



Gardens and Coronavirus 2020

The importance of gardens and outdoor spaces during lockdown



Report September 2020



“My garden was the only place
that I wasn’t worried about Covid-19.”



About us

The National Garden Scheme gives visitors unique access to over 3,700 exceptional private gardens in England and Wales, and raises impressive amounts of money for nursing and health charities through admissions, teas and cake.

Thanks to the generosity of garden owners, volunteers and visitors we have donated a total of £60 million to nursing and health charities since we were founded in 1927.

Originally established to raise funds for district nurses, we are now the most significant charitable funder of nursing in the UK and our beneficiaries include Macmillan Cancer Support, Marie Curie, Hospice UK and The Queen's Nursing Institute.

The National Garden Scheme doesn't just open beautiful gardens for charity – we are passionate about the physical and mental health benefits of gardens too. We fund projects which promote gardens and gardening as therapy, and in 2017 launched our annual Gardens & Health Week to raise awareness of the topic. We also support charities doing amazing work in gardens and health and grant bursaries to help community gardening projects.

Our funding also supports the training of gardeners and offers respite to horticultural workers who have fallen on difficult times.

Visit our website for more about our Gardens & Health programme: ngs.org.uk/gardens-and-health/

Photo (left and front cover): National Garden Scheme garden owners who participated in the Virtual Garden Visits during lockdown April - June 2020. All photographs are taken from the relevant virtual garden visit films and are copyright of the videographer

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Who we are

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Executive Summary

2020 has been an extraordinary, challenging year. For the National Garden Scheme the news that the country was to go into lockdown at the end of March because of the Coronavirus pandemic was devastating. Overnight our garden gates closed, with absolutely no certainty of when they might open again. As a result we were forced to retain most of the money we were about to give to our nursing beneficiaries and only distribute reduced donations - at a time when they needed the funds more than ever.

In response, the National Garden Scheme's *Virtual Garden Visits* campaign was born. With the help of our wonderful, resourceful and passionate garden owners, we began to release weekly portfolios of virtual garden visits; short films that opened the gates to over 180 gardens large and small across England and Wales between April and the end of June.

We had little idea what impact these films would have but the benefits soon became clear. People loved them! Hosted on our YouTube channel our audience quickly grew with viewers from across the world tuning in to see them each week. By the end of June there had been over 600,000 views. Donations soon followed.

What also became apparent was the desire of our owners to share their gardens with others. Their quotes later in this report give powerful examples of exactly why opening and sharing your garden can be hugely positive for your mental health and wellbeing.

Comments and feedback left by our viewers and donors during the campaign further supported the view that even a virtual visit to a garden could be good for your mental health, especially in lockdown when many no longer had access to outdoor spaces or gardens. We received stories of families viewing the gardens in different parts of the country - indeed the world - and then coming together by phone and facetime to discuss them. People who were housebound, unwell, shielding or isolated looked forward to the weekly film releases - they gave them hope and solace, they found them uplifting.

Anecdotally, we knew that gardens (real and virtual) were playing a significant and important role in people's lives during lockdown but we wanted to know more.

Our online survey '*The importance of our gardens and outdoor spaces during lockdown*' was designed to do just that, to back up our anecdotal evidence with something a little more robust.

With a strong sample of over 2,400 the findings were not wholly surprising - 86% said they spent more time than usual in their gardens and 92% said their gardens were 'extremely' important to them during lockdown - but the level of importance that some placed on their gardens was often unexpected. A few of their stories, where gardens played key roles in the recovery from Covid-19 or provided solace after the loss of a loved one, are deeply affecting.

This short document lays out those findings, the statistics and some of the stories that respondents shared with us. We hope you find it illuminating.

At the National Garden Scheme we have long recognised the importance of gardens to our mental and physical health and wellbeing. In 2016 we commissioned the King's Fund Report '*Gardens and Health*' which has become the seminal work on the subject, and we continue to champion gardens as places of rest, relaxation and recovery. Many of our nursing and health beneficiaries - for example Macmillan, Hospice UK, Maggie's, Marie Curie and Horatio's Garden - include gardens as part of their patient care and we fund community projects that provide hope, routine and training to many.

Our survey clearly confirms that the power of gardens to do good has never been more important.



