



**The Sunday Times**  
30/12/12

## Allotment Food Piles High on UK Plates

by Mark Hookham

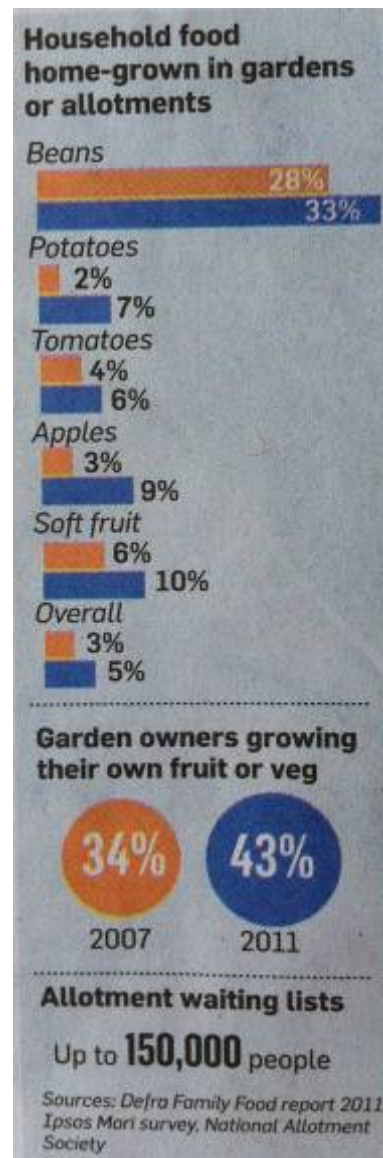
It would surely raise a smile from Tom and Barbara Good, the suburban couple whose attempt at self-sufficiency was the subject of the 1970s BBC comedy series *The Good Life*.

New government figures reveal that the proportion of fresh fruit and vegetables grown for consumption by green-fingered Britons has almost doubled in just four years. Of all fresh beans entering the household, a third are now cultivated by families in their gardens or allotments.

For soft fruit, including strawberries and raspberries, the figure is 10%, for apples 9%, for potatoes 7% and for tomatoes 6%. The trend emerges in the Family Food survey, a study of 6,000 households by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which shows that the percentage of all home-grown fruit and vegetables has increased from 2.9% in 2008 to 5% in 2011.

The increase is attributed to the rising cost of fruit and vegetables in supermarkets and calls from celebrity chefs such as Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver for people to "grow their own".

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The study found that, on average, a portion of home-grown fruit and vegetables weighing 3 ½ oz was eaten per person per week in the UK in 2011, an increase of 38% on the previous year.

The percentage of eggs from home-reared chickens has increased from 3.2% in 2008 to 5.7% in 2011.

Georgie Willock, a spokesman for the National Allotment Society, said: "Gardening always has a popularity boost during times of recession. Allotments fell out of favour in the 1980s and 1990s during the yuppie era but, now that we are in a gloomy time again, people have gone back to them."

The society estimates that up to 150,000 people have put their names on waiting lists for allotments. In some areas of inner London people are facing a wait of up to 40 years. About 46% of the society's members are women, up from 35% in 1993.

When Donna Baines, 46, first arrived at her allotment plot in Blidworth, Nottinghamshire, seven years ago, she was the only woman on the 45-plot allotment and was asked by her fellow growers if they could meet her husband, who they assumed would be helping her.

"They thought if a woman had an allotment ... she wouldn't be able to manage it and that it would end up in disrepair," said Baines, a food development manager for Nottinghamshire county council.

Unperturbed, Baines became the society's first female committee member in its 70-year history, helped to convert a disused pig

shed into a meeting room and now helps to organise a packed social calendar for her fellow plot-holders.

Baines, who has 19 chickens and managed to rear a 28lb turkey for Christmas, estimates that women are involved with up to 70% of the plots. "In that [time there have also been more families that have taken allotments," she said.

Young professionals are also growing their own food. After waiting for 2 ½ years, Mark Champion, 33, took charge of an allotment plot in Norwich. He estimates that it supplies between 50% and 80% of the of fruit and vegetables that he and his girlfriend, Claire Stephen-son, need during the spring and summer. "No one is 'good lified' to the point of being self-sufficient but supplementing your diet with something which you have [grown] yourself is the aim," he said.

At the Bluebell Allotments, another site in Norwich, 20 plots have been subdivided into strips about 20ft long and just over 4ft wide for those who are , unable to commit to a 300 sq yd j standard-size plot. The number of people working the plots has increased from eight to 200. Mahesh Pant, an economist who runs the project, said: "We are getting more and more younger people [involved]." Mary Creagh, the shadow environment secretary, said: "The 'dig for victory' spirit is welcome but it shows the very real pressures on families struggling to make ends meet"

Read the DFRA Report. See Section 1.3 <http://tinyurl.com/anwoxkm>