

Meet the team



An interview with Richard King, one of our hard-working volunteers and a true CommuniGrow's ambassador.



Richard joined CommuniGrow a year ago and has been helping us with gardening and DIY jobs. He is a keen gardener and very good at fixing and making structures usable again. He's a caring and conscientious person with a very positive attitude - always finding solutions and being ready to help. He is a real asset and an active ambassador of the charity who has also been promoting the charity within his group of colleagues and the Hunton Gardening Group.

If you would like to meet him in person, come on a Thursday morning. Until then, we hope you enjoy this interview, conducted by Sui, one of our dedicated volunteers.

Sui Searle: How did you come to find out about CommuniGrow?

Richard King: I was researching around the area locally for volunteering opportunities outdoors connected with nature. I came across CommuniGrow through my work. I work in the health sector and I was actually talking to my manager about what I was looking to do and she said "oh what about CommuniGrow?". It often comes up on other charities' information that comes through. Just very small, but it does come up. And I checked it out and that's what led me to CommuniGrow. But my drive really was that I was starting to think about nature, growing my own and organising my garden to source my own food and things like that, and I just thought I could expand that to a wider purpose.

I think what I recognised, particularly because during lockdown my work changed over night from in-person work, face-to-face getting out in the community, to being at a computer in an office permanently, and although there are positives and benefits to working from home, there's also downsides. After a few days I can feel very isolated with lots of screen time and a lack of outdoors and movement. I start to feel fatigued. The body feels the effects of it. You mentally feel tired but physically you feel fatigued from not moving. So I thought, I really need to get outdoors physically and actively doing something. So I purposely put my CommuniGrow day after my working days so that I have a physical day outdoors.

You garden at home don't you Richard? And you're quite involved and active in your garden?

Yes, we started actively changing our garden into a garden and food growing. Partly because my wife has intolerances to some food - for example with preservatives in. So we started thinking about growing our own naturally that would reduce the preservatives in our food.

So you started becoming more conscious of the food that you're eating?

Very conscious, but also the other conscious side of it that I was starting to see a lot more was just the impact of nature. So I think the whole lot just came together. Sort of wanting to eat healthier, but also actually starting to get quite down at times about... the more I understood about our role with nature and climate change. So I felt I wanted to do something.

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Given that you are quite involved in your own garden, what made you look to volunteer elsewhere when you have your garden to work on?

I think I knew I was not only getting to the point of doing as much as I could in my garden so I'd be useful gardening somewhere else, but also as I work in the health sector, by nature I like to be part of something that has a community base that helps others as well. But at the same time, I didn't want to be in a role where I was responsible for other people's welfare in the voluntary role, because I do that for my day job. So I wanted an active role in a community venture, but doing something where it could also release me from those responsibilities.

There are so many gardens and charities and volunteering opportunities around, what specifically drew you to Communigrow?

I think what separated this is that it felt very much more organic, it didn't feel like it had a business behind it that was driving it. It didn't feel commercialised and it felt more organic in its nature and it's often the smaller organisations like this that don't get the visibility like the more commercialised ventures. So I think I wanted to be part of something that needed help that doesn't have that visibility and doesn't have that backing. And what I found here when I did come was a really nice group of people who felt the same really.

You talk about how it felt organic in terms of not being commercialised or like a big business/corporate/profit-driven, does it matter to you also that they grow "organically" without pesticides here? Was that a consideration?

I think that was all part of how my values are changing about the environment, so yeah, the fact that they're growing organically. I think that I also wanted to be part of something that was part of growing organically and healthily and doing that for the community but also something I could learn about as well at the same time. I know that I far from understand everything about growing, so I knew there were like minded people here who I could learn from.

And since you've been here, what kind of tasks have you been taking part in, or which have been most memorable?

So many tasks! I think seasonally it changes. Like now it's often more looking at how we can structure the site more practically. Spring/summer we're out more actively on the land hands on. But probably one of the most memorable is dismantling the Dutch barn from another site to bring it here. Again, another ethos of this place is to try and reuse things.

Yeah, there's a lot of salvaging isn't there? And recycling. And people donate a lot of things too.

Yeah, so to be able to source something that was no longer needed but was in good condition, to bring here so it has another purpose, that was quite memorable. Lots of memorable points but it's mainly been around the people who have been here at the time. Sort of the interactions and what we're doing at the time.

What kind of things do you enjoy doing the most when you come?

I quite like turning up on site and never knowing what is actually going to happen! It's quite random.

Yes, it's very varied isn't it!

Very varied! Every week I come down it's something different. So you never get bored.

How much of your time do you volunteer here? How often do you come?