A Martin McMillan OBE, Chairman



George Plumpton, Chief Executive

Key findings



- **2,419** people responded to the online survey
- **92%** said their gardens and outdoor spaces were 'extremely important' to them during lockdown in terms of health and wellbeing
- **87%** said that a key benefit gained from access to their garden/outdoor space during lockdown was 'It helped to relieve stress'
- **100%** of those with balconies or window boxes (35 respondents) said a key benefit was the reduction in stress – all of these respondents were within an urban or suburban environment
- Of respondents with access only to a public outdoor space (20 respondents) **95%** said that a key benefit was that 'It helped to relieve stress' (as opposed to 87% overall)
- **78%** said that a key benefit gained from access to their garden/outdoor space during lockdown was 'It helped them appreciate nature'
- **69%** said that a key benefit gained from access to their garden/outdoor space during lockdown was 'It kept them fit and contributed positively to their physical fitness'
- **86%** said they used their gardens more during lockdown
- **77%** used their gardens for relaxation
- **81%** spent their time growing and propagating seeds
- **70%** grew their own produce
- Enjoying time to watch and encourage wildlife, connecting with neighbours 'over the garden gate', completing overdue garden projects and enjoying the sanctuary of their outdoor spaces were common themes in the long form responses.



Photo: Chris Jackson

"I realize that people may not be able physically to visit any gardens at the moment, but I am delighted to say that the National Garden Scheme has cleverly adapted itself to offer 'Virtual Garden Visits' instead. Garden owners are making short films about their gardens and every week they are uploaded to the National Garden Scheme's website for members of the public to watch and enjoy.

Of course, this is tapping into the theme that we all know to be so important; that gardens are good for everyone's health and wellbeing. I am especially proud that the National Garden Scheme has undertaken pioneering work in this space, in particular commissioning, in 2016, a report from the King's Fund entitled 'Gardens and Health', as well as supporting charities that build gardens in hospitals and other healthcare settings.

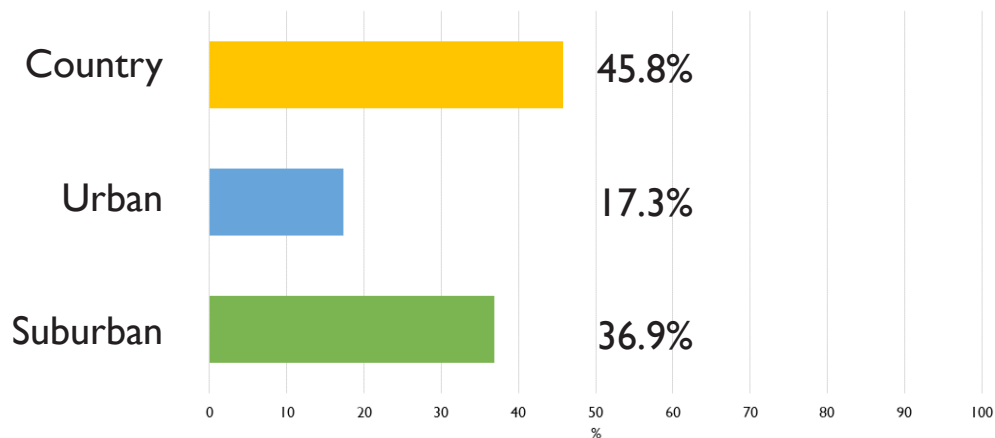
This link between gardens and our health has never been more relevant – especially as we endure the challenges of the confined circumstances in which we currently find ourselves, in many cases beset with anxiety and, I am afraid to say, often with personal tragedy. During these times the beneficial effects of gardens and green spaces have never been more apparent. The reassuring solace, peace and inspiration of a garden, whether it is your own or someone else's, can now be found to a certain extent through digital means, thanks to this terrific scheme."

HRH The Prince of Wales
Patron of the National Garden Scheme

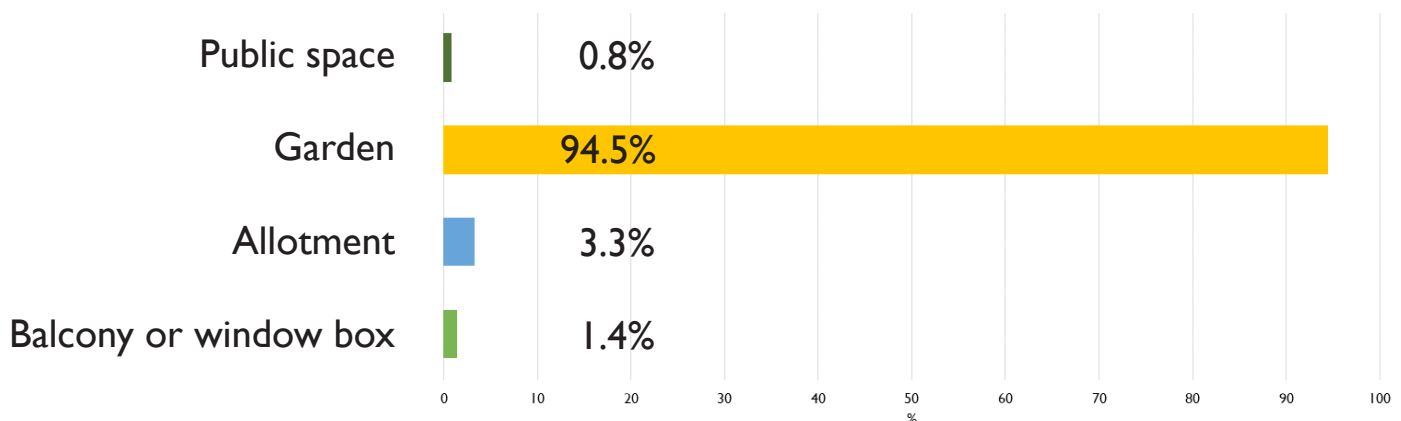
This is an extract from the video message our Patron, HRH The Prince of Wales made in June 2020 to support the Virtual Garden Visits campaign. To view the whole message visit: <http://bit.ly/MessageFromHRHPrinceOfWales>

