

HOW MUCH LAND DO YOU NEED?

When we first started out, we were in rented army accommodation with small plots, so we know what it's like to have very little land. We've since lived in terraced and semi-detached houses, a Cornish

smallholding and even a château with several acres. In each plot we tried everything from keeping bees to building smokers, and we continue to do the same with the next generation of Strawbridges.

MAKE THE MOST OF WHAT YOU HAVE

We all wish we had more land, whatever our plot size. We'd love to have space for livestock, woodlands, and even for some natural meadows, but we know that our first priority is to make full use of what we've got. You can have a really productive plot, even in a tiny urban garden, and if you're out at work all day, this may be as much as you can handle in your spare time.

Living in a "normal" house can mean space is an issue if you want to be self-sufficient; but it should not be a major problem if you are aspiring to a sustainable lifestyle. Suburban living doesn't have to be about immaculate lawns and washing the

car every weekend - you can be very productive on an average urban or suburban plot: your veggie patch, cloches, greenhouse, polytunnel, beehive, and chickens can go a long way to help you achieve a degree of self-sufficiency. In fact, your garden may even make you the envy of your friends and neighbours.

If you live in the city or suburbs the good public transport links mean you don't need a car, so you can reduce your demand on finite fuel reserves. There are plenty of shops, too, where you can buy local, environmentally sound produce and products. Taking all this into account, you may end up with a lower-impact lifestyle than those with a similar-sized rural plot.

WHERE TO ACQUIRE MORE LAND

If you are using your available space to the full, and you have time and energy to take on more land, the next problem is how to get hold of some. The odds are that your local land is expensive, or you may find your ideal plot has been sold, but persevere. Most landowners are not keen to sell, so see if you can rent a fallow or unproductive area from a farmer, and after years - yes, years - of softening him up with boxes of produce, he may give in and decide to sell.

ALLOTMENTS

Britain has an allotment scheme where local councils have a duty to provide land for residents to grow their own fruit and vegetables. The origins of

allotments can be traced back over centuries but the system as we know it came into practice in the late 19th century, when philanthropic Victorians were keen to provide poor people with the chance to grow their own produce, and to stop them from getting drunk in their leisure time.

Allotments are no longer the place where men retreat to their sheds or grow prize onions. Many are worked by women and whole families. In our village some allotments have three generations sharing the labour and the bounty. In Britain, allotments are governed by local byelaws. On some plots it may be possible to keep hens, bees, pigeons, rabbits, and even pigs. But you can expect restrictions on planting trees, erecting fencing, subletting, digging a pond, or using the plot for business purposes. If you are lucky enough to acquire an allotment, ask to see a copy of the rules before you get carried away. And don't let a long waiting list deter you from signing up - it's worth it!

COMMUNITY GARDENS

Land for cultivation also comes in the form of community gardens and city farms, which are on the increase. They tend to be in urban areas, often on reclaimed wasteland, where they provide a valuable space for local people to grow their own food. Generally run by volunteers, they are also a great way of bringing people together.

Councils and local authorities are increasingly making unused land available for community gardens. These schemes take a lot of effort to get off the ground and organize, but if there is one near you they are well worth joining.

LANDSHARE SCHEMES

Landsharing may seem altruistic, but it is practical and many people are happy to allow others to cultivate some of their land. A national UK landshare database shows you what is on offer in your area. Alternatively, there is a very good chance that someone will know who could do with a hand; for example, an elderly

person who can no longer cope with a large garden and would appreciate a box of veg in return for use of a plot, or a farmer with some fallow land.

With any luck you'll end up with the extra growing space you need, while landowners benefit from a productively cultivated plot and some produce to sample into the bargain.

- 1. A productive urban garden**, no matter how small, can be as beautiful as it is bountiful with some flowering fruit and vegetables.
- 2. Allotments** are much sought after in cities and suburbs, but it is still worth joining the waiting lists at a few sites.
- 3. Laying hens** can be kept in urban gardens with specially designed chicken coops.
- 4. If you want cattle** you will need a few acres of good pasture, and possibly space for a shed for them in winter.
- 5. A greenhouse** provides that chance to grow all year round and is perfect for salads and herbs.
- 6. Allotments have rules** but some allow you to keep animals, such as pigs, hens, and bees. Find out what is allowed before buying any animals.

