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# To Tackle the Housing Crisis, we Need to Talk About Ownership

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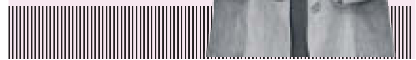
# On the wild side

Even in a small garden or one with rampaging pets and children, it is possible to create havens for wildlife

Leave some of your garden to nature, using low-maintenance plants such as lady's mantle, top, and bergenia to give insects, such as farming ants, a chance to use them

JANE POWERS
GARDENS



A few weeks ago I was bowling along a particularly nice stretch of country road, in one of those buoyant Bertie Wooster moods. The sun was shining, birds were singing, and the verges were awash with wildflowers. As Bertie might have said, it was a top-hole day.

The homeward journey along the same road, however, was a different kettle of fish. During the few hours since I'd passed earlier, someone had mown down the long grasses, the daisies, the buttercups and all the other wild and bouncy things. The lively strip of nature had been reduced to a flattened mash of bruised vegetation: one minute a diverse and teeming habitat, the next a squashed wasteland.

Roadside verges, even if they are to be kept wild, must be mown, but not at the end of June, before flowers have dropped their seeds, and during peak reproduction period for many insects. Early summer mowing such as this is the equivalent of dropping a bomb on a thriving community. Those insects and flowers are part of an important ecosystem, one that is greater than themselves.

Other animals — birds, mammals and predatory insects — depend on the vegetation and wildlife in the verges for their food. Some species will recover, but some will dwindle and disappear. A graphic reminder of the ever decreasing numbers of flying insects is the fact that our windscreens are no longer heavily fly-spattered after a drive in rural Ireland. There are far fewer grisly splotches after an hour or two on the road. Our windscreens' gain is biodiversity's loss.

Of course, verges must be cut in spots where safety is a priority: at junctions, blind corners and passing places. Even so, it's not necessary to scalp the whole verge: a margin of longer vegetation can be left farther away from the road, and the mown strip does not have to be super short. Verges, roundabouts and other bits of ground by roads, when properly managed, can act as wildlife islands and corridors, allowing species to spread from one area to another.

Our gardens, too, can provide sanctuaries and green passages for innumerable wild things. For those with larger properties, it is not difficult to maintain natural areas. Lawns can be turned into meadows simply by forgoing fertilisers and weedkillers, and wildflowers can be added by inserting plugs or bulbs. Some broad-leaved species will return of their own accord: plants such as clovers, plantains, daisies and speedwell.

Plants such as dandelions and docks that are less popular — with us — may also appear. It's worth remembering that the annoying yellow flowers of the former are lifesavers for bumblebees and early honeybees, while docks are the larval food of the small copper butterfly and several moth species.

Where grass is growing too strongly, it may crowd out wildflowers. In this case, you can introduce species such as yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), red bartsia (*Odontites vernus*) or eyebright (*Euphrasia sp.*). These are "hemiparasitic" plants, which derive some of their nutrition from the roots of the grass, thus reducing its vigour.

Some of the lawn could be left as a wildflower meadow to attract bees, while a stack of logs will create a home for invertebrates

Meadows are mowed only once or twice a year, so you're cutting down on labour as well as helping wildlife. When you mow less frequently, you use less fossil fuel and pump less $CO_2$ into the atmosphere, if you use a petrol mower.

For those of us with smaller gardens, real meadows are out of the question, but mini-meadows are possible if there aren't children or animals around to flatten the grasses and wildflowers.

If your garden is teeming with children and pets, you can still have bits of wildness around the edges. Just let the grass grow long around the perimeter. Long grass is a hospitable habitat for many invertebrates, and is food for the caterpillars of seven Irish butterflies. Of these, the speckled wood and meadow brown are quite common in congenial gardens.

Nettles are another excellent wildlife plant, providing sustenance for the larvae of red admiral, small tortoiseshell and peacock butterflies. Nettles sustain about 40 species, which become food for other creatures. They support colonies of aphids in spring, which feed the ladybirds that patrol our gardens all summer. Even butterflies depend on aphids: the holly blue and speckled wood varieties feed on "honeydew", the plant sap that is excreted from their little green backsides. Isn't nature resourceful?

Nature is working in a thousand unseen ways, and every time we interfere with it, we set off a chain of reactions that we can only guess at.

I'm not advocating stopping gardening, I am suggesting a gentler approach. Let's manicure and micromanage our spaces less. If you have a lawn, set the mower blades to a higher level and ditch the chemicals. A longer lawn absorbs more rain and is better for water management. Stop spraying the roses: live with a little blackspot and mildew, or grow a resistant variety (see davidaustinroses.co.uk).

If you don't have a tree, plant one, but if your garden is overshadowed by an overgrown tree, chop it down and plant a more appropriate one. Stack a few of the logs in a quiet corner to make a habitat for invertebrates. Plant some areas with low-maintenance perennials such as *Geranium macrorrhizum*, bergenia, lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*), ferns and euphorbias. You won't need to pay them much attention, so they'll make a haven for wildlife.