Survey results data

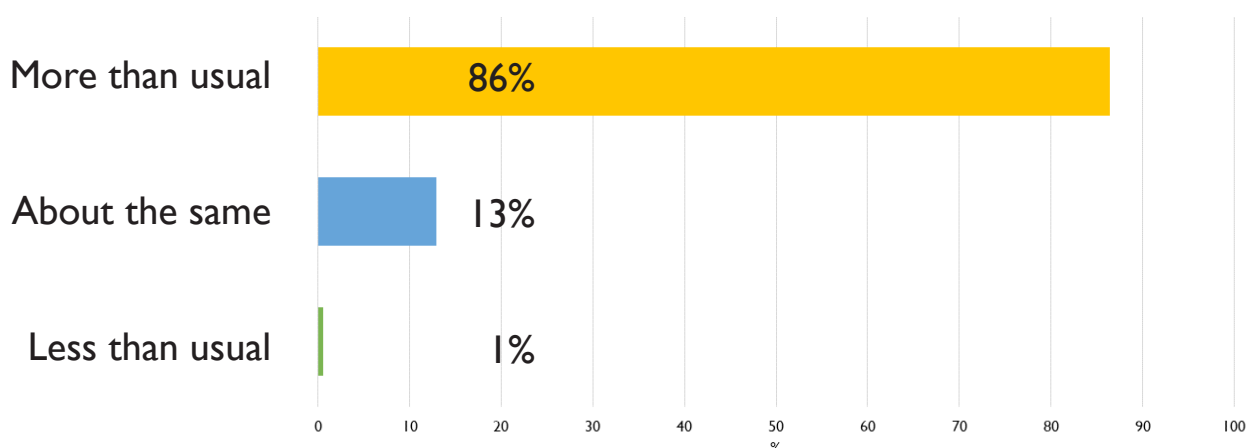
Q1 Where is your garden / outdoor space located?



Q2 What type of garden / outdoor space do you have?

