

## **An Investment that Grows**

Garden designer Barry Lupton explains how garden investments can provide lifetime dividends.

If you told someone twenty years ago that you were employing the services of a garden designer, you'd probably be met with a confused stare and... 'a garden what?' Nowadays, you'd most likely be met with an agreeing nod and... 'what are you having done?'



So what's changed? Put simply, *us*.

Over the last couple of decades our perceptions and attitudes have undergone a radical shift. Influenced by mass media exposure to garden activities, increased disposable income, a general diffusion of the health benefits associated with gardening and the celebratisation of gardeners, we now look at our gardens in a very different light. These, and a host of other less obvious stimuli have opened our minds to a host of garden opportunities. The concrete path, the garden gnome and the whirly-gig washing line have given way to the outdoor living experience, the living, lifestyle accessory and the roofless room. The contemporary Irish garden is less about goal posts and drying a geansai, and more about aspirational lifestyle goals.

But what dividends will you really reap for investing in your garden? Measuring returns on gardens investment can be done in a multitude of ways. For ease of explanation, I've broken down possible dividends under various headings and included brief explanations of the factors driving them. At the end of the article I've included web links for further reading.

### ***Health and Well-being***

There's no escaping it, our lives our hectic. From the moment we wake, we're under the clock and bombarded with a constant stream of information, thrown at us through every conceivable medium. By the time we clock-off at night - if we still even do that - our minds are so frazzled that it's no wonder that we've energy for little more than channel hopping. Enter the garden.



It's been common knowledge since, well... since we invented common knowledge, that gardens can have a calming effect upon stressed minds and can plicate weary souls in need of rest. Over the last few years our common knowledge has been bolstered by a raft of anecdotal evidence, and more recently, an abundance of scientific research that has sought prove what we

already know to be true; that gardens are good for us. In addition to the general understanding that contact with nature can help to reduce stress, a number of recent scientific papers have revealed that views of trees from hospital wards can help to speed recovery; crèche's set in natural surroundings report fewer absences due to sickness, and a Scandinavian study showed that playing in natural surroundings increases concentration and motor skills in young children.



Before you rush out to the garden in search of respite, swing by your medicine cabinet and take a look at the active ingredients in your vitamin supplements, immune system boosters and cold remedies. I think you'll find they're almost exclusively derived from plants. And guess what, most can be grown in your garden.

The changes of the last twenty years may well have opened our minds to the endless possibilities for our gardens, but when it comes to what we grow in them, we're looking backwards to go forwards. Perhaps best illustrated by the recent BBC show, *Grow Your Own Drugs*, which got back to basics about growing and using medicinal and culinary plant species. As evidenced by the recent surge in sales of herbs, we appear to be ditching the well-marketed, expensively packaged, manufactured cures, in favour of home-remedies; and we're boosting our health with raw ingredients that can be produced for next to nothing in our own backyards.

### ***A Very Tasty Garden Indeed.***

Closely linked to the rising concerns about health and well being is the increase in food *insecurity* - where does it come from, was it ethically produced, is it sustainable? And so on. With the volume of negative media surrounding modern food production methods, it's amazing that we eat anything at all. Enter the garden...again.



*'To put homegrown food in perspective, one recent study calculated that a typical bag of prepared salad contains 70 calories but can take up to 4500 calories to produce! The same study calculated that to open your back door, sprinkle some salad seeds on the ground and water them in, takes 7 calories. You work it out.'*

In addition to opting for more holistic, natural approaches to our health, we're also rediscovering our gardens as wonderful places to produce food. Deep inside us all is an evolutionary urge to grow-our-own. If you don't believe me, take a look around. From Bloom to Chelsea and Mizen to Malin, designers, gardeners and non-gardeners alike are experimenting with food production on an unprecedented scale. Lawns, paving and decking are being replaced with greenhouses, raised beds and cold frames. The worm is turning and we're shaking off the thin veneer of Margo and Gerry and embracing the depth, warmth and satisfaction of Tom and Barbara. In addition to providing peace of mind about food provenance, our natural compulsion to cultivate, and the pure joy of lifting your first crop of spuds or apples will have us trading our Minolos for wellies in the very near future. Bring it on.

### **Save the World from your Garden**

If providing you with food and medicine isn't enough to get you out into the garden, what about saving the world? Unless you've been living in a cave - no offence to cave dwellers - you will be very familiar with the foreboding language of environmental destruction; Global warming, habitat loss, ozone depletion, floods, droughts...the list goes on and makes for very unpleasant reading.

