

# An interview with Clair Evans, a grower at Communigrow

March 2022



*One of our dedicated and talented growers, Clair Evans, shares her experience being part of Communigrow. Clair is not only passionate about growing her own food, making vegan recipes and recycling; she is a dab hand at woodwork too.*

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## ***Sui Searle: Can you give us an outline of your role at Communigrow?***

Clair Evans: I'm officially a grower. But sometimes I do a bit of carpentry, a bit of up-cycling of old pallets, and whatever needs doing. I'm happy to help, I like mucking in. It doesn't feel like a job, it feels like a hobby or a pastime. I work part time here, two days a week and a few hours some Saturdays too.

## ***How long have you been at Communigrow?***

I've been here almost 3 years now. I started in October 2019, so it was all very different, then Covid happened March 2020 at the start of the growing season so the first year was a bit...unusual. But surprisingly enough we did manage to get quite a bit of produce in.

## ***How did you first come across Communigrow?***

I live in Ditton. I've always known about Communigrow but I had a full time job so I never managed to make it to the field when it was open. I think I picked up a veg box or two on a Saturday, years ago. And then I got a bit of free time, I went part time at work, and started volunteering here.

I then decided to leave my full time job and do gardening work with and for, my friend, mostly mowing lawns & weeding. I saw the job advertised and my love of vegetables made me apply.

## ***I was going to ask what attracted you here...***

Vegetables! I'm a big fan of eating & growing vegetables. I think it's the colourful food thing, it's a self sufficiency thing too. I dream of living off grid & not being reliant on supermarkets.

## ***Have you always grown food yourself?***

Not always, no. For the last few years I have. I used to have chickens, so didn't have the space, and the constraints of work and family made having an allotment difficult. When the chickens passed away I turned the area into a reasonable sized veg patch.

***It's challenging growing food for yourself. For me, that's why I like coming here, because you feel like you're contributing to a bigger effort as part of a community.***

Yes. It's a bigger scale as well. There's so much space and so many varieties. At home you only grow what you eat really. There's no point growing things you don't eat. Whereas here, we grow everything we can. It's like a community allotment.

***What have been your most favourite, joyful things about working here?***

The sunshine! [Laughs] I don't know actually. I don't think I have a favourite thing. It's just anything and everything. I like pottering about and there's always stuff to do.

***Have you had any formal gardening training?***

I started an RHS Horticulture course in September 2019 but then Covid... So it got cancelled. It was a practical course but it was mostly in the classroom. I think experience is going to stick better than someone writing on a whiteboard. It's so hands-on here plus you get advice from people like Paul who have been around forever and just knows things. You could pick up more tips from him and David than you could in a classroom.

***Yes, and Paul gives his knowledge so easily. It just comes out as you're gardening together.***

Yes, there's no point having knowledge is there if you're not going to share it? There's no point keeping it secret.

***What challenges have you been faced with working here at Communigrow?***

I don't think there have been any really. During Covid I was coming round here on my own, because I could just walk round, I was coming round and doing bits and pieces. If we didn't get things growing, March time, that's another year gone isn't it. We were winging it a little bit but I like a challenge so I didn't really see it as negative.

***You mentioned you knew about Communigrow before working here through the veg box scheme. I know the veg boxes were a large part of what attracted me to Communigrow. Do you think the veg boxes are an important part of what Communigrow does here?***

It's an important part for me. It's the main part I'm interested in and feels like the end product. Everybody eats food. Everybody in the village eats food. It would be nice if we pushed the vegetables as much as we do the education side of things. It's frustrating sometimes because they seem to get forgotten about. It sometimes feels like the produce gets left by the wayside, which is a shame.

***What kinds of things would you like to see grown here that aren't currently being grown?***

I don't know. We've pretty much covered everything. We had so many seeds last year. I'd like to see more melons. I grew watermelons at home, just petite ones the size of my hand. I brought a couple in. We ate a melon here one day. It's novel isn't it.

***That's actually a really great idea. Growing more diverse food could be a good way of attracting a greater diversity of people to the field. People connect to food. Something to give more thought to perhaps...?***

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### ***What improvements do you think could be made at Communigrow?***

More organisation and more structure. More so everybody knows what they're doing and what's expected. For example, the first of every month we sow salad again, or something. A notice board maybe: for example, has the polytunnel been watered today? Yes/no?

Maybe some child-friendly activities not during school term times so that people who don't have home-educated children could join in here as well. We have a junior school, an infant school and two playschools in Ditton alone. Maybe we could offer some sessions? Encouraging the local kids to come here would mean the parents knew about the field as well.

Also, perhaps instead of covering ground in [weed suppressant] black plastic, removing it and digging the ground, we could leave the ground and no-dig it?

### ***Do you practice no-dig at home?***

Yes, at home I do.

### ***How did you learn about no-dig?***

I don't know actually. It's one of those things you know and can't quite pinpoint. It was probably an Instagram post or something that I came across. Probably Charles Dowding or Jack's Patch. It just makes sense.



***Yes, you don't release the carbon from the soil and actually it's a lot less effort than digging. You feed the soil and grow food at the same time.***

Yes, why disrupt the soil and let the weed seeds come to the surface plus it's hard work. It just doesn't make sense to make more work for yourself.

### ***Is no-dig something you would like to see happen here?***

Yeah. I'd love it. We could get in touch with some local kitchen fitters and ask if we could have all their [cardboard] cabinet boxes [to lay on top of the soil], and do away with this black plastic. And use green manure rather than the black plastic too.

### ***Have you made any meaningful connections or discoveries about yourself since starting at Communigrow?***

No, I don't think so. I like being in the sunshine and fresh air and I like pottering about. I've always known that.

### ***What new skills or horticultural knowledge have you picked up here?***

Hmm, how to dig leeks up! I'd never grown leeks before. I do now. They're quite deep in the ground and the deeper down you get them the better leek! Probably little gems like that that I'll only remember when I need to use them.

### ***Is there any advice or encouragement you would give to people looking to join in at the Communigrow field?***

Yeah, just do it! Just get yourself in there, in the fresh air. It's so chilled here.

### ***What has the field given to you in your time here?***

Peace and quiet. It's relaxing at the field. It's a nice, calm, slow place in a busy life. You can look around and there's space here.

### ***What do you hope to give to the field and the people who come here in your time here?***

Oh, vegetables! Yummy food. I'd like people to be interested in growing their own. You don't need a big space. It would be nice if people took that and became less reliant on supermarkets.