



In his first column for Concept For Living, northern garden designer David Keegan explains why he's a passionate proponent of the organic movement and argues that the only way to win the fight against climate change is to learn how to walk lightly...

My earliest and best childhood memories are of summers spent on the farm in southern Ireland where my mother grew up - days spent wandering under the light-suffused canopy of overhead shrubs and trees, the sun throwing down the occasional spears of dappled light onto the stony potholed drive, like sparklers at Halloween.

To reach the old stone farmhouse you had to drive down a long snaking avenue, which veered off sharply to the left halfway down. There was a small stream where I marveled at tadpoles wiggling in and out of cover at the bank side, and caught minnow which ended up in old jam jars, later held up to the sunlight for a better look through their silvery, slightly cloudy waters.

Following the road to its end brought me onto what we called a common, which I remember being told meant it belonged to everyone, and no one.

It was, in effect, a boggy marsh and I learnt that the only way to explore it was to use a technique called 'walking lightly'. "What does that mean?" I asked in earnest. "Well, it means what it says," my uncle answered; "When you put your foot down to take a step you put it down gently and that'll stop ye sinkin'". The funny thing was - it worked.

After that I spent day after day walking lightly for what seemed like miles and miles, mesmerized by the busy drone of insects amongst the profusion of wild flowers.

Years on, I find my footsteps on this planet are once again an issue and I am trying my best to walk as lightly as possible.

It never occurred to me that only a few fields away from the area where I played as a child, farmers were spraying large quantities of chemicals onto crops - all in the name of food production and increased yields. There are currently some 350 pesticides permitted for use in farming, while we are pumping some 4.5 billion litres of chemicals onto British food each year.

When I started to make gardens about 10 years ago I initially trotted dutifully along to a large DIY store and gazed at all the liquids and potions I could purchase in the battle to achieve the perfect garden. Never mind that a lot of them had a nasty smell, carried big red and black symbols on the back of the box and required you to wear a mask and eye protection.

Over time my awareness grew as to the damage these chemicals were doing to the environment, but more importantly, as to the devastating effect they have on the natural balance between pest and predator and its greater implications for wildlife in general.

This has now developed into a principle in my approach to garden design. The truth is that there are plenty of natural and biological controls available which are far less damaging to us and to the environment.

It took a while for me to make the transition from organic gardener to a purchaser of organic food. I'd say 99% of what I now purchase is organic and I also grow my own organic crops on my 500sq m allotment.

One of the arguments being put forward at the moment, no doubt funded by the chemical lobby, is that there is a lack of proof as to the additional benefits or increased flavour of organically grown produce and that a lot of it is flown around the world, thereby gathering air miles.

But in my view that misses the point completely. My first priority in choosing what to buy is the benefit to the environment and wildlife - not whether it tastes better (which it does!) or whether it's more nutritious. I don't mind where in the world food happens to originate, as long as our buying habits encourage farmers globally in the move towards a chemical-free food chain.

And when more locally grown organic produce becomes available, I will support it.

It could be argued that if I am purchasing food that has been flown half way around the globe then I am merely contributing to the problem: my answer is that I have made decisions in my own life to counterbalance this.

I no longer fly if I am traveling anywhere within Europe but use the train as I did last year on a trip to Spain - and yes, OK, it took a lot longer but that was part of the fun; by the time I got there I felt I had actually gone some distance.

The awful truth is that whether we like it or not climate change is going to force all of us into making changes in how we live and travel. Whereas today we still have a choice, I can easily envisage a situation in the not too distant future where these changes will no longer be voluntary.

So if you have a garden and you don't know what to do with it or you are having it designed, or even if you can't afford to do a lot with it in terms of time or finances, can I suggest a very simple starting point?

Firstly, plant some fruit trees along with one or two native trees depending on the amount of space you have. Make sure you allow enough space for their eventual size and spread, and ensure that they are planted in the right aspect.

The label on your plants usually carries most of the information you will need. Apart from that, don't worry too much about where you plant - trust your instincts and it will more than likely look good.

Then buy a selection of herbs - things like rosemary, thyme and sage are very easy to grow with minimal maintenance, particularly if you use them for cooking. You may even want to think about buying a small bay tree.

You could be creating the garden of the future. In the meantime, we all need to learn to walk a little more lightly.

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