

Reclaiming their roots



Deborah Colvin

Ahead of National Gardening Week, which begins on Monday (29 April), DEBORAH COLVIN tells Sarah Olowofoyeku about a church with a garden in the heart of London

A SUMMER'S lunchtime in a city often includes the sight of workers cramming into any plot of green within walking distance of their office to enjoy a few minutes of sunshine in a garden. One such oasis from a concrete jungle is the garden of St James's Church in London's Piccadilly.

On a not-so-summery day I meet with Deborah, one of two churchwardens at St James's, in the church offices. Outside, the churchyard is teeming with life, despite the rain, as people patronise the street food stalls set up outside the building

'We have an employed gardener,' says Deborah, 'and she has worked hard to develop the place for biodiversity. We're building the soil and ensuring we have plants flowering all year round. This attracts the invertebrates, such as bees, which then attract the birds.'

National Gardening Week celebrates the positive difference a garden can make in people's lives. 'One of the benefits of our garden is that we sometimes hire the premises out, so the garden makes it a lovely space for people to hold events,' enthuses Deborah. 'But

secondly, we run citizen science projects, so it's educational as well. People come along to learn about birds and sometimes we run bug watches through a programme called Open Air Laboratories (Opal), in which people can come and identify creatures and record changes over time.

'The biggest advantage is reconnecting people to the natural world in the heart of Piccadilly.'

The St James's garden has been the recipient of a Green Flag award, which is the mark of a quality park or green space. It has been a part of St James's for many years. But the garden has been developed a great deal recently as the church worked to attain its Eco Church gold award, which

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it received towards the end of last year.

'Eco Church is a scheme run by A Rocha UK, a Christian conservation organisation,' Deborah explains. 'Churches can take a survey and assess their performance against five categories – buildings, grounds, worship and teaching, lifestyle and global initiatives. It's helpful for thinking about what you're doing.'

As well as working as a churchwarden, Deborah serves as the sustainability champion for the church and has been working on many of the initiatives that helped it gain its Eco Church gold award.

'We decreased our energy use in the building by 60 per cent through a whole range of actions – changing our behaviour, turning down the thermostat, getting a new boiler, putting insulation in the roof and putting LEDs right across the site,' she says.

At St James's, Deborah explains, nature and the environment have been incorporated into regular church life. 'We have liturgies in the garden and we celebrate festivals such as harvest and rogation. They are ancient liturgies that people have celebrated for centuries and that are linked to the outside world.'

'We run talks and events about various theologies of nature so that people can connect to teaching they might not otherwise hear. We also get involved in campaigns, such as Earth Day.'

Deborah believes that connection to nature and care for the environment are closely linked to faith. 'Doing Eco Church and the environmental work is about loving our neighbour,' she says.

'Now that we live in this globalised world, we have to recognise that our neighbours are those who are close and those who are far away. The actions we take that affect the natural world, are impacting people on the other side of the world. They affect other species too, who I would also say are our neighbours.'

Some people may feel that there is no point in their trying to save the environment because their actions cannot make a difference, or that an all-powerful God should be able to take care of ecological problems himself. But Deborah argues that the Christian faith is not based on an

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interventionist God.

'We have a religion based on the extraordinary example of Jesus' behaviour,' she says, 'and to me it always comes back to "love your neighbour". Then we have to reinterpret that for our time. That's what living religion is.'

Many people across the UK are making steps to return to nature, whether through gardening or being more environmentally friendly. Deborah agrees that

it is the right thing for people to do.

'We have to reclaim our roots,' she says. 'The Bible doesn't just

talk about humans, it also talks about the trees and the fields and the Earth as a whole. We have to recognise that Christ is for all of creation. We all belong together.'



The pond and bog garden



The garden at St James's

CHRIS DAVIES



The church garden receives its first Green Flag award

