

Gardening without Plastic by Sally Nex
Friday, 3rd May

At a talk given by Emily Penn, a skipper and ocean advocate, Sally Nex was horrified to learn of the thousands of tons of plastic polluting our oceans and beaches, and the devastating effect they are having on marine ecosystems. The talk changed her life. Driven to reassess her work as a gardener, Sally pledged not to introduce any new plastic into her garden and her talk introduced us to alternatives.

UK gardeners currently get through about 500 million plastic pots every single year as well as countless plastic plant labels, seed trays, bedding plant trays, polythene cloches, etc. and yet Victorian gardeners managed perfectly well without plastic. Plastic seed trays, while convenient at the time and can be re-used, take 400 years to break down and so she recommended that we do not re-use them once they start to break up. Check that your garden centre has an arrangement for recycling pots, however recycling is not the long-term answer. The only solution is not to use plastic.

Seed trays can be made relatively easily using wood, lined with newspaper. Seedlings in wooden trays grow better than in plastic trays and to create seed modules, take 3 sheets of newspaper folded into 6 strips. Cut the strips and roll them round a shot glass – this creates 5 cm modules. Sally has conducted many trials and finds that bio-degradable pots produce better plants. Using toilet roll tubes is a favourite way to start seedlings (Andrex ones are more robust than Tesco ones!) but it makes no difference to the plants and the plants can be planted directly into the soil. Sweet peas however, do not grow well in toilet roll tubes – they prefer pots.

New clay pots have a high carbon footprint so Sally recommends buying second-hand pots, available at on-line auctions. Alternatively, rice hull pots are bio-degradable and last up to 5 years. Coir plant pots come from coconut and are seen as a good alternative but they biodegrade slowly and they are shipped long distances. Paper-maché pots are a very efficient way of growing and are completely bio-degradable. The seemingly outlandish idea of wool pots proves to be a very good option; use as a normal pot and then plant the whole thing as it is completely bio-degradable and, if the top rim is left proud of the soil, it is a good slug deterrent. You can make your own pots using cardboard, using masking tape to stick the edges together.

Plant labels. Lollipop sticks are often used as an alternative to plastic ones but they absorb water and rot eventually. Bamboo labels are better than wood and are naturally water-resistant. Slate labels last forever and can be written on with chalk or Tippex which can be sandpapered and the slate re-used.

String. Hemp string is better than jute or nylon as it is very strong, durable and resistant to mould and mildew. Use jute pea-netting – it will last two or three years.

Fleece. The garden fleece traditionally used is made of polypropylene and should therefore be banned from your garden. Alternative products are made of hessian or wool.

Sally made other suggestions about ways to eliminate plastic, for example, using hessian sacks for Gro-bags and using water butts (galvanised) and a watering can rather than hose pipes.

Of course, compost bought from a garden centre or supermarket is only available in plastic bags and there is only so much you can do to re-use the bags. The better idea is to make your own compost.

Sally stressed that the spread of plastic in every aspect of our environments was caused by a billion tiny individual actions and if the 30 million gardeners in this country stopped using plastic, they could make a big difference. Her talk gave us many ways in which we could be part of that solution. She was truly inspirational.