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The Ten Commandments of Eco Gardening

Thou shalt conserve water: who would have thought that in this country of incessant drizzle, water would become such a precious commodity, especially in the southeast of England? The gardener needs to plan ahead, conserve as much water as possible and deploy it thoughtfully. Use water butts to collect run-off rainwater throughout the year and recycle household “grey” water from baths, and so on, ideally using biodegradable detergents and soap.

Wherever you live, watering generously only when absolutely necessary is far better than little and often, as it encourages deep rooting rather than shallow surface roots, enabling plants to search more effectively for water in dry weather. Whether dealing with containers or plants in the ground, water only in the evening or early morning to minimise evaporation, and direct the water at the soil rather than the leaves. Finally, a generous layer of mulch, be it organic material or gravel, will maximise the retention of moisture within the soil.

Thou shalt put the right plant in the right place: this might seem obvious, but in the past we have been able to push the boundaries, coaxing thirsty plants to grow in thin soil with liberal watering. If you choose your plants carefully, once they are established, it should be possible to achieve a non-irrigation policy in most gardens. Juvenile plants will need to be watered while they settle in, but once they reach maturity, it may be best to accept that what doesn't survive without extra help is unsuitable anyway.

Thou shalt not use peat: peat bogs are an essential part of the ecosystem and once they have been harvested, they are gone for ever. If the Royal Horticultural Society and the National Trust can both resist peat as a soil improver and mulch in their gardens, so can the average gardener. There are now so many excellent alternatives to peat that it has become impossible to justify its use in domestic gardens. Sometimes, however, garden centres make buying peat-free composts more difficult than it needs to be. Lobby your local retailers. Tell them you want to be offered the widest selection of quality peat-free products. If we vote with our wallets, they will soon get the message.

Thou shalt recycle garden waste: composting is the key to successful garden management. There's nothing more satisfying than producing sweet-smelling crumbly home-made compost simply by chucking a lot of unwanted vegetation on to the heap. Once you start turning kitchen waste, grass cuttings, annual weeds and ripped-up newspaper into black gold, fallen leaves into flaky leaf-mould and shredded sticks and prunings into valuable mulch, you'll never burn or chuck out garden rubbish again.

Thou shalt reuse non-biodegradable products: we all have teetering towers of plastic pots in the shed. Before you throw anything out, ask yourself: is there still life in it? Many plastic containers can be reused, although a thorough clean is a good idea to prevent disease. It is time to go back to using cut-off lemonade bottles as mini propagators and yoghurt pots for potting on seedlings.

Thou shalt minimise the use of chemicals: this can be almost taken as read nowadays, although there is a notable exception. When I studied practical horticulture, I was taught that, even if you intended to garden organically in the long term, it was justifiable to zap a badly neglected, weed-infested plot with glyphosate at the outset and thereafter keep on top of things with a regime of vigilant prevention rather than cure. Unless you are prepared to wait months for pernicious perennial weeds to give up the ghost beneath thick sheets of black polythene or old carpet, this is still the most practical approach, though purists may disagree.

Thou shalt leave a messy bit: a pile of logs, long grass and fallen leaves are an ideal habitat for beneficial wildlife, providing somewhere to shelter, hibernate and reproduce. Encourage hedgehogs, ladybirds and beetles into your garden, and you will have an army of aphid, slug and snail-eaters permanently on call — far better than reaching for the bug gun.

Thou shalt use hard landscaping with sensitivity: it is worth questioning where materials such as stone, timber and gravel have been sourced and looking at their impact on the environment — concrete is particularly ecologically unsound. Before buying new materials, consider whether you could use something reclaimed or recycled.

Thou shalt use lighting responsibly: light pollution is irritating for neighbours, confuses birds and is a waste of electricity. By all means, light up the garden for parties or over Christmas, but restrict the use of everyday outdoor lighting to practical security or safety lights. Solar-powered versions are worth investigating, and there are plenty of candle-holders, oil-burners and torches on the market that will create more sparkle and atmosphere than any amount of electricity.

Thou shalt teach thy children where food comes from: children love to grow things. It is fun getting mucky, and if they can eat the fruits of their labours, so much the better. If we are really going to change habits in the future, we have to tempt our kids away from their computers and televisions and inspire in them a genuine love of nature and respect for their planet.