

... that includes a place to relax, writes **Joe Swift** (p31). So how did we get here? As **James Alexander-Sinclair** explains, it's been a long evolution...

The basics of life never change. We walk the same way as our ancestors, we reproduce using the same technique, and we garden in a way that Adam and Eve would instantly recognise. The difference is in the detail: we have trainers instead of bare feet, boudoirs instead of caves and whopping great ride-on lawnmowers instead of sickles.

Each generation adds something to our general experience of gardening: the Iron Age provided mattocks, Medieval monks found medicine in roadside herbs, and the Victorians sent stout-hearted fellows to the farthest corners of the Empire to bring back plants for our gardens. The more recent past has brought us the mechanisation of many tedious tasks;

books and magazines rushing to advise us on every aspect of husbandry, and the slow metamorphosis of the Chelsea Flower Show from elitist hat-fest to popular TV spectacle.

Most significantly, the past 50 years have brought gardening to everybody. Once there

were yards whose main purpose was for laundry and somewhere to put the outside lavatory. Thanks to indoor plumbing and tumble driers, these areas are now gardens and their objectives have moved from utilitarian to decorative. Where there was uniformity, now there is individuality. Walking along the average street 20-odd years ago, the gardens you would see mostly consisted of a conventional patch of lawn surrounded on three sides by narrow borders. People have become more adventurous, and a stroll along that same street would now reveal gravel gardens, ponds, raised beds, decks, pergolas and palms.

Today, gardening is firmly established as the number-one leisure pursuit for many millions of people (there is always a bit of debate over whether it is more popular

than fishing). The key word in that sentence is leisure: it is no longer a matter of gardening in order to feed your children and to survive. Or is it? Because of our increased awareness of climate change and green issues, the garden has taken on an extra dimension. It is the only part of the environment over which we as individuals have complete control: shed roofs groan with sedums, and compost heaps occupy previously unloved corners.

Most obviously, there has been a phenomenal surge of interest in vegetable gardening over the past couple of years. The allotment has always been with us, of course, but until recently it was regarded as the exclusive territory of grumpy men in holey jumpers who retreated to their plot to escape from the pressures of family life. Nowadays, thanks to umpteen articles, celebrity chefs and assorted television programmes, it has been taken over by people with a completely different agenda. The allotment has been colonised by enthusiastic foodies seeking spuds unsullied by either chemicals or the taint of supermarkets. In principle, this has to be applauded: the more people who can experience the warm, fuzzy feeling of cooking and eating something that they first met as a dry and husky seed, the better. However, the truth is that this is an experience that must be earned by sweat and backache. I hope that the current enthusiasm does not wilt like warm lettuce in the teeth of reality.

For many home owners, the garden will always be little more than another room of the house, the only room in which it is OK to cook over open fires and operate petrol-driven machinery. For others, it is so much more: it is a place to work, a place to plant, a place to watch, a place to eat and walk, a place to save the planet and, most importantly, a place of their own. ■

Thieves stole nearly £500 million worth of plants and access from our private gardens last year

In 2007, we spent £5.45 billion on our gardens, down from £4.82 billion during the makeover craze of 2002

Since 1998, each of us has spent an average of 2 hours 45 minutes a week working on our gardens

ILLUSTRATION: NATHALIE LEES

SOURCES: THE HORTICULTURAL TRADES ASSOCIATION, CHURCHILL HOME INSURANCE