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Why we forgot how to grow food

As a food shortage looms, people are digging for Britain — and their dinner table. John-Paul Flintoff gets back to our roots

Not long before Christmas, a man walked into the care home next door to his house and asked the manager if it would be possible for a group of neighbours to grow food in the vast gardens. The manager said he would be delighted. In the days that followed, the man casually asked various neighbours whether they would like to get involved. They all said yes. So he popped over to the care home with them, and each remarked how large the garden was, and what a lot of food could be grown there.

As well as beds for vegetables, there could be fruit trees trained to grow up the south-facing walls, a bed of herbs for the kitchens, and flowers to take inside. The group could perhaps even keep chickens, once the fruit and veg were up and running.

The man went home after each trip feeling tremendously pleased with himself. I know this, because the man was me. Now, it's not as if I did anything special: I didn't lift a spade. Many people have done considerably more, as part of a grass-roots movement spreading rapidly across the nation, to grow our own food. And fast. Because for the first time in decades, Britain faces the real prospect of severe food shortages.

About 40% of the food we eat is imported. That includes an astounding 95% of our fruit and most of the wheat in our bread. This reliance on goods from abroad is perilous. During the 2000 fuel strike, Sainsbury's chief executive wrote to the prime minister to warn that food supplies would run out "in days rather than weeks". Supermarkets rationed bread, sugar and milk. The situation is now arguably worse: world food reserves are at historically low levels, and last year several countries stopped exporting staples because their own populations were going hungry.

If the problems were only temporary, it would be bad enough. But they're not. We have become dependent on fossil fuels that are starting to run out. Taking account of all the oil- and gas-derived fertilisers, pesticides, distribution and retail practices, our modern farming uses an incredibly wasteful 10 calories of energy to put a single calorie of food on your plate.

Reverting to old-fashioned farming will be hard because our soil is in poor shape. Fertility has come to rely on annual, chemical top-ups instead of the traditional long-term build-up using animal manure and crop rotation. Suddenly taking away all the artificial fertilisers will result in drastically lower yields. And if we're to feed ourselves, we can't afford lower yields — because the UK is more densely populated than China, Pakistan or any African country except Rwanda.

Meanwhile, levels of minerals such as phosphate, which plants need for healthy growth, are falling fast. Global supplies have peaked, and last year phosphate prices rose by 700%. Britain imports 80% of its phosphates. The only alternative is to return all food waste and animal and human manure to the land, instead of flushing it to sea. And let's not forget the extremes of weather that will result from global warming. Rising sea levels spell doom for the 57% of grade-1 arable land in east England already below sea level. In 2000, during the unprecedented heat wave, crop yields in Italy and France fell by a third.

Perhaps most importantly, we lack know-how. Most of us today have little experience of food-growing. The farmers we do have are mostly approaching retirement, and there are few of them: agricultural employment has fallen from 40% in 1900 to 2% today, and much of the work is done by casual workers brought in from abroad.

Modern governments have not regarded self-sufficiency in food as a desirable aim, according to Professor Tim Lang of City University in London; but last year that changed. A report from the Cabinet Office concluded that "existing patterns of food production are not fit for a low-carbon, more resource-constrained future". In response, Colin Tudge, the author of the book *Feeding People is Easy*, called for "a global renaissance in agriculture". This more or less agreed with the insights of a less well-known environmentalist, Jeremy Clarkson: "We are heading towards *The End of Days*, and you'd better get yourself an allotment."

That's what I did last year, just in time, because now dozens of others are on the waiting list.

All over the country, people are starting to think about producing food. Some because they fancy a bit of the River Cottage lifestyle, but many — including Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall — have been inspired by the growing Transition Town movement. Transition Towns were started by an Englishman, Rob Hopkins, after a stint working as a teacher in Kinsale, Ireland. At the time, he never imagined that oil might one day run out. "But then I showed students a film, *The End of Suburbia*. I have to say it was as traumatic and shocking for me as it was for the students." The film made it clear that no aspect of life will be the same after cheap oil runs out — which it suggested will happen very soon. "When we got over the shock, we set about looking at Kinsale," says Hopkins. "We examined how the town might look in 20 years if it adapted instead of pretending it wasn't happening. We came up with a vision, then backcast it to see how to get there, year by year."

Unlike other environmental initiatives, this deliberately involved finding the "upside" rather than dwelling on doom. "I like to use the analogy of inviting a reluctant friend to join you on holiday," Hopkins explains. "If you paint a picture of the beach, the pool and the candlelit taverna by the sea, they're more likely to come."

Returning to England, Hopkins helped to create a similar "energy descent" plan in Totnes, Devon — the first Transition Town. Others soon followed. Lewes, Glastonbury and Stroud are full of middle-class hippie types, but in Bristol it's the poorer districts that have been most dynamic, and across Wales the impetus has largely come from the agricultural community. Today, there are more than 150 "official" groups (who have formally asked to join the network) and hundreds of

others still preparing or mulling it over. There are TTs in New Zealand, the US, and on The Archers.