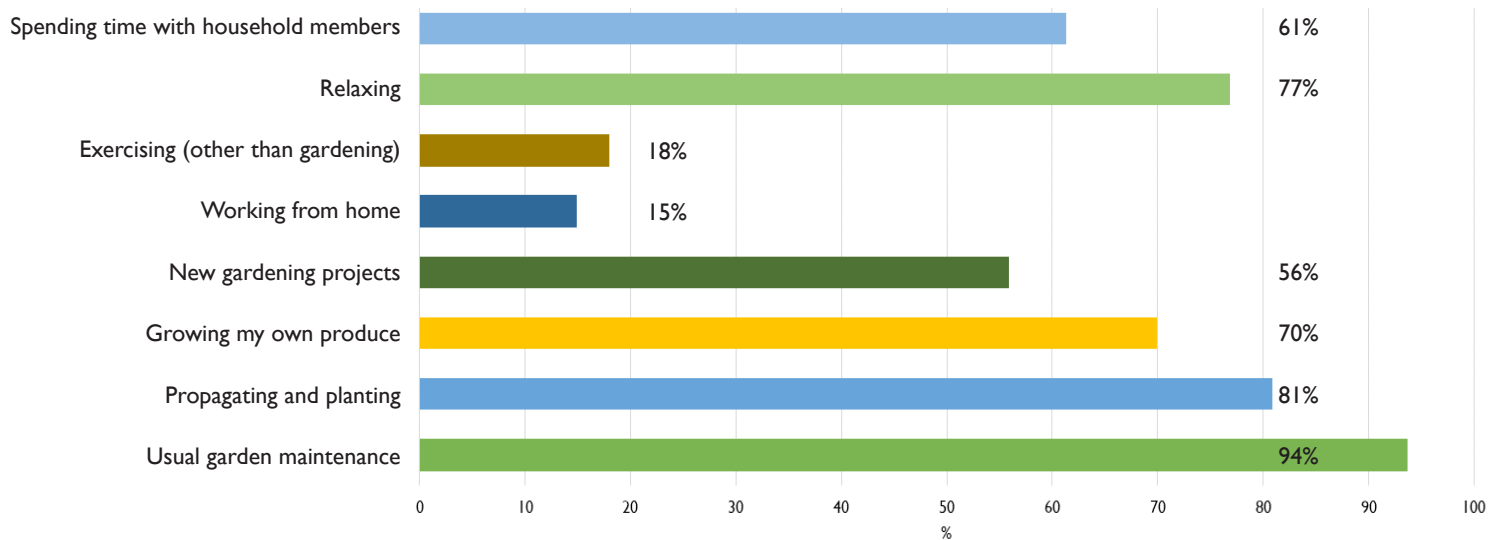


Q3 During lockdown how often were you in your garden / outdoor space?

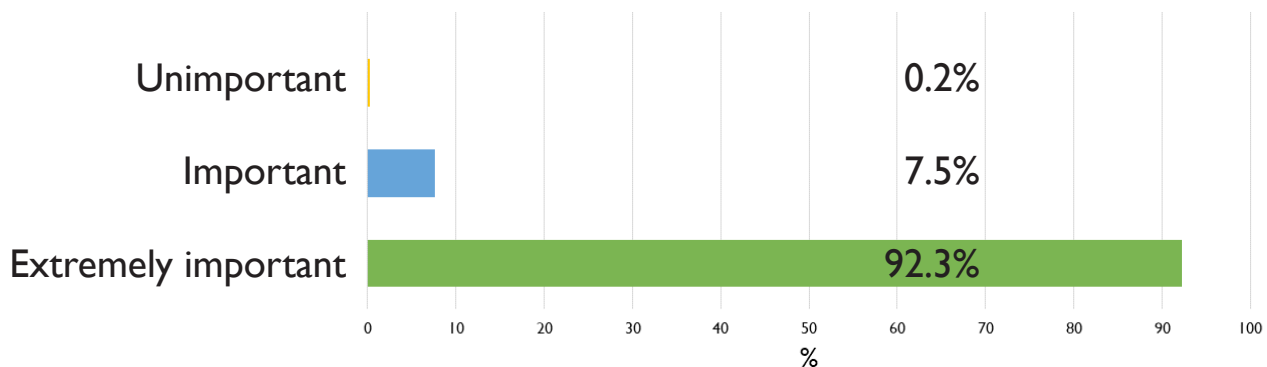




Q4 What did you do in your garden / outdoor space during lockdown (tick as many as apply)



Q5 How important was your garden / outdoor space to you during lockdown in terms of health and wellbeing?