We may be the most powerful species on this earth, but we're not the only ones living here.

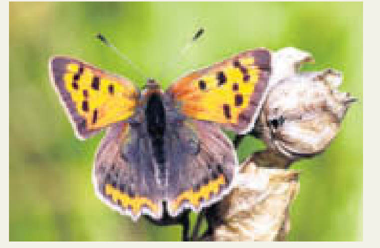
## Grow for it

**Come to Carlow**
Carlow Garden Festival, a 10-day event of horticultural talks and guided walks, runs from July 23 to August 1. Participants include British designer and broadcaster James Alexander-Sinclair, *below*, grande dame of English gardening, Mary Keen, and from Ireland, our own Helen Dillon, Diarmuid Gavin, Dermot O'Neill and Thomas Pakenham. Download the brochure at carlowgarden trail.com

**Across the water**
Plantlife, a British charity, offers plenty of advice on re-wilding our roads and gardens. *plantlife.org.uk*

**Jane digs…**
Butterfly Conservation Ireland; butterflyconservation.ie, also on Facebook

*gardening@sunday-times.ie*



# To tackle the housing crisis, we need to talk about ownership

Redefining the rights and obligations of homeowners and helping those who will forever rent are key challenges we face

LORCAN SIRR
ON THE HOME FRONT

The rights and obligations that go with property ownership are important issues in any country trying to control its housing stock, resolve a housing crisis or create a functioning system.

The concept of ownership is not clear cut: there is common ownership, as seen on the pampas and prairies, and in the outback; shared ownership, in India and China; temporal ownership, in medieval France and now Catalonia; and subservient ownership, where the Earth belongs only to its creator.

Until about two centuries ago, most productive land in the world was owned by the church, the monarchy or communally. The idea of exclusive individual ownership of the Earth, not just elements that can be carried (produce) or occupied (land), is a recent phenomenon. Where exclusive ownership has taken hold it has eliminated civilisations and displaced populations.

Conversely, exclusive ownership has given people the personal freedom that in turn provides comfort, happiness and security. It has also been the basis for most political and social change, from Magna Carta to communism, and has conferred the weightiest of rights, such as that of voting.

The need to own is both economic and psychological: it provides a base to sleep and eat to produce whatever labour and goods are needed to survive, and to lay claim to a personal space that gives security and certainty. Owning property can also be our greatest source of discontent and anxiety. Not all countries equate ownership with exclusivity. In the US signs saying "trespassers will be shot" are commonplace (and meant). But in Sweden the law of *allemansrätten* gives people the right to roam over almost all property, except private gardens.

In an increasingly urbanised country, ownership becomes more difficult as space becomes less available and more expensive. Irish society and its economy is effectively based on property ownership, but for several reasons this will soon be unachievable for many (and this is why renting needs to be made sustainable for long-term inhabitants).

Libertarians tend to be of the view that people should be able to do what they like with their own property, with no state interference. They often hold this view as homeowners, and not as tenants renting an apartment next door to another apartment permanently let to a holiday letting agency, with all that can entail.

Many committed objectors to plans for neighbouring development — if it in any way offends their exclusive sensibilities — often hold libertarian views. Local authority planning files are full of objections from libertarians.

Irish society and its economy is effectively based on property ownership but decreasing space and rising prices put this under threat

Given these views in the context of a housing crisis, there is a need to evaluate what ownership should mean, especially considering that it often encourages a set of more personally oriented values in the middle of a societal housing need.

Does ownership give equal weight to the right to do something with one's property as it does to the right to do nothing at all? Does it confer a right to leave a property empty perhaps, or for landowners to leave their land idle until prices rise? Where does the right to object to use or non-use fit into all this? How do you control housing when everybody wants their own control?

The master of the High Court, Edmund Honohan, recently suggested the state use compulsory purchase orders (CPO) to acquire properties to protect vulnerable tenants. Reforming landlord-tenant legislation would be an easier option, but CPOs could be used to acquire land for the state to build on, in the same way as it is used to acquire land for infrastructure. Indeed, it is interesting to note that housing is not considered infrastructure, although everything that surrounds it, services it and supplies it is.

The constitution is often cited as an impediment to interfering with the property rights of owners, but the courts have demonstrated the need to balance the common good with personal rights. A political reluctance to challenge ownership rights often starts with advice from the attorney-general, but then the issue is never taken to the Supreme Court, which is there to hear these challenges. We have seen this with the vacant site levy.

Our housing, health and pension systems are all dependent to varying degrees on property ownership. Increasingly, however, it will not be feasible for much of the population, so what is the plan for reforming these systems? Indeed, what is the plan for housing those who will never own?

Ownership — its rights and obligations — and the inevitable rise of non-ownership are key elements in planning for housing. We should plan for the latter with as much care as we do with the former.