After first talking to Hopkins, two years ago, I registered my own corner of northwest London on the Transition Town website and hoped that someone would join me. Nothing happened. So I cycled to south London to meet Duncan Law, an actor and director who parked the day job many, many months ago to devote himself full time to launching Transition Town Brixton.

The cafe where we met, Honest Foods, had a policy of sourcing food locally. Law asked for a word with the chef, said he knew someone with a vast crop of pears in their garden, and asked if the chef would be interested in buying them? Without hesitation, the chef said yes. I was impressed.

Law took me on a tour of Brixton: him on his recumbent bike and me on my foldaway with tiny wheels. If we looked odd together, the effect was increased by Law stopping every so often to collect apples that had fallen from trees. He told me about an entrepreneur who made £4,000 in the early 1950s — more than Law's headmaster father earned in a year — by commissioning children to gather blackberries for him. TT Brixton, he said, was about to start mapping fruit trees across south London. (They've since done that.)

Near Balham, we visited Sue Sheehan, a Transition Town supporter who recently started growing fruit and veg in boxes in the tiny space in front of her terraced house. I still hadn't got the hang of how to be upbeat about peak oil and climate change and ungraciously told her that the crop, though plentiful, would not be enough to keep her alive when the trouble starts. But every lettuce you grow yourself, Law said, saves growing another one miles away and shipping it to you, and all the emissions associated with that.

A few days later, I watched *The Power of Community: How Cuba survived Peak Oil*, a documentary film about what happened to Cuba after Soviet oil supplies dried up. It shows how Cubans gradually turned away from a heavy reliance on carbon-intensive agriculture: in rural areas, they learnt to plough with oxen; in cities, all kinds of spaces were turned to horticulture, from window boxes to wasteland. The transition took more than two years, and Cubans had to forgo the equivalent of a meal a day — but by the end, even people in cities were producing half their annual fruit and vegetable needs.

I finally found like-minded people nearer my home, willing to launch a Transition Town. In Belsize library, we hosted a week of film screenings culminating with *The Power of Community*. It was clear from the question-and-answer session afterwards that the audience was gagging to start growing food. Strangely, they just seemed to want some kind of permission to get started. I improvised: "Just go for it! What can you lose?"

Transition Belsize was born and I found myself co-ordinating the 40-strong food group. The first thing the group did was visit my allotment. My new friends weeded, built a new raised bed, and took home some of my surplus apples. Since then, we have gathered names of people on the waiting list for allotments and put them in

touch with householders who possess gardens but insufficient time, expertise, or ability to grow food themselves. We've set up a section in the local library with books and magazines devoted to food-growing, co-ordinated bulk purchasing of otherwise costly organic food so a wider portion of the population can access it, and got agreement from the local franchise of Budgens to sell produce grown by local people in gardens and allotments.

Another member, Councillor Alexis Rowell, rather brilliantly persuaded the council to allow residents on its estates to grow food there. Having done that, he went knocking on doors of one neighbouring estate to ask if people would like to grow food there. Over the course of a single weekend, members of the Transition group transformed the previously overgrown and unused gardens. Residents supplied hot soup and drinks, and joined in the work too. I travelled one cold January morning to Stroud, Gloucestershire, where members of another Transition group have done amazing things. Stroud has one of the country's most successful farmers' markets, and two Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes, through which householders fund a farmer to supply food to them directly. The first was started in 2001, by four individuals renting an acre of land and employing a vegetable grower. After two years they had formally established a co-operative and rented 23 acres. Today two full-time growers provide veg and meat to 189 households, with enough profit to pay a bonus.

Meat production runs at a loss, and has to be subsidised by the veg, but the farmers see stock as essential to good stewardship of the land, providing plentiful manure. There's another benefit: marketing. Animals can be very attractive parts of any membership project. For that reason, the CSA houses its pigs in a prominent position, beside notices explaining how the scheme works.

One of the hardest things for the CSA is getting people involved. Most members are happy to pay to receive veg — after all, it's cheaper than buying from most supermarkets — and will turn up to occasional events on the farm, such as wassailing parties and apple pruning in January, blossom celebrations in May, haymaking in August, a bonfire-night party, and singing to cows in the barn at Christmas.

But schemes like this need a critical mass of members willing to help out more routinely, and might lose energy or collapse altogether if a small minority of volunteers find themselves always responsible for making it work. Wandering over weed-infested fields with two such volunteers, Helen Pitel and Caroline Denny, I see for myself how hard the work is. "But we can't let this fail," says Pitel cheerfully.

Among other setbacks, the CSAs have had meat stolen from their packing shed, and had to deal with unsupportive neighbours, such as one who complained about the appearance of polytunnels on the hillside and forced the CSA to secure retrospective planning approval. Even members can be difficult. As part of recent efforts to get them to share trips to the farm to collect food for each other, a list of names and addresses were sent out. Some complained that this breached data security and risked ID theft, reveals one member of the core group: "It sometimes feels like there is a long way to go in building the 'community' bit of Community Supported Agriculture!"

I'm not surprised to find that setting up and running large-scale projects of this sort can be difficult, and no less impressed for that reason.

