbeing. However, in this article, I have focused on a single programme not just to keep the amount of data manageable but also due to the prevalence of these themes within *GW* and in interviews with Don and the especial influence the programme has among people with an interest in gardening.<sup>7</sup> *GW* wasn't always 'about' mental health or wellbeing. But it has always been about educating an audience on how to garden, informing that audience of the benefits of these activities, inspiring people to want to take up gardening themselves and providing relaxing Friday evening entertainment as a programme in itself. All of these aims can be turned towards promoting and celebrating gardening *for wellbeing*, making it a suitable medium through which to propagate the idea that gardening is a good activity to practice for one's wellbeing.

## Why gardening?

When lockdown measures were announced in the UK on 23 March 2020, it was the start of a new growing season and *GW* Series 53 had just begun, with Episode 1 broadcast on Friday 20 March and Episode 2 on 27 March – 3 days after Prime Minister Boris Johnson's lockdown announcement. So, the show immediately had to contend with the huge changes imposed on nearly everyone's lives by the pandemic and lockdown. Although Covid-19 could hardly have been mentioned, in the first few episodes, it was obliquely referred to using phrases such as 'extremely difficult times' (Monty Don, Episode 2) or 'very strange and uncertain times' (Adam Frost, Episode 3). But clearly the potential for gardening to help people cope was picked up on very quickly by the show's presenters and producers. As Don explains in Episode 2:

Over the coming weeks and even months, where most of us are going to be spending much more time at home, we'd love to know what you and your family are doing to keep yourself busy in the garden. So, we'll be asking you to send us your gardening videos so that we can share them and hopefully, they will inspire everyone to get out into their garden *for their wellbeing*. (My emphasis)

Indeed, and in keeping with the BBC's role as a public service broadcaster mentioned above, the *GW* team saw broadcasting the show as something of a responsibility to their audience: 'All of us here at the *Gardeners' World* team are doing everything we can to bring you the programme... We are all mucking in to make that happen' (Monty Don, Episode 2).

This effort to keep the show running in lockdown conditions seems to have been appreciated by the audience, with viewing figures reaching 2.9 million (Middleton, 2020).

As mentioned, mental health and wellbeing were featured prominently in the content for the rest of the year and continue to be today. Many of these accounts referred to gardens as possessing some innate qualities – 'healing properties' – that can be utilised by the gardener in order to help with their problems. Viewer Angela's account of how gardens helped with her lifelong depression

and anxiety (in Episode 26 of the 2020 series) exemplifies this. Presenter Monty Don introduces the feature by explaining that gardens look after us as we look after them. Then we cut to Angela's garden. This garden has an outdoor living room quality. Angela is shown seated on a chair on the immaculate lawn with her dog at her feet and next to a gigantic tree fern (*Trachycarpus fortunei*) and a luxuriant tetrapanax (rice paper plant) with leaves that seem to be at least 2 ft across. She describes how attracted she is to the 'gorgeous' qualities of these dramatic species. As she speaks, gentle music plays in the background, and the camera pans across a particular detail of the planting, highlighting bright red and purple fuchsias and giant white lilies. It is an enclosed space; Angela is surrounded by high walls of dense greenery. She explains that she finds the garden peaceful and twice refers to it as a 'safety blanket' – the plants are sheltered from the elements; as Angela explains, they look after each other and perhaps also the humans amongst them. At one point Angela even likens the plants to new-born babies and talks about the pleasure of seeing a seedling develop into a huge plant. For this gardener, there is a 'magic' in the garden that is sometimes hard to put into words. At the end of the segment, we cut back to Monty Don in his own much wilder and more unruly garden. He concludes by pointing out that it is positive that people 'talk openly about the powerful healing qualities of gardens and gardening, particularly to do with mental health'.

As evidenced by *GW*, there are a huge variety of reasons why people take up gardening, some explicitly related to wellbeing, others less so. Plants are a source of a wide variety of produce – including fruit and vegetables, herbs and spices, honey, eggs, materials for making dyes, cut flowers and other home decorations and food for pets. Beyond these material benefits, a garden can provide a hospitable space for adults, children and pets to use for outdoor activities as well as physical health benefits from exercise. Attracting wildlife is also clearly a benefit of owning a garden or allotment and was a theme of many of the home videos sent into *GW* by viewers; garden animals are a source of interest that evidently provides a huge amount of pleasure. The relationship between wellbeing and gardening as an environmental activity – which seeks to make a positive contribution towards addressing issues of climate change and biodiversity loss – is a potential topic for further research. Community Psychologists Heather Okvat and Alex Zautra (2011), for instance, have started to address how community gardening could benefit both human wellbeing and help to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions.

