

My great outdoors

Having your own outside space, no matter how small, can help you unwind and feel at one with the world. Five women tell us why their open-air sanctuaries are so special to them

By JO UPCRAFT

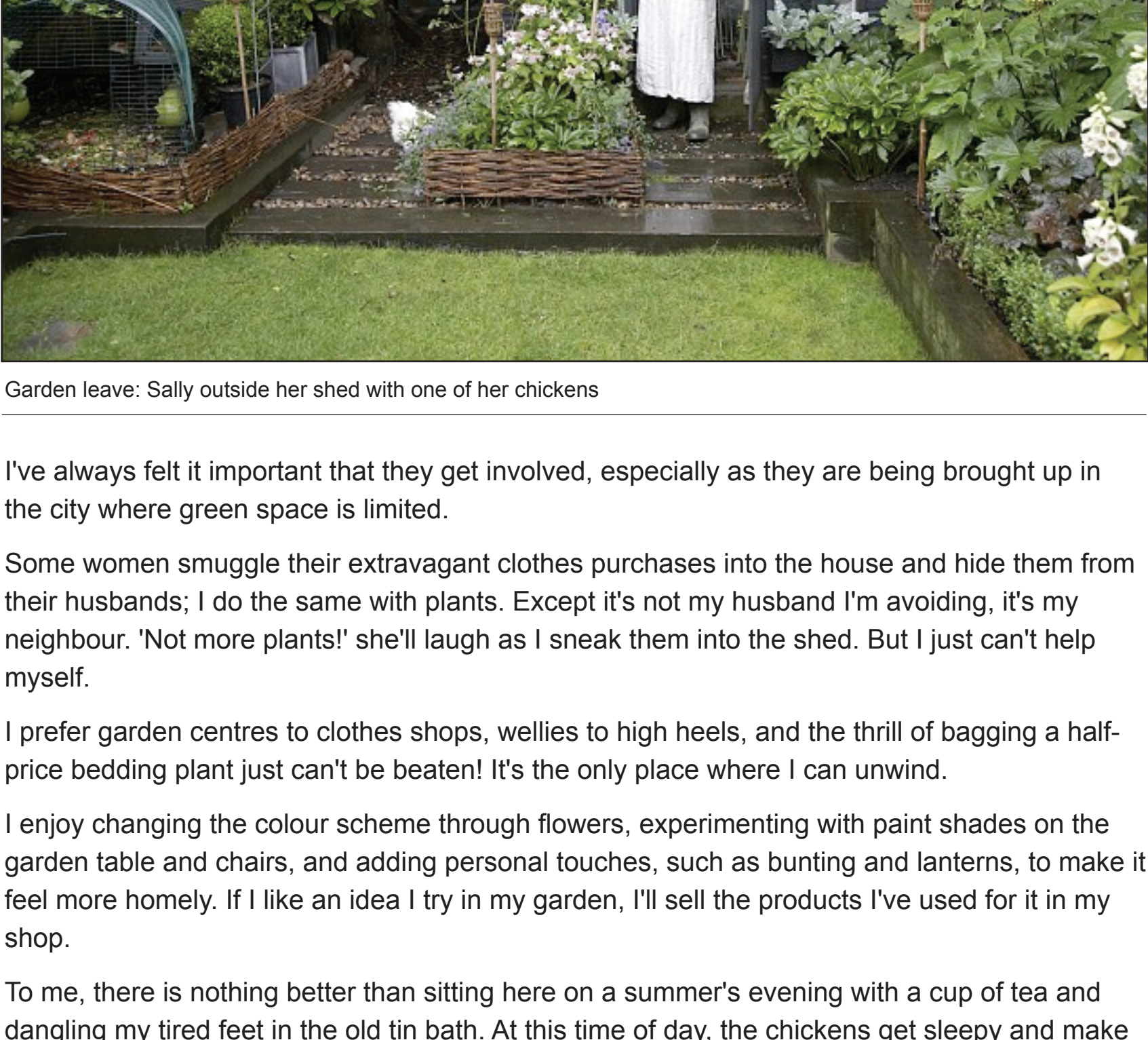
“It's the only place where I can unwind”

Sally Bourne, 43, lives in a terraced house in Crouch End, North London, with her husband Philip, son Elliot, 15, and daughter Tilly, ten. She is the owner of Sally Bourne Interiors.

My garden is my sanctuary. In the 16 years that we have lived here, I've transformed it into a lush green space that makes you forget the concrete jungle outside.

It's 15 metres long and six metres wide and there's a lawn bordered by large wooden sleepers, box hedging and raised beds.

At the end there's a shed and also the coop for our three chickens, Nano, iPod and Shuffle, named by Elliot and Tilly, who have grown up in this garden and love it as much as I do.



Garden leave: Sally outside her shed with one of her chickens

I've always felt it important that they get involved, especially as they are being brought up in the city where green space is limited.

Some women smuggle their extravagant clothes purchases into the house and hide them from their husbands; I do the same with plants. Except it's not my husband I'm avoiding, it's my neighbour. 'Not more plants!' she'll laugh as I sneak them into the shed. But I just can't help myself.

I prefer garden centres to clothes shops, wellies to high heels, and the thrill of bagging a half-price bedding plant just can't be beaten! It's the only place where I can unwind.

I enjoy changing the colour scheme through flowers, experimenting with paint shades on the garden table and chairs, and adding personal touches, such as bunting and lanterns, to make it feel more homely. If I like an idea I try in my garden, I'll sell the products I've used for it in my shop.