One of the most significant achievements of Stroud's food group did not involve growing anything. It's a comprehensive analysis, conducted by members who happen both to be local councillors, into whether or not the district could feed itself. The report by Fi Macmillan and Dave Cockcroft was inspired by an article in *The Land* magazine, *Can Britain Feed Itself?*, written by Simon Fairlie, a journalist and campaigner who has a sideline selling scythes (to, among others, me). Fairlie lives in Somerset and has some connection to a local Transition group, but he's been doing this kind of work for years. His article was itself inspired by a book published in 1975.

Using the same model, Macmillan and Cockcroft investigated whether 110,000 people living in Stroud district could be fed if they relied on the 37,000 hectares of available farmland. The initial finding was encouraging: the district does have enough land to feed itself, though only if people reduce their meat intake to a quarter of the current UK average of 80 kilograms per person per year, and significantly reduce their sugar intake. There would be some surplus with which to trade for staples such as citrus, tea and coffee.

Alas, the analysis doesn't stop there. Macmillan and Cockcroft go on to examine whether Stroud can feed itself without inputs from fossil fuels, and with land set aside to produce the biofuels needed to replace them. (An additional pressure on land, which they only mention in passing, is the need for land-based textiles, whether from sheep or fibres from hemp and other crops.)

The conclusion, this time, is distressing: "We have nowhere near enough land to produce a significant proportion of our current level of transport and heating fuels." Crikey. If that's the dismal outlook for the district of Stroud, set among all those rolling fields, what hope is there for London? Is it time to get out?

Rob Hopkins thinks not. He used to believe the most responsible thing to do was to move to rural areas, build a house and grow your own food. "But when I found out about peak oil I came to question that. We had built our own house, and were growing our own food, but this was only going to be sustainable if I am prepared to sit at the gate with a shotgun. What do I do with my carrots if the village up the road is cold and hungry?"

"We have to move towards collective solutions," he says. "Peak oil is a call to those of us who have been out in the highlands to come back and help, because the skills are very much in demand now." According to Simon Fairlie, supplying our needs in the future will also need considerable movement in the other direction: dispersal of both livestock and humans around the country, not least so that all that human manure can be put back on the land.

For now, the best thing I can do is to make a go of food-growing in London, as they did in Havana. So on my return from Stroud I throw myself with renewed energy into the Belsize group.

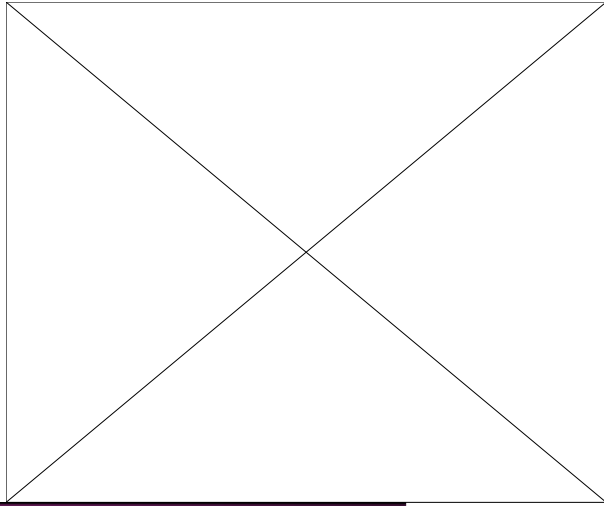
Over dinner, the core group wrestles with strategies for growing the group ever larger. We agree to work hard in our own streets, as individuals, then the next street, and so on. One attractive idea is to deliberately grow “too many” seedlings, giving ourselves a perfectly amiable pretext for knocking on doors and inoffensively getting neighbours started on food-growing.

Back home, inspired by the Guerrilla Gardening movement to grow beans on a patch of scrubby land beyond the end of my garden, I stare across at the vast gardens of the neighbouring care home, and notice — not for the first time — just how big and bare they are. Then I look down the road and notice that one of my neighbours, five doors down, has likewise been cultivating the wasteland. I knock on his door, we get chatting, and in no time he’s touring the gardens of the care home with me. A few days later, I ask a family with girls about the same age as my own daughter. They visit the site too.

I set up a neighbourhood project on an online food-growing network and soon my neighbours sign up. I decide to ask them over for drinks. We’ll watch the first episode of *The Good Life*, then *The Power of Community*. In a few weeks time we will have achieved nearly as much here as Belsize, down the road, achieved all last year. After that, who knows, we might set up our own veg-box scheme...

But I shouldn’t get carried away. In *The Transition Handbook*, published last year and already reprinted several times, Rob Hopkins offers what he calls a “cheerful disclaimer”: “Just in case you were under the impression that Transition is a process defined by people who have all the answers, you need to be aware of a key fact. We truly don’t know if this will work.

“Transition is a social experiment on a massive scale. What we are convinced of is this: (a) if we wait for the government, it’ll be too little, too late; (b) if we act as individuals, it’ll be too little; but (c) if we act as communities, it might just be enough, just in time.’



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