So my structure is to be here on a Thursday from morning through to the afternoon. So one day a week.

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Do you feel as though you've had any challenges to deal with, or has it all been quite fun and easy?

I think probably the challenges just in my time has been change. There's change in every organisation and when people leave and new people start and have new ideas, it's a natural adjustment phase of things settling down and working out what the next change is and how you're going to be a part of that, I guess.

I feel similarly, that we've had a real period of transition with lots of changes just recently. And it's always funny when you start at a place with certain people and then there's a lot of change, it can feel disruptive.

Yes, suddenly you're getting used to new people.

As part of the changes going forward, are there any things or areas of improvement you'd particularly like to see happening?

I think I do see it starting to happen but from a growing point of view we're looking to improve gardening with soil health in mind. So things like the no-dig ideas. I'd like to see things like rainwater harvesting and trying to be as sustainable as possible is one side of the growing aspect. I guess the other side that they're doing, which I think is really healthy, is to educate and bring in people from communities who may have lost touch with their food - to get back in touch with growing and what it means to eat healthily. So that branch of the project I think feels really important. Especially at this time, moving forward with trying to get that shift for the better of the planet.

What things do you most enjoy growing and what things would you like to see growing here?

Probably most of what is grown here - all the vegetable and things. One of the things that's nice is that I get to see new vegetables that I didn't even know existed. One that sticks out is a summer crooked-neck squash. I tried it and it was a new flavour that I'd never come across before. It opens your mind to new veg that you haven't come across before.

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Have you made any meaningful connections or learnt any new skills since you've been here?

Yeah, I've learnt lots of things about planting in the field and how to do things that I didn't know. From practical things that we've been doing to shared ideas that others have had that I thought were really good and useful to embrace. So yeah, I think it's all round, ongoing learning. I like that we learn from each other. There's opportunity for people to share. And I like people's enthusiasm to share as well.

Have you learnt anything about yourself in the year that you've been coming here?

Yeah, I've learnt that it's good always to step out your comfort zone, because I was probably anxious for quite a while about actually doing something like this and I think that's always the learning I take away. To always try things out and step out your comfort zone because that's really how you learn and how you grow.

That almost answers my next question which is, is there any advice or encouragement you would give to people looking to join in with CommuniGrow?

Yeah, just to take that chance. See what it's like and it might be for you. It won't be for everybody but I think there's lots of people who - particularly in today's modern world, that doesn't work for so many of us - just want to connect back again with others and nature.

That's so beautiful. And that's so true, yeah, I think the modern world doesn't work for many people, even if they may not always realise or connect with that. It's harsh and unforgiving and not always very caring, really.

It's absolutely lost sight of what's important to us as humans to thrive. We're very organic as humans, we can learn so

much from nature - about how nature works, how we work and how we interact with it to thrive. But the modern world is so fast, so technology based and all the things that create a lot of stress and unhappiness and don't always help humans a lot of the time.

Yeah. Obviously technology has given us so many benefits. But it feels like another layer of separation. We're so separated from who we are as human beings as part of the natural world, as part of the animal world. There's so many barriers between us, our food and what it is we need to live, survive, thrive and to care for ourselves and each other.

I think it takes away the creativity of the human mind, that children have. You put a child in an environment like this and their curiosity will take them everywhere. They want to touch and smell things and enhance their sensory experience of what's going on here. But we're, I think as adults, we get chained to inactivity and looking at things and searching for things, rather than engaging with the actual experience and remembering that our minds are creative and really more at peace with nature than the fast pace of the modern world.

What has the field (or land) here given to you in the time that you've spent here?

For me, I think it was always about getting outdoors, connecting with nature, being part of that, but also being part of a group, connecting with like minded people is the thing that I probably take the most. Even on the days where, like everybody, I'm like, ugh, you know your own mind gets in the way of you doing things... I'm like, no I know it's good for me once I'm on site and I just get down here and get moving and talking to people.

And what do you hope to give to the land/the field in your time here?

I just hope that whatever use I can provide, whether it's planting, whether it's doing simple things like working the soil, and things that help to keep the land healthy are the things for me. Really helping - again, it's a full cycle isn't it, as we said we have a lot of veg around us and that then potentially goes back into the community and feeds them and people can come and be healthier.

Yeah, and I guess that touches on the last question as well which is: what do you hope to give to the people and the community in your time here?

I would love, because I do have a real hypothesis that if we all embrace healthier eating habits and grew more of our own, not only would our environment be healthier but actually the impact on medical conditions and health would see a massive improvement. I think we forget to invest in that level of self care and just looking after ourselves and eating well.



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