Gardening has been promoted for wellbeing in part due to the opportunities for social interaction on offer. This was certainly expressed in *GW*, for example, where a group of Bristol residents started to work together in the communal garden attached to their block of flats. As one interviewee stated:

It's made me feel a whole lot happier here, really. It's definitely been a challenging, quite stressful time workwise, so it's been nice to come out at the end of the day and do a bit of watering and have a different focus that's not just being inside my four walls. I have the joy of seeing people come together, of community developing. (Hazel Trapnell, Episode 19)

However, the benefits of gardening are evidently not reducible to the opportunities to interact with other people – they can also be experienced by individuals in their own private space. Episode 8 featured singer-songwriter Will Young, interviewed in his parents' garden about how gardening helped him cope with his anxiety disorder and enabled him to focus on writing lyrics.

In *GW*, it is often the activity of gardening itself that is portrayed as appealing, aside from any material benefits from growing produce or uses of the outside space such as getting to socialise with other people. The activity was rarely, if ever, described as a chore: 'I can be out here 12 hours a day, but it never bothers me. I just enjoy every minute of it' (Margaret in Episode 19). Even mundane and repetitive tasks such as pricking out seedlings were presented on *GW* as therapeutic in that they

provide an opportunity for mindful restoration of attention. Hester Parr (2007) similarly demonstrates how social and therapeutic gardening projects have sometimes successfully emphasised active work in the garden as opposed to passive enjoyment. Furthermore, few of the gardeners in *GW* seemed to have much time merely to sit and relax in their gardens, with many spending a significant portion of their free time doing some kind of work there. Some participants on the programme even expressed that it is difficult to relax in the garden as there is always something that you notice that needs to be done. Instead, they got pleasure – perhaps one more associated with eudaemonic rather than hedonic wellbeing – from growing their desired plants. This aligns with the attention restoration approaches outlined above (Bhatti and Church, 2004; Kaplan, 1995) although it should be noted that Bhatti and Church's (2004) survey-based research also identified a significant minority of 'reluctant gardeners' including those who hate the work involved.

## A place of retreat?

Angela's garden described above is a particular kind of cultivated, domestic space. Just as geographical studies of mental health have referred to the importance of the sense of place constructed in the private garden (Milligan et al., 2004), several of the contributions to *GW* raised issues of the type of place gardens are supposed to be. Gardens can be seen as a place of retreat from the rest of the world. And this view was certainly expressed in many of the features of *GW*, for example, where gardens were described as a 'haven', a 'little safe space in this world of madness' (viewer video, Episode 8) or somewhere to be 'immersed in' (Episode 19). In Episode 12, Anne Bailey explains how her garden is only a mile and a half from the centre of Wolverhampton and yet spending time there feels like being in 'another world'. In many of these accounts, tamed nature as opposed to wild and unpredictable landscapes are seen as more conducive to healing (see also Walton, 2022b: 102). Gardens supposedly provide a welcome contrast with the home or work environment – especially during lockdown and when working from home. Privacy, relaxation and 'getting away from it all' are likewise some of the most central associations with gardens as a place in Bhatti's and Church's (2004) research.

This creates the sense of a binary distinction between the world of work and the space of relaxation in the garden, one that builds not only on an existing supposed separation between the social and natural that has long been critiqued by geographers but also on the association between mental ill health and modern, urban lives (Parr, 2007: 540). This understanding of the garden as separate from the social world can obscure the very social forces that shape people's attitudes to gardens and gardening. As Bhatti and Church put it: 'The garden may have the potential to be a site for human creativity and sensual connections to nature but it is also imbued with the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions of late modern living' (2004: 49).