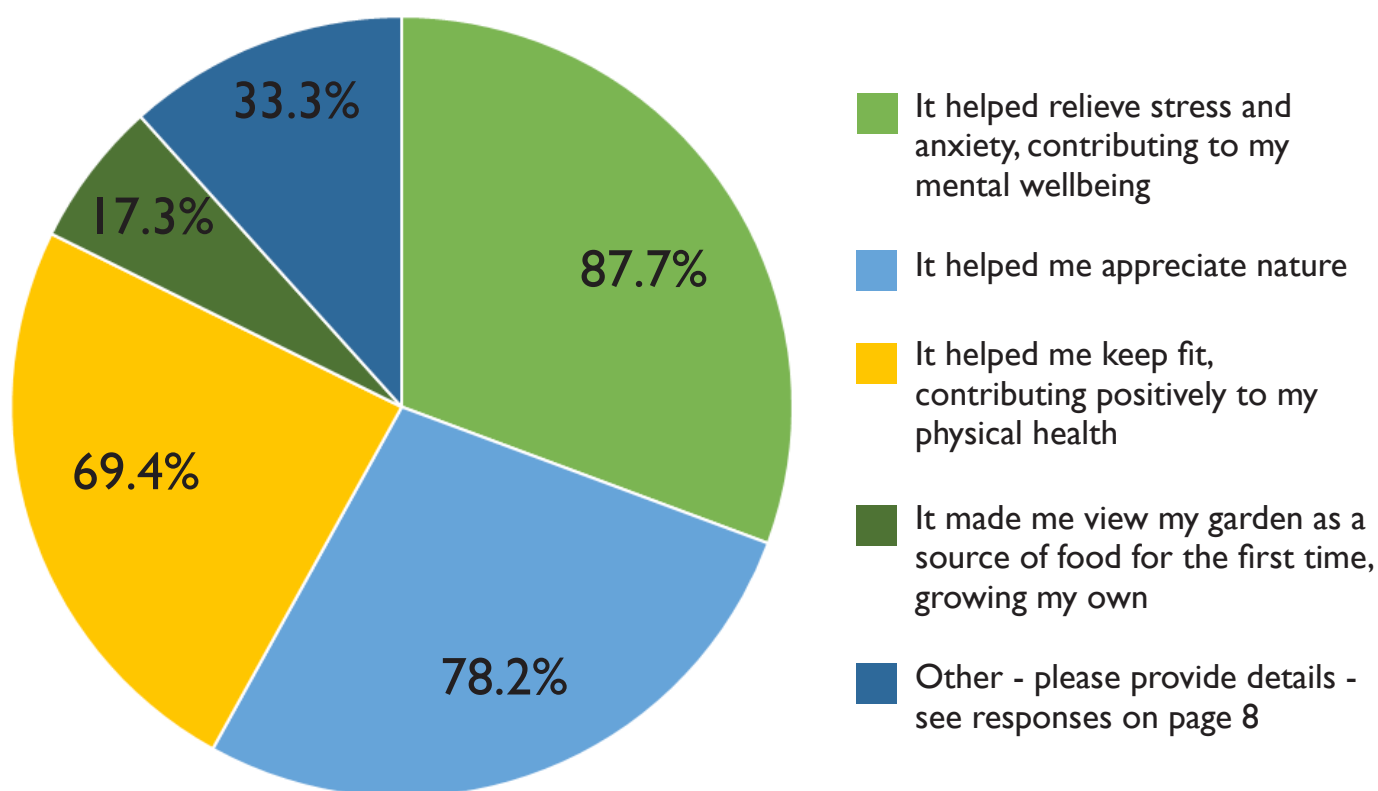


“My community garden saved my mental health during lockdown.
It was my only source of escape and access to nature in the city.”



Survey results data continued.

Q6 What benefits did you gain from access to your garden / outdoor space during lockdown (tick as many as apply)



“The recognition that gardens and communal green spaces are critical to our mental and physical health and wellbeing has been reinforced by the recent lockdown. Just as access to gardens provides hope and routine - allowing us to be creative, to keep fit, to share with like-minded people and to reap positive results - being denied access to green spaces can exacerbate isolation and anxiety.”

Professor Sir Sam Everington, one of the country's leading advocates of social prescribing and pioneer of the Bromley-by-Bow Project

Additional information for Q6

Almost 800 of the 2,419 respondents chose to add additional information about the benefits they gained from access to a garden or outdoor space during lockdown at the end of Q6. What is apparent from these replies is the solace and safety that gardens provided to many in the depth of lockdown and the joy gardens continued to give once lockdown was eased and families were able to gather safely in outside spaces. Here is a sample of those responses:

"My community garden saved my mental health during lockdown. It was my only source of escape and access to nature in the city."

"It is my safe space and I have felt this even more during the pandemic."

"We seemed to chat to many more people over the garden wall as our village lane seemed to become the regular exercise route for local people."

"It gave me space, literally and psychologically."

"We ate outside everyday and shared most of our meals with two robins who ate from our hands, plates and bowls! It was quite wonderful and completely took our minds off Covid-19."

"My garden kept me sane and happy."

"My garden meant that friends and family were able to visit me safely after my wife died of Covid."

"I have a husband with Alzheimer's so my garden became my refuge, a place to escape to."

"It gave me huge satisfaction and a sense of purpose. My efforts were repaid in spades - literally - as the garden had never looked so good after all my hard work. I worked in the garden every single day and as we were shielding it stopped me from feeling isolated."

"It provides exercise, solace and peace."

"Just wonderful to take time and really enjoy it and not having to rush around. Very relaxing and therapeutic."

"I self-isolated in a studio for four months I couldn't have done it without my balcony."

"I was shielding so mostly I stayed in my flat and looked at the garden through the window which helped relieve my sense of claustrophobia at being confined indoors."

"It kept me occupied, doing something I really enjoyed, and it made up for the absence of the usual people who would be in my life. It gave me a routine to replace the one I had lost."

"It gave me a sense of achievement."

"It helped me complete long-planned projects and to learn new skills - sharing the garden "virtually" through Youtube and village newsletters - trying to inspire others to garden."

