

An interview with David Jeffrey, Horticultural Leader at Communigrow

April 2022



David Jeffrey took up a full-time position at Communigrow after being made redundant back in 2020. Reflecting on the past two years, David who has more than 50 years' experience in the horticultural sector says he feels "at home" working at the charity. David is very skilled and experienced and has been able to transfer his knowledge to those who volunteer to maintain the 3-acre site. He had previously served within a role in a prison – teaching inmates valuable life skills including how to grow and harvest their own crops.

Sui Searle: Before you came to Communigrow you were working as a Head Gardener looking after people in a prison. What things did you learn there that you have brought with you to Communigrow?

David Jeffrey: I think a sense of giving everybody a chance. The people that came to me to learn about horticulture, all wanted to learn more. Often they thought that they didn't want to do some of the other subjects that were available (like English and Maths) because they didn't think they could. But I showed them that actually, although horticulture has always been seen to be "oh if you can't do anything else, do gardening because it's simple", actually it's very complex and there is also a lot of English and a lot of maths involved. One of the things that I did there that I've started to do here as well is I taught the Latin name of all the plants. And I think that's why I enjoy being here, because this is a teaching field before we do anything else and I want everybody that comes here to learn something. It could be about vegetables or it could be about cooking or nature... And prison did the same thing. It's giving people hope really. I want this to be a friendly field - I want it to feel welcoming and for people to feel welcomed. Somebody said to me a few weeks ago "you make me feel welcome", and that was really nice. Because if you feel welcome then you feel as if you belong and that's the thing. I think the whole point of the charity is to let people feel they belong to something. Especially as this pandemic has isolated so many people and if we can bring people together just a little bit and give them the confidence to go out and do more.

What have been your favourite and most joyful things about working at the Communigrow field?

That's difficult! That really is difficult. Everything, I think. Everything that we do here has been a real joy. I mean, there have been some days where you think "oh no", like last year's tomato crop. Everyone was coming in and saying "oh my tomatoes have gone", but I think it's that everybody wants to help everybody else and that's the feeling I want to get on the field. That it doesn't matter what experience you have, you may not have any experience in gardening, but you can still learn and you can still teach others, because you may have a skill that comes in that they haven't thought of. So I don't think there's been one major thing. Maybe getting Alan to count to twenty! All the time he's been coming here he's only been able to count to four but he counted all the way to twenty and that was a real achievement and was really nice.

Apart from the tomatoes, what other challenges have you been faced with in your time here?

Um, the weeds! This seems to be a very weedy field. Mainly because there's a lot of grass because it was a grass field before. Well, it was an orchard. So it had grass in it, and thistles. They seem to be the two main problems that we have here. But apart from that, it's just the remoteness of it really - because we don't have electricity and that brings its own challenges to some of the things we want to do. However, because it is remote we've had some really interesting people finding us. Because we're so far away from everyone, if they find us, they're interested to see, "oh we didn't know you were here", and then once they've found us they want to join in.

How have most of those people come across Communigrow?

They've either been looking for something, so they've looked and found us on social media, or they've been walking and they've stumbled across us and come into the field. We've got footpaths both ways. If they've been walking across I've always invited them to come in and show them around. So, social media for those who are looking for something and people walking who aren't particularly looking for anything but have found us.

We grow using natural and sustainable methods here at Communigrow. Are there any lessons or advice you would give to people looking to grow food in a natural way at home, who might find it a bit daunting?

Yes, the biggest thing is, if you're trying to grow in a natural way then you're working with nature rather than against it. Farmers who don't grow organically are fighting against nature and so that's why they have to produce stronger and stronger chemicals, because nature has a way of adapting itself against the chemicals that we use against them.

So, if you're going to grow without chemicals then it's about using natural things to help you with that. We put cornflowers next to broad beans because cornflowers attract ladybirds and they eat the blackfly, but also, there must be something within the cornflower that stops the blackfly coming to the broad beans. It's the same as using carrots and onions - onions give off a scent that carrot root fly don't like and carrots put off a scent that onion fly don't like as well. So it's finding those combinations. And it's not new. People say it's companion planting but gardeners have been doing this for hundreds of years. A lot of what we call companion planting was around in places like Egypt.

If you're going to grow naturally then it's also about putting up with certain things. Your carrots may not be fully straight - they might be bent or sometimes may have little scabs on them, and the same with potatoes, however you can still use them. It's still food. You can also use some plants, such as marigolds, if you put the roots into water then you can use that as an insecticide against mealworm and things like that. So there's a vast range of things that grow naturally that you can use to help. But my bit of advice is don't be disappointed, take it and work with it, you will get success but it may not be the success that you expect.

A lot of the chemical free produce grown in the Communigrow field goes into the veg boxes. How important are the veg boxes?

They're very important. It's all seasonal food, so we only put in food that is right on that week. It also means that we're reaching out to the community because a lot of the boxes go to people within a couple of miles of the field.



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It brings people in as well so they know where the veg is growing and they can see how it has been grown and it also gives us a chance to have a chat with them as well and talk to people. Sometimes they come in with their experiences - "oh you've got lovely carrots, my carrots haven't done anything...". A lot of people that buy from us may grow a few things themselves, or they've always been interested in growing. What I have found with the veg boxes, they've introduced people to the field and then they become volunteers, or volunteers are introduced to the veg boxes. It's a two-way thing.



Yes, when people come to collect their veg boxes it's clear how that connection is important. Communication takes place, bonds get made, you can exchange ideas and have a chat about things.

Yes, and we don't just talk about the veg boxes, we talk about what's going on in the world and things like this but it's a very neutral place and people feel as though they can open up and say things and that's really good.

What are some of the things you'd like to achieve or change over the next growing period?

Growing-wise, we're going to set up some specific beds which will look into plants for global warming. One will be an

Italian/Mediterranean bed. And we're going to set up a Europe-Asian bed, so it will be Syrian food, food from India, as they're semi-arid. We'll be looking at how they cope with the climate here. We're also going to do a moon planting bed (planting by the moon phases or biodynamic planting). We started one last year and we're going to do another one this year. Two volunteers already want to get involved in the Mediterranean bed. I will be there to help them on their way but they will work on it and take the lead with it. The other thing I really want to do is start teaching City & Guilds, Level 1 to start with, then maybe Level 2, for everybody here. We'll start off with staff, then volunteers. It's important people feel they're getting something out of being here. Volunteers to me are very, very important. I couldn't do any of the work here without the volunteers. I want to make them feel as welcome and as comfortable as possible.

What has the field and the people here given to you in your time here?

Peace. Sorry, there's a kestrel [David points up to a kestrel hovering in the air just beside where we are sitting].

Oh wow, so beautiful! Against that blue sky!

[Laughs] Wildlife! Yes, I think peace and having people here that want to get away from the madness of the world really. The hustle and bustle here is nice. Right now it's quiet and peaceful.

What do you hope to give to the people and the field in your time here?

My expertise, my time and sharing what I've got. I want to share my experience with others. And that's what I've always wanted to do. Whatever I've done, I want to share that experience, because that's why we're here.

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