However, despite some of these assumptions about gardens as places we go to escape from a too-social world, the programme also hints at alternative understandings. Gardens can evidently act as sites where people express their personality, identity, aesthetic taste or cultural values and where people make sense of the world by acting within it (Crouch, 2003). Class, gender and racial identities are not left behind when someone enters the garden. This was evidenced in *GW* in the case of people from diaspora backgrounds such as Bala Kompalli, the horticulturist in the orchid unit at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew who spoke to *GW* (Episode 30) about her seed-collecting Indian grandfather or Wayne Amiel, whose inspiration is his Caribbean childhood (Episode 24). But the relationship between gardens, memory and identity was not only evident in discussions of race, migration and heritage. For example, gardener Annie in Episode 19 was told that she wore too much black until at some point she started to embrace wearing colours, which was also reflected in her use of colour in the garden. Another white British woman, Julia, in Episode 28 was reminded of her mother when watering her potted plants as well as commenting that gardening is 'good for the mind'.

The idea that people want to create a garden as a ‘display of status’ (Hitchings, 2003: 102) or to be seen by others as a responsible citizen has been discussed by geographers in relation to the desire for a well-maintained front lawn, especially in the US context (e.g. Robbins, 2007). This type of gardening was actively resisted in *GW* in favour of a focus on the pleasure of the gardener rather than what others might think. Gardens featured in the programme were frequently described as stunning or beautiful, which of course suggests that there are others that are not so beautiful. But the possibility that the person designing the garden could have poor taste was not entertained and presenters repeatedly asserted that there is no right way or wrong way to go about designing a garden if you enjoy the process. Gardening ‘should be a creative act that reflects your own personality’ (Monty Don, Episode 14). We might of course be sceptical that gardeners are really unconcerned with how their garden looks to other people. Despite the best intentions of the *GW* presenters, it is difficult to imagine that they are not influenced by cultural norms and values that circumscribe what a garden ought to be like, including what kind of garden is good for wellbeing.

Furthermore, maintaining a private garden provides a significant design challenge. While some of the principles of interior design can be applied to outdoor spaces, gardens are not simple reflections of the taste of the gardener. Gardeners need to consider the nature of growing plants – the element of surprise and anticipation offered by the need to think about what plants will do in several months or years’ time: the degree of luck involved and the opportunities for experimentation. As Hitchings (2003) observes, gardening can be thought of as a dynamic relationship between plants and people. This is expressed in the conversation about garden design between *GW* presenter Toby Buckland and Ken Roscoe, who usually works on interiors:

Ken: “The hard part, for me, in the garden, was understanding each of the plants and how this is not a static space. In building a house or an interior, it’s done. Day one, it’s static. Toby: “Did you expect it to be?”

Ken: “I did, if I’m truly honest. But I’ve enjoyed the challenge of how it’s evolved and how it builds and builds”.

This challenge can lead to a sense of pride and achievement which can be positive for people’s wellbeing when they see the results of their activities or when they find pleasure in planning and considering what their garden might look like in the future. This suggests that, although there is good evidence for the mental health benefits of simply being in green spaces (Mackerron and Mourato, 2013), there is something more to gardening than this. The ability to manipulate one’s environment and use gardens as a form of self-expression is also significant. In his work on allotment gardening, David Crouch further argues that the practice of experimenting and reworking nature itself can challenge or sustain ideas and preconceptions of nature including the idea that nature is something ‘out there’ to visit or observe (2003: 28).

The way in which gardening focuses the mind on a possible future and the sense of achievement associated with creating a garden are among the key elements of why it is beneficial. One feature in particular strongly emphasised this aspect of hope for the future, Episode 30, where broadcaster Kate Garraway was interviewed. When Garraway’s partner was hospitalised with Covid-19 in early 2020, the family started growing plants for him to enjoy when he was back. As she explains herself, in this way, gardening keeps hope alive; the act of planting meant planning for what the future garden would look like, which seems to prevent people from dwelling solely on the present. However, gardening does not offer a guaranteed future but a more open-ended range of possibilities. It is a task that is never finished. Indeed, this seems to be part of why it is an interesting activity that captures the imagination.

## Plant passions

Finally, another notable reason why people enjoy gardening as expressed on *GW* is a sense that there is something ‘magical’ about the natural world that we notice when we observe it and especially if we play some role in aiding the growing of plants. Words relating to magic were found frequently throughout the transcripts analysed. The fact that a tiny seed can germinate and develop into a thriving plant seems to be a source of amazement. This is expressed in *GW* Episode 29 by Fish from the rock band Marillion in a discussion of why his garden has been a great place for healing:

It’s trial and error, and sometimes you have disappointments, sometimes, you know, you have to stand back in amazement... It looks great and it tastes great, and they’re my friends. You’re in a state of perpetual wonderment, and it makes you a little bit humble as well, in the face of things... It still amazes me that, you know, a seed in the earth, and then it starts to just...and then you eat it.