"I had time to redesign and replant my garden, mainly done by splitting what I had and growing from seed and cuttings."

"Gardening helped to wear myself out and helped me sleep."

"We rediscovered the pleasure of co-operating as a family, working hard together then relaxing among the fruits of our labours and having long interesting conversations."

"Can't imagine being without my garden."

"We used the garden to help with home schooling our daughter."

"I have a yard in a terraced house - as do millions in the UK. I made it into a garden with pots and any container I could find so much so that even a workman repairing my house recognised it as a garden looking at it yesterday. I was chuffed."

Survey results data continued.

Q7 In your own words, please tell us briefly what your garden meant to you during lockdown? (optional)

2,004 of the 2,419 respondents chose to add additional comments at the end of the survey in Q7. A small selection of those comments are recorded here. The most common, recurring themes were how important gardens were for maintaining a sense of sanity and normality - many described their gardens as a sanctuary, a friend or simply 'everything' - the bond with nature and neighbours also came across strongly. There was universal acknowledgement of how lucky respondents felt to have a garden or allotment.

"As a nurse manager I was very busy in pre-Covid, during the peak, and in the recovery. My garden has been a place to unwind. To focus energy on something entirely different from nursing."

"My garden helped me to be distracted from the negative impact Covid-19 has on every one and to think more positively of the future."

"It was a place of peace and tranquility where I could be at one with nature and a place to recharge my batteries when I was nursing my husband who had Coronavirus ... I think my garden saved my sanity."

"As we were both shielding the garden provided some safe outdoor space for us to escape to and to use, we were also able to immerse ourselves in new projects which as well as providing some exercise enabled us to become engrossed and absorbed allowing us to temporarily put Covid-19 and its awful impact to the back of our minds."

"Covid-19 does not come into the equation when out in our garden."

"After work or at the weekend it gave me somewhere I could relax and feel safe away from my fears of Covid."

"As a key worker in mental health working on the telephone from home, the garden was a good place to relax and have a lunch break."

"It was a haven and nice to see that nature didn't get the Coronavirus memo. Seeing it thrive gave hope."

"It became a haven for us, to enable events in the outside environment to be less oppressive and give safety, solace and hope for our future. Nature is a wonderful element to achieve this, it's also a great healer."

"A haven from the chaos of Covid-19. We were the lucky ones. It was a pity that we could not share the garden with anyone else."

"My garden is my most important asset. I'm not moving now as I need a garden. Before Covid I was moving to a flat with balcony, hate to think how I would have coped if that had happened."

"My garden has become the most appreciated and important place both from the gardening aspect and enjoyment of wildlife all the more so as a vulnerable shielded singleton, unable to see family, grandchildren or friends. It has been my saviour in so many ways."

**"My garden meant everything.
A safe haven for my family."**

"The garden was essential to me and my family - a play area for the children and restful outside space for the adults."

"It has become a peaceful place for me to spend time in when the day-to-day stress of working from home and remote schooling becomes too much."



"My garden, although small, was a lifeline. Being able to have lunch outside during a working day with family; enjoying each other's company. It also gave us time to slow down and appreciate the wildlife. We watched the birds, learnt how to identify them and watched baby birds leave the nest. I enjoy gardening anyway but just having more time to spend in the garden was lovely, especially as I was shielding and couldn't access any local London park."

"It gave me a purpose. I live alone so my garden gave me space to focus and not worry about Covid. I could wave and talk at a safe distance to neighbours and that made me feel less isolated."

"Escaping from the stress of seemingly endless news updates about Covid-19 into a haven for bees, birds, butterflies and flowers was a joy. Watering gave me a routine. Seeing the first bright yellow courgette flowers come out, followed by the shiny green courgettes, made me smile. Eating the juicy red strawberries made me laugh! The garden has kept me positive in these difficult times. It is always there for me."

"It was the most important thing in my life after the well being of the family."

"My garden meant I had space outside my home to enjoy walking, working, fresh air and a chat over the hedge with neighbours. I watched the birds feeding and wildlife thriving and this gave me and my family great enjoyment."

"We appreciated our garden space more than ever during lockdown. It was a source of peace and calm and really helped our mental wellbeing. I found working at home isolating at times but being able to sit outside on the step with a cup of tea and listen to birds was very grounding."

"My garden was sadly a loss to me due to my being a key worker and volunteer therefore spending much less time in it. Sadly that has impacted on my mental health which it would usually have helped with."

"My small patio garden was my sanctuary and being part of a community allotment group provided me with exercise and a good feeling which helped my mental wellbeing."

"It was a place of solace, a joy to be in and mentally uplifting. It also gave me more exercise and utter pleasure."

