

WE ARE A SMALL ISLAND with a growing population. We've built nearly 13 million homes in the UK in the last 50 years, yet this will seemingly never be enough and we are running out of space. New homes are created with really small gardens, or no garden at all, or built in existing larger gardens that are then destroyed in the process.

The future for our gardens is small, of that there is no doubt, but they play a vital role in our lives and our environment so we need to know how to get the most out of these ever-diminishing spaces.

People want to grow food, be in touch with nature and encourage wildlife, but also have somewhere for the kids to play and relax, while being environmentally responsible. These put a lot of demands on a small space.

But it seems to me that while there is a wealth of information, resources and back-up to aid the small gardener, scratch beneath the shiny surface and what you find is a divide between what the market needs and what is actually available. To make matters worse, there isn't any joined-up thinking and, in many cases, the system seems to be set up to inhibit rather than encourage gardening.

Professional difference

Since garden designer John Brookes identified what was then a niche market 40 years ago with his 'small space gardening', there have been endless coffee-table books on the theme. These now tend to be light on realistic practical solutions and heavy on what is tantamount to 'gardening pornography' with their glossy pages of gratuitously gorgeous gardens. (I confess that I, too, am guilty of this.) Magazine and newspaper articles can only dip into what is an enormous subject, and accusations of TV dumbing-down are well documented.

Conversely, the professional side of the landscape industry is thriving, driven by market needs. As a professional garden designer, if I want to source permeable paving for a client or put a green wall on the side of a building, the suppliers and specialists are easy to find. But there is a gulf

between the industry and retail outlets and consumers. If a layman wants to undertake a DIY project on a small scale, it is a different story. Green walls, a brilliant idea for any small space, are incredibly expensive. There is little information on these innovations, and until the big DIY outlets take them up they will remain largely out of reach to the domestic market.

Better use of space

Perhaps developers could be coerced into doing more to help small gardens? Roof gardens are a perfect way to green-up and garden an otherwise unpromising space. Yet when developers build apartments they rarely allow sufficient load bearing for anything more than a few pots. It would be so easy and relatively inexpensive for them to allow for the creation of proper rooftop gardens. But what is their incentive? Subsidies and tax breaks in Switzerland and Germany have underpinned a market of 15 million sq m (161 million sq ft) of green roofs a year. Yet in the UK it is harder to justify the cost of these. Could planning rules drive this? And, while we are at it, tax breaks might encourage developers to increase the amount of green space, with regulations tightened so they cannot leave new gardens full of rubble-filled compacted soil.

The planning process is also obstructive at times, thanks to its complexity and the way in which it is enforced. When I deal with planning around the country, I find that each local authority has a different approach and interpretation of the rules (some helpful, some not) but even planning officers within the same council will say and do different things. The situation is incoherent.

Government has been encouraging environmental responsibility, although with a stick rather than a carrot. We have legislation that should stop us paving over front gardens, but in reality councils are still only just getting to grips with this after some years of it being enforceable. Most members of the public know nothing about it and a worrying number of people in the industry do not abide by it. It seems impossible to police, and this can only get worse as cutbacks cause local-authority landscape officers to disappear. More education and incentives are needed.

So what is the answer and who can we turn to? The RHS as a charity with an educational remit plays its part, offering sound practical information in these pages, on its website, in its gardens and in its shows. Perhaps it needs to go further and set up a dedicated 'small garden' advisory service where all the necessary information is available in one place. Or should it be a Government initiative that combines a database of information and suppliers with a streamlined planning process, tightened building regulations, new legislation, tax incentives and, of course, plenty of carrots? Either way, we need to act now to maximise the use of smaller gardens for the future. ■

*Andy Sturgeon is an award-winning landscape designer and author of *Big Plans, Small Gardens**

DESIGNS ON SMALLER GARDENS
Andy Sturgeon believes that there is little support or encouragement for those who garden in small spaces, even though new gardens will continue to decrease in size

? What do you think? Do you garden in a small space? What are the challenges you face in making the most of your garden? Write to: Viewpoint, The Garden, 4th Floor, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT; email: thegarden@rhs.org.uk; please include a postal address

Spatial awareness

As gardens get smaller, developers and planners could do more to help home gardeners get the best from their outdoor space. **Andy Sturgeon** suggests how. Photography by Neil Hepworth

