

Cut council tax for green gardeners to help cities tackle climate change, say UK researchers

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Garden styles can be divided into those where vegetation is minimal or absent (top-left 'Gray'), vegetation is present but lacking in diversity and is intensively managed (top-right 'Intensive') or vegetation is abundant, diverse and mimics natural habitats (bottom-left—'Green'). The latter style can be applied in even quite utilitarian parts of the garden such as the driveways (bottom right). Credit: *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* (2022). DOI: 10.1016/j.ufug.2022.127820

According to new research from the University of Sheffield, policymakers should offer incentives, such as council tax or water bill discounts, to encourage gardeners to use environmentally sensitive techniques to help combat climate change in cities and boost communities' health and well-being.

The study, published by Professor Ross Cameron in *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening*, highlights that, as gardens become increasingly important in the battle against the extreme effects of climate change, financial incentives should be considered to ensure gardens are well stocked with plants.

Professor Cameron said, "Gardens account for a third of all our [urban areas](#) and are vital spaces in terms of keeping our buildings and city environments cool in summer, absorbing rain to avoid flash flooding and providing an important refuge for wildlife.

"Gardens need to be green and full of plants to be beneficial to the [local environment](#), and some types of [garden](#) are more beneficial than others."

"The paradox is that many gardens are not actually green and some trends in garden design can be very damaging for the urban environment. We have paved them over to house the car, or provide sterile patio space; factors that increase urban temperatures and increase flooding risk."

The study calls for [policy-makers](#) to promote more sustainable garden management and to help foster gardening activities that help us meet important environmental and sustainability targets.

Professor Cameron outlines potential incentives that could be offered by policymakers to ensure gardens remain green and well-planted, including:

- Offering financial rewards—such as a reduction in council tax or water bills—for house owners with more than 50 percent of their garden space planted
- Offering [financial incentives](#) to plant or maintain trees in gardens, with appropriate choices based on size of garden
- Banning or restricting features that damage environmental processes e.g. having a maximum area artificial grass can cover and banning synthetic pesticides for home garden use
- Acknowledging that gardens with a high proportion of plants act as a health facility, and that planning processes should have mandatory requirements to include and protect, well-planted areas

Will Teare, 32, from Norton Lees, and his family have been planting a garden that provides a home for wildlife as well as a space for them to enjoy at the same time.

He said, "When we moved into our house, we thought about how we could create a garden that would help us be more connected to nature, so the most important thing for us has been that it benefits wildlife.

"Humans are responsible for a lot of the loss of habitat for wildlife and we wanted to invite it back into the garden. Everything we try in the garden, whether it is the plants we use, or having a go at creating different habitats in the garden, say with a woodland type area or pond, needs to have value for the wildlife.

"The family gets a lot of enjoyment out of it, the birds coming to nest, or watching the frogs and newts around the pond; it brings the garden to life, and is a source of excitement for the kids."

"I think like us, everyone can work with what space they have, have a small tree, unusual plants, or create different habitats; basically anything

other than hard paving can be an asset to wildlife, and benefits us as well. So I think incentives to plant a garden will definitely get people to think about it!"

Unlike previous eras, where private garden management has largely been left to the discretion of the homeowner, Professor Cameron argues that radical changes in policy and practice are now required if local authorities are to deal effectively with the impacts of [climate change](#) and biodiversity loss at a city level.

He said, "Our research shows that some cities may have lost as much as 50 percent of their 'green' garden space over the last two decades. Many residents use artificial grass that kills much of the soil life underneath it, and when real plants are present, we wrongly assume we need to hit them with a cocktail of chemicals to keep them alive and free of pests. These chemicals pollute our watercourses and damage the ecological function of our gardens."

The research suggests well-planted gardens not only provide a quality habitat for wildlife, but also improves local air quality, improves health and well-being, provides people with the opportunity to grow their own food, connect with nature and reduce energy bills by better insulating homes.

Professor Helen Woolley, Head of the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Sheffield, said, "The value of this research is it categorically states the value of a particular landscape type and how that links to different socio-environmental agendas. Many citizens quickly realized the value of their home gardens during the pandemic lockdowns, and this academic paper builds on and reinforces what we learned then. It is important that policy makers and planners take note."

Professor Ross Cameron is also the author of a new book exploring the science behind how introducing [plants](#) into your life and space, irrespective of how much outdoor space you actually have, can promote a powerful, long-lasting and positive impact on your well-being. "[How plants can save your life](#)" will be published by Quercus on May 25, 2023.

More information: Ross Cameron, "Do we need to see gardens in a new light?" Recommendations for policy and practice to improve the ecosystem services derived from domestic gardens, *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ufug.2022.127820](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2022.127820)

Provided by University of Sheffield

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