"I have limited mobility so sitting in the shade and watching the birds and other wildlife was very relaxing."

"Despite the fact that it is a small space, I couldn't have got by so well without it and the wildlife in it."

"I have three kids and was homeschooling, the garden was often the only place to be alone and have a quiet head."

"I was shielded during lock-down, so the garden was my main activity. It was the reason for getting up and being busy."



Survey results data continued.

"I live alone and suffer depression and loneliness at the best of times so lockdown was testing but the bees, butterflies and hover flies coming to my planting kept me company and provided company, interest and stimulation as well as relaxation. I was profoundly and consciously grateful for my small outside space during lockdown."

"The allotment was somewhere safe for me to go, interacting with others at a safe distance, keeping my mind off the appalling stress of feeling I was one of the most vulnerable people around. It was a place where I was able to leave fear behind at the gate."

"Lockdown made me realise how much I love gardening and our garden."

"Essential to our physical and mental wellbeing because my husband was shielding and was therefore not able to go out. We enjoyed not only the work, the growing, the wildlife and fresh produce, but also the planning and sharing it together."

The third 'person' in our bubble

"I'm a 24/7 carer for a 98-year-old disabled lady. When I started five years ago the outside space hadn't been touched for many years. Making a garden and tending it has been exhausting, time-consuming work, and it has kept me sane. But in the past six strange and solitary months it has been, literally, a life-saver for both of us. Sitting outdoors, in sunshine or dappled shade, amid birdsong and fragrance and the slow dance of changing colours, has given Eileen a view out from her small, confined world; simply it's made life worth living. Working with the garden has kept my body moving and my brain alive, and daily swept the dead leaves from my soul. Our garden has restored and inspired us. It's been someone else to talk to, the steadying, comforting third person in our little bubble. It has asked us to look up from our lives, and down at the earth we all grow from. It has kept us grounded, and flying."

"Gardening during lockdown, with all its uncertainties, provided a sense of purpose and introduced a new, disciplined daily regime while shielding. I felt, and feel, that I have been reintroduced to an early love and appreciate it more than ever before."

"The garden was a constant source of occupation and satisfaction. Hard work followed by a feeling of a job well done. Lockdown would have been extremely difficult without it."

"Being a widow living on my own my allotment gave me a focus to each day. I'm not sure life would have been so great during that time in lockdown without my gardening."

"I live alone and during the first six weeks of lockdown got quite lonely. The garden was a wonderful pick-me-up from this - hearing the amazing birdsong, watching the succession of flowers, doing gardening and reading and eating in it in the glorious weather we had. I took great pleasure in nurturing my seedlings and watching them grow."

"We swapped plants and success/failure stories and it took our minds off the news."

"I just have a path at the front and side of my house. Just watching the bees in the pots of lavender was lovely."

"My nine year old grandson has really developed an interest in gardening and has been helping out every morning for several hours while school has been suspended."

"Although my garden is very small it helps me to concentrate on what I would like my 'new normal' to be like when the pandemic subsides. It helps me to see that my life before lockdown was not normal and concentrated too heavily on consumerism, comparing myself with others and being busy, anxious and stressed. I am determined to change; appreciating the wonder of nature in my tiny garden is integral to my going forward with purpose and optimism."

"Having my husband at home all the time was stressful - we have very different ideas about gardening!"

"It was wonderful looking out over beautiful views - a real change from being in the house. We loved the fresh air and chatting with neighbours over the fence or when they walked by."

"Not having to commute meant I had time to spend in the garden and to get to know my neighbours."

"I discovered Gardeners' World and the National Garden Scheme's virtual garden visits and they inspired me to get to work on my neglected garden during lockdown."

"At 73 being outdoors and gardening is a life saver. It clears the mind and keeps me healthy too."

"My wife had some serious mental health difficulties after her father died a couple of years ago. I was worried about how lockdown would impact on her. Having the garden to work on has given her a huge sense of purpose and pride and has been extremely healing and therapeutic."

"I gave away hundreds of plants to my local community, plants which I have been propagating in readiness for my plant sale at our garden opening in June. Myself and my husband delivered them throughout the community of villages where we live."

"My garden was a life-saver, it was good to be able to be in the garden for at least an hour each day for my health and wellbeing."

In memory of dad...

"During this time as a nurse on the community front line I caught Covid. I was unable to go outside as I was really ill until the week before I returned to work."

I hadn't realised how emotional I was going to be and then my dad who had lung cancer was unable to access palliative care so I went down to nurse him and five days later he died.