This sense of awe and wonder does not seem to abate even among the most experienced gardeners: ‘I always get a little sort of burst of pleasure when I see a plant that is really healthy that I’ve grown from seed’ (Monty Don in Episode 12).

On a related note, the relationships people can have with plant species were evident in one of the most striking and prominent features of *GW*; the passion and enthusiasm displayed by both presenters and members of the (gardening) public for plants and their care. References to being ‘obsessed’ or having an ‘obsession’ were found in 6 episodes out of the 33 surveyed. These obsessions were often for specific types of plants. Episode 33 (aired on 30 October 2020) documented the all-consuming effort by brothers Ian and Stuart Paton to produce a world record-breaking pumpkin: ‘It turns into our whole life. Families don’t see us, we’re in there at five o’clock in the morning. We’re in there all day if we get half a chance’. Geoff Hoyle in Episode 32 discussed the vibrant wall of colour he had created in a garden dominated by 450 species of dahlias. Throughout the programme, presenters were enthused about the qualities of specific plants, whether bright and showy or subtle and elegant. Presenters employed evocative descriptions that used all five senses in referring to the colours and scents of flowers and the anticipated taste of fruits and vegetables as well as the feeling of getting their hands in the soil. Similarly, Milligan et al. (2004: 1786) point to the importance of sensory engagement for the older gardeners they interviewed about the importance of gardening for their wellbeing.

However, attention to the attractive qualities and healing properties of plant cultivars can be double-edged. The same descriptions of plants can prove alluring to viewers looking to emulate the effect they see on *GW*, therefore turning plants into valuable commodities (Statista, 2021b).<sup>8</sup> The programme undoubtedly appeals to the viewer as a consumer. Indeed, while doing this research it was sometimes difficult to avoid the temptation to purchase more plants myself, especially as they are readily available online.

Furthermore, the plant industry has been known to fiercely protect its ability to commoditise plants and therefore make money from their sale. But just as the material properties of plants can prove attractive to humans, ironically their biological attributes can pose barriers to their commoditisation. For example, recent media reports have mentioned ‘proplifting’ – removing leaves of succulents, which can easily be propagated to produce new plants – from the floors of garden centres (Flood, 2022). Some garden centres have prohibited this. Even though the fallen leaves would otherwise end up in the compost bin, allowing them to be taken for free would obviously impinge on the retailer’s ability to sell their products.

This raises a potential critique of the way plants and gardening are portrayed on *GW*. The show and its producers could be accused of unintentionally feeding the assumption that viewers can buy

their way to happiness by purchasing more products from this large and growing industry. In the same way, for Amazon, the solution to distress and isolation is for us all to buy more stuff from Amazon. Indeed, an emphasis on the affective properties of non-human species might align with the neoliberal imperative to commodify aspects of the non-human world (even if we accept that this alignment is contingent rather than necessary – Braun, 2015). Such projects of commodification rely on the ability to alienate individual organisms from their surroundings (Castree, 2003), as tends to happen when programmes like *GW* celebrate the glorious and magical sensations associated with favoured plant species as individual organisms.

## Conclusions

This article has addressed the ways in which the notion that gardening is good for wellbeing is discussed in the television programme *Gardeners' World*. Research into relationships with non-humans as portrayed on television can provide a rich dataset that can inform our understanding of how ideas about nature are reproduced for an audience. This research could be complemented by ethnographic and participatory forms of fieldwork to gain deeper insights into how ideas might be taken up by the gardening public. With viewing figures in the millions, it seems reasonable to argue that *GW* is highly influential and that television shows like this are among the ways in which people learn to relate to non-human species. *GW*'s remit as a BBC programme, and its status as part of a contemporary trend in lifestyle programming imply that it aims to provide both information and inspiration in portraying an ideal of gardening that is meant to be achievable for the viewer.

Numerous psychological studies have evidenced the benefits of gardening for wellbeing. Therefore, as with other critical accounts of green prescribing such as Bell et al. (2019), my intention is not to dismiss the role of these practices or to doubt the sincerity of the presenters or participants on the show. Rather, it is to examine the role of popular media in reproducing certain dominant understandings of what makes nature good for us. Gardening provides an easily legible idiom of what 'connecting with nature' might look like. This is perhaps why in a UK context, it is one of the most popular types of intervention for mental health, consistently turned to by organisations such as the NHS and the charity sector. Yet, it is not the only way of relating to nature, leaving other activities or alternative conceptions of nature potentially marginalised (Bell et al., 2019).