To me, there is nothing better than sitting here on a summer's evening with a cup of tea and dangling my tired feet in the old tin bath. At this time of day, the chickens get sleepy and make a really soothing sound. I sit here and think that I really couldn't be happier.

sallybourneinteriors.co.uk

“I feel as relaxed after visiting my patch as I do after yoga”

Beauty journalist Heidi Utton, 37, lives in Oxford with her husband Dom and 18-month-old daughter Eithne. She has had her allotment for four years.

When we moved to Oxford, our main criterion was to find some outdoor space where I could grow vegetables.

The moment we spotted the allotment at the end of this street, we knew we'd found the place for us. Dom and I had talked about having children and were keen to raise them on an organic diet.

Today I'm the proud grower of tomatoes, broad beans, spinach, potatoes, courgettes, onions, beetroot, butternut squashes and pumpkins, plus we have some apple and pear trees and blackcurrant bushes.



Patch work: Heidi and her daughter Eithne both benefit from the allotment

We also have a shed for rainy afternoons and quiet contemplation.

When we first moved here I was commuting to a job in London and I'd always pop to the allotment on my way home, even if it was just to pick a lettuce. Some people go to the gym after a hard day, this was my equivalent.

I was surrounded by luxury products all day as a beauty editor, and suddenly being in the mud would quite literally bring me back down to earth.

Now that I no longer work in London and have Eithne – and another baby on the way – I snatch moments to come here when I can. I'll often make time in the evenings, and sometimes Dom and I will bring crisps, dips and wine with us.

The sound of birds and frogs really calms my mind. I feel as relaxed after visiting my patch as I do after a yoga session.

Having Eithne has made the allotment even more special. It's important for children to learn about vegetables; I'd like her to have her own patch in the future.

We started to 'instil' the wonders of the allotment into her before she was even born; she was referred to as 'bean' throughout my pregnancy!

“My window boxes cheer me up and put me in a positive frame of mind”

Martine Davis, 41, is the owner of Balcome Street Window Box Company. She lives in a 1900s town house in Marylebone, Central London.

Just as accessories make an outfit, so window boxes make a house.

I'm in the centre of London in a house with no garden and a street with no trees, but my boxes of greenery give me an ever-changing picture to look at and a nicer view than just staring across a street.

Right now they're planted with bright red and pink geraniums, fuchsias, impatiens, serafinas and rosemary. I started doing my boxes six years ago when I moved here.



Life on the ledge: Martine gets to work on her window-box display

I couldn't afford a place with a garden but hated the lack of colour around me, so I planted up my first boxes in the car park outside my house. I felt so inspired while making them up that it gave me the idea to start a company selling ready-filled window boxes.

I change my boxes every season. It's hard to choose my favourite because at the start of a season you're excited by what you have, but by the end you can't wait for the next season to start. My next boxes will be for winter and I'm already looking forward to my new view of berries and ivy.

When I'm creating my displays I become so absorbed that my mind completely clears and all worries disperse. I especially love my boxes first thing in the morning when I open the window and have breakfast next to them. No matter what mood I wake in, they always cheer me up and put me in a positive frame of mind.

window-box.co.uk

“I feel totally disconnected from the bustle of the city”

Michelle Barry, 34, a HR manager, and her husband Ross live in a maisonette flat in Whitechapel, East London .

On a Sunday afternoon, there is no better place to be than on my roof terrace.

Five floors up, the views over East London are breathtaking. We can see the Gherkin and Tower 42, a huge old chimney that was part of the Truman Brewery, and the spire of the church at Spitalfields where we got married. Sundays are also the best day for people-watching on the street below.

Not only do I get to spy on everyone coming in and out of our local pub, but on a Sunday afternoon one of the local restaurants holds wedding receptions. I love watching the cars arrive with the bride and groom and everyone dressed up.



Up on the roof: Michelle's terrace is the ideal place to shut off from the world

When we moved here there was no direct access to the roof, so we installed a cast-iron spiral staircase that we bought on Ebay. We've got wooden planters around one edge, a bamboo fence, a table and chairs and barbecue – plus lots of scatter cushions and candles to give it a chill-out feel.

The greenery and flowers add a splash of colour to the grey surroundings, and the pots of lavender smell wonderful.

Living in London, you rarely get to feel that you have much personal space, but here I feel completely free and totally disconnected from the hustle and bustle of the city. You can't hear any noise from below, and it feels warmer up here too.

It's the ideal place to shut off from the world, and as we're the only ones with a terrace for miles, it's my own private escape.

“Here I feel focused and inspired”

Lisa Beard-Rogers, 34, a PR director, lives with her husband Simon in a country cottage in Isham, Northamptonshire.

My garden helps re-energise me. Pottering around it in the evenings gives me a boost that nothing else can. It's a mixture of grass, gravel and flagstones with lots of room to roam around, so there's great sense of space and tranquillity, and our dog Poppie and rabbit Holly can go wild.

There's no one overlooking us, and we back on to a graveyard, which adds to the peacefulness.

Cultivated taste: Lisa in her garden with Holly the rabbit

I've got a busy mind, but here I feel focused and inspired. I find that while I'm enjoying doing the watering or planting my sunflower seeds I come up with lots of ideas for work and for the house.

I especially like the contrast you get from putting old and new things together. I love how the shapes of my topiary trees contrast with the crumbling walls of the stone cottage.

One day I'd like to get some Barbara Hepworth-style white sculptures to go with them. I've lived in houses with gardens before, but nothing has been as large as this one and what I love the most is the element of surprise.

The other day I discovered four starlings nesting in a pot of potatoes I'd left to grow, and I like finding carrots and courgettes that I've planted months previously growing among the bedding plants. It's exciting not knowing what you're going to find in a place that's constantly changing and evolving.