Sitting in my parent's garden was a time of reflection - looking at how the garden has matured since my childhood and the wonderful memories of how we watched dad tending his precious roses. Due to lockdown we were unable to scatter dad's ashes and Father's Day was coming up fast so in order to commemorate dad's memory I planted a little rose garden using roses named 'Best Dad' 'Perfect Gentleman' and 'Dear Dad'. Dad loved to quote Winston Churchill so I was lucky enough to find a Churchill rose too.

Come Father's Day it was cathartic to sit in the garden and reflect on our family's life as we grew up and remember the good times that being in the garden together brought us. My grandchildren Joshua, Oliver, Jacob and Amelia enjoyed this new gardening initiative and we planted bedding plants around the roses.

Perhaps in years to come my grandchildren will also look back and reflect that in lockdown we planted, seeded and enjoyed making our own memories for their lifetime reflections. I hope so."



National Garden Scheme garden owner feedback

With over 3,700 garden owners within the National Garden Scheme their views on the importance of gardens to their own health and wellbeing gives an important insight into the role that gardens play. While the majority cite sharing their gardens with visitors as a key motivator for opening, it is interesting to reflect on what their gardens means to them every day, and during and immediately after lockdown. This small selection of quotes comes from our Virtual Garden Visits portfolio - a unique video archive of gardens and their owners during the lockdown period April - June 2020.

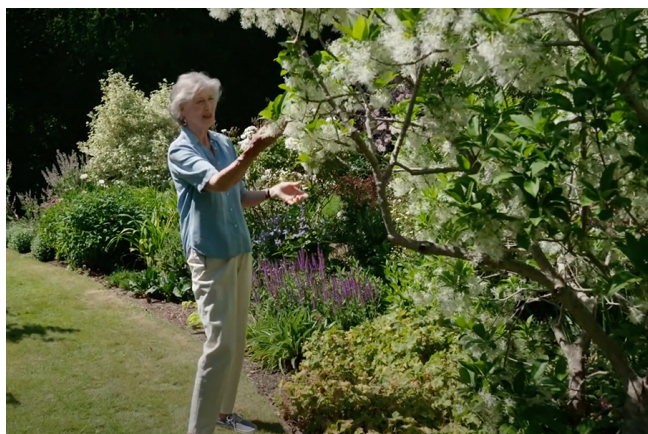
Access to the original films from which these quotes are taken can be found on the National Garden Scheme website at: ngs.org.uk/virtual-garden-visits/

“Being in the garden has taken a lot of the stress out of self-isolation.”

Mike Price, Elm Trees, Long Crendon, Bucks

“The garden is my favourite place, it’s my solace, my peace, my quiet, it’s the best place in the world to be.”

Carol Price, Elm Trees, Long Crendon, Bucks



“I love every aspect of gardening, the peace and wellbeing it brings as well as the sharing of ideas with visitors.”

Diane Hart-Dyke, Hampshire



“It came as a bit of a surprise to realise that opening my garden is a kind of therapy for my mental wellbeing.”

Dave Darwent, Sheffield



“As a GP and the daughter of a GP, gardening - and this garden - has always provided relaxation and respite after our busy days - never more so than at this time. We’ve missed watching others enjoy the garden too.”

Sonya Grubb, Algars Manor, Gloucestershire



“The garden is really important in terms of maintaining my sense of connectedness to myself and being in a good space. It’s beautiful spending time watching the birds and insects. It supports good mental health for me and my clients.”

Sarah Chapman (Counsellor and garden owner),
Brindles, Long Crendon, Bucks



“The world is all right in the garden.”

Brenda Salmon, Church Gate, Blockley, Gloucestershire



“I’ve missed sharing the garden.”

Caroline Todhunter, The Old Rectory, Berkshire



“During lockdown this has been the main place that I come. I often see one or two people and can at least have a safe interaction. We’re giving spare crops the village support group.”

Allotment holders at Warton Gardens, Lancashire



“Working as a psychotherapist with troubled couples and families, the garden helps me process quite stressful feelings, enabling me to go back and do my job.”

Stella Vaines, Bakers Close, Long Crendon, Bucks



“In the current situation; the confinement everyone is having to endure, the anxiety and in some cases real tragedy has shown just how important gardens are to everyone’s physical health and mental wellbeing. I feel particularly aware of this having been diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago. My garden became a lifeline. It was a place of escape, a welcome distraction and a way to keep as active as possible. But above all it offered me a sense of promise for the future – that glimmer of optimism coupled with the help I was given by several cancer charities - kept me going through treatment.”

Rachel de Thame

National Garden Scheme Ambassador and gardening broadcaster



For more on the National Garden Scheme’s Garden & Health programme see:
ngs.org.uk/gardens-and-health/

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