This article has followed Classens (2015) in distinguishing between critical and celebratory accounts of the role of gardens. *GW* tends strongly towards the celebratory and nature-endorsing. This is discussed here with regard to three themes that arise throughout the show. Firstly, gardening serves a purpose for people. Gardens are understood as possessing some innate healing properties that can be mobilised in order to benefit the gardener; we look after gardens, and in turn they look after us. Secondly, many of the gardens on the programme were portrayed and spoken about as enclosed and secluded 'havens' allowing an escape from the social world. Thirdly, the programme's content emphasised sensations associated with non-human species, such as the sight of brightly coloured flowers or the taste of homegrown tomatoes. It appealed to some gardeners' passions for particular species and their attractive properties. It is these charismatic properties that home gardeners seek out as they attempt to emulate the lifestyle portrayed by purchasing the same types of plants.

It is perhaps inevitable that a TV programme like *GW* should emphasise the picturesque and the charismatic in this way. Television is a visual medium that often (figuratively as well as literally) flattens or simplifies depictions of non-human nature. In this case, the slow pace of the programme and the use of close-up shots of plants and attractive animals helped emphasise the visual beauty and hedonic pleasure associated with gardens. However, *GW* also hints at other conceptions.

Gardens can be understood as places where the social and natural constitute each other. Gardening is described by Monty Don as a creative act that ‘reflects’ the gardener’s personality. It involves designing a space according to one’s interests. In many cases, it is the work involved and the challenge that interests gardeners, as much as the attractive qualities of the plants. But it is also a practice whereby gardeners must work with non-human processes that may be unpredictable, so gardens do not simply reflect the gardener’s wishes. This negotiation between the actions of humans and non-humans was at times explicitly recognised in *GW*, for example, by Monty Don in Episode 19: ‘If gardeners are honest with themselves, they spend most of their time trying to control nature, to make plants do exactly what they want, when they want it, how they want it and where they want it. But sometimes nature fights back and wins’.

Finally, interest in nature and its apparent benefits for wellbeing must be viewed in the context of wider discussions of the effects of climate and ecological breakdown on mental health. At the same time as a better relationship with the natural environment is prescribed for mental distress, anxiety over the future of the planet is seen as one of its causes. This is a topic that has not been addressed in detail in this article. Suffice it to say here that it is ironic that the UK government is promoting nature-based interventions while at the same time pursuing policies of fossil fuel industry expansion that will further undermine the possibilities for access to biodiverse environments. Gardening can help us cope but will not ultimately overcome the alienation from nature that is symptomatic of capitalist modernity.

## Highlights

- The assumption that nature is good for wellbeing has been widely reproduced, including in popular culture such as gardening lifestyle television.
- Discussions of mental health and wellbeing were found to be prominent in the TV programme *Gardeners’ World* in 2020.
- Representations of gardens and wellbeing emphasise secluded environments and sensory engagement with individual species.
- Gardening is an interesting activity due to the possibilities for active intervention in the garden as well as passive enjoyment of one’s surroundings.

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## Notes

1. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1z73AKLBgLg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1z73AKLBgLg).
2. Although this work refers specifically to ‘urban’ gardens, the points made are relevant to gardening more generally.

3. This posed a challenge for producers during the pandemic. Several of the earlier episodes of the 2020 series required Don to film his weekly activities himself rather than having access to a camera crew on site (Complete Camera Company, 2021).
4. [www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/b006mw1h/gardeners-world](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/b006mw1h/gardeners-world)
5. *GW* is available to watch on demand on BBC iPlayer after the live broadcast. It also uses social media such as [www.facebook.com/BBCGardenersWorld](https://www.facebook.com/BBCGardenersWorld) and <https://twitter.com/GWandShows> to build interest in the live broadcast and to share the Jobs for the Weekend segment as a video clip.
6. <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand>
7. In separate interview-based research with gardeners on similar themes, several participants mentioned *Gardeners' World* unprompted.
8. In 2020, nearly £5 billion was spent on garden products, and the industry is expected to grow by 2025 (Statista, 2021b).

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