

NOT FANTASTIC PLASTIC

The Garden columnist Sally Nex attempts to eliminate the tide of plastic from her garden

I suffer from selective blindness where my garden is concerned. I will notice the moment the first nub of asparagus pokes through in spring, but walk straight past a broken fence, oblivious. I could supply daily bulletins on my ripening tomatoes, but ask me why the path through the vegetable garden is only half-laid five years after I marked it out and I'll genuinely have forgotten it is like that.

Recently, though, some snapshots I took brought me up short. In my head, my garden is rustic, cottagey, charmingly pretty in places. But the camera told the truth: in the real world, my garden is a sea of plastic.

Vegetable growers seem particularly afflicted by this, perhaps because we sow so much from seed, with all the paraphernalia that comes with it. At the height of the spring frenzy, every surface is littered with a flotsam and jetsam of seed trays, pots and modules in black, green, or *diarrhoea* brown. And it's not just pots: there are plastic cloches, plant labels and fertiliser containers, acres of 100 percent polyethylene insect-proof mesh and piles of compost sacks – every last item wince-inducingly ugly.

The aesthetics are bad enough, but I think of myself as a friend to the planet. I garden organically; I use peat-free compost; I even grow nettles for caterpillars. Yet my gardening is, literally, trashing the world. That cracked plastic pot I threw out will still be somewhere in the world more than 400 years from now, probably amid a vortex of microscopic plastic particles poisoning albatrosses in the Pacific Ocean (if any still exist by then). It's not something I want to have any part in.

Back to basics

So I am ditching the plastic. It's a gradual process: years of habit take a lot of unpicking, and I'm having to learn new ways of doing things. Or rather, old ways: many non-plastic techniques and materials I'm now using would be familiar to any 19th-century estate gardener. Victorians would have loved plastic, but of



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course they gardened (rather well) in a pre-plastic world, so I'm borrowing heavily from their techniques.

It turns out to be a delight. Clay pots and wooden seedtrays take a bit of getting used to for a gardener raised on plastic: they need gentler handling, proper cleaning and storing in the shed. But they are such a pleasure to use and things of beauty – which is more than I've ever said about my green plastic ones.

One revelation has been that plastic is not always best. Glass 'barn' cloches are pricey, especially when fitted with toughened glass, and require mastery of advanced origami to assemble them. But they last a lifetime instead of ripping after a few seasons, and stay foursquare where

you put them unlike polythene cloches which blow away, irritatingly, in every middlingly brisk breeze.

Rethinking practices

My labels are now wooden, and I am a whizz at making paper pots. Occasionally, I've completely rethought how I do things. Gone are the black plastic coverings protecting my vegetable beds in winter: I just mulch thickly instead. I no longer bother insulating my greenhouse with plastic bubble wrap, and since horticultural fleece is out – despite its fabric-like appearance, it is actually spun polypropylene – I've decided anything that can't get by with a temporary swaddling of newspaper probably shouldn't be spending winter in Britain anyway.

A few things have defeated me. I haven't found an alternative to plastic fruit-cage netting, or rid myself of the compost sack mountain – even with sheep and ponies contributing I struggle to generate enough home-made to make my own compost. And plastic creeps back. Few nurseries offer plants in non-plastic pots, so any impulse buy brings in another eddy.

So I don't suppose I shall ever be totally free of it, but the high water of plastic is gradually receding to reveal a garden much closer to the fantasy version in my head. Now I just need to get around to finishing the path... ●

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