Now I'm not going to tell you that you'll solve all the worlds environmental problems by doing a bit of gardening, what I will say is that you can make a very significant contribution with very little input. From simple interventions such as the introduction of a bird table or water butt, to more significant ones like a naturalised pond, a wildflower meadow or permeable paving, you can effect real change; change that can contribute to the creation of a world that is as rich and diverse, if not more so, than the one we inherited from our parents.

*'The real meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you will never sit'*

Besides the measurable environmental dividends delivered by going natural, you'll also find that it can save you money through reduced energy, chemical and water input, giving you more time to simply kick back and enjoy the magic of life in action.

### **The Greatest Classroom on Earth**

Gardens can be the most engaging, stimulating and exciting learning environment. From safe-havens for a baby's first steps, to exploring the senses; to understanding nature, the seasons, the universe and your place in it; to places to learn about the environment, nutrition and science. In an increasingly sedentary world, gardens offer us a whole range of educational opportunities that make learning fun.



And while gardens might be primarily associated with the cultivation of plants, with a little creativity and some innovative thinking, they can become dynamic, living classrooms where young minds can be cultivated, and where important, aspirational lessons can be instilled, diffused and put into action.

What better dividend can you receive from your investment than seeing the next generation harness the valuable lessons you instilled in them through using the natural environment?

*'A swing is a swing is a swing. A garden is an escape, a jungle; it's mission control, the setting for an impromptu play, the scene of a shoot out between cowboys and Indians; a garden is anything a child wants it to be.'*

### **Know thy Neighbour**

You may not be aware of it, but gardens and gardening are fantastic catalysts for making friends: and I don't just mean having the neighbours around for a bbq. Although that works too!

As a nation we love to talk, we love stories, people and face-to-face contact. So it's unfortunate that one of the effects of the last twenty years has been the dilution of our sense of community. In a few short years we've devolved from a nation of interconnected communities to an economy of disparate individuals. And if you've been around long enough to appreciate what that means, then, like me, you probably miss the *good ole days*.

Now I'm not about to tell you that an investment in your garden will cure all our social ills, but I will tell you - that like the environment - it can make a serious contribution. Investing in your garden, particularly your front garden, indicates pride, and commitment to your locality that can be picked up upon by neighbours. It can quickly evolve to instil community identity, ownership and sense of belonging. Which, as we all know, translates into increased property values.



What might start with the purchase of a packet of seeds, might end up with you exchanging cuttings and plants with people you never met, building friendships, communities and ultimately, great places to live. As the saying goes, *from little acorns do big trees grow.*

### **Hard Cash**

No review of investment dividends would be complete without reference to finance. In a world when even the most assured ventures are anything but secure, it's great to be able to say that a garden investment is guaranteed to grow. Ignoring the obvious pun, it's interesting to note that rather than depreciating with age - like most fixed assets - a garden appreciates in value. And unlike a good wine, which also gains value with the passing of time, you get to enjoy every moment as it ages.

*'A recent study has shown that a well landscaped garden featuring mature trees can increase the saleability of a house by as much as 20% and can command a 10% increase in value as against a similar property with a poorly landscape garden.'*

In addition to gaining value as it matures - one could also measure value in terms of aesthetics, environment and health - recent studies have revealed that a quality landscape can also increase the saleability of property and rental returns. No small comfort in these precarious times.

### **Looks aren't everything**

With all the benefits that gardens provide, or at least the ones I've highlighted, it could be easy to conclude without reminding you about one of the most important dividends of all: Beauty. Gardens can be magical places, places to relax, retreat, unwind and observe the wonder of the living world. Whether it's the scent of a *Daphne* in flower, the feel of a lambs-ear leaf on your skin, the sound of wind rustling through trees or subtle hues of colour change through the seasons, your garden can be a place of sublime beauty, that words - particularly my ones - cannot do justice.

If you want a sound investment opportunity forget about financial advisors, talk to your local garden designer instead. You might find that the greatest dividends of all are staring you in the face.

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Web links to further reading.
<b>Gardens as learning tools</b>
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<b>General garden benefits and property values</b>
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<a href="http://www.wildflowers.ie/wild_gardening/gardening/index.htm">http://www.wildflowers.ie/wild_gardening/gardening/index.htm</a>

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