

I left my job in London to grow food. This deep connection with nature gives my life meaning

Level 3: Advanced

## 1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions below with a classmate.

1. Do you know of any urban garden spaces?
2. Do you know anyone who has their own vegetable patch or who grows edible plants? Do you mind getting your hands dirty?
3. What can we learn from working with the earth? What lessons are there in sowing and harvesting and cultivating land?
4. How do you connect with nature? Would you consider a career change to spend more time outside? Why / Why not?

## 2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

abundance    backbreaking    colonialism    cultivate    grow accustomed to    harvest  
horticulture    hustle    nectar    pollinator    pursuit    sow

1. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a (sometimes dishonest) way of making money.
2. To \_\_\_\_\_ something is to think / start to think that something is normal or natural because you have experienced it regularly over a period of time.
3. To \_\_\_\_\_ is to plant seeds in the ground.
4. An \_\_\_\_\_ is a very large quantity of something.
5. To \_\_\_\_\_ is to collect plants that can be eaten.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ is a sweet liquid that some flowers make and that insects and birds drink.
7. A \_\_\_\_\_ is an insect or other animal that places pollen from one flower onto another to produce seed.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ is a situation in which one country rules another.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ is the activity of growing and studying garden plants.
10. If something is \_\_\_\_\_, it is physically very hard and tiring.

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11. To \_\_\_\_\_ is to develop something such as an attitude, ability, or skill.
12. The \_\_\_\_\_ of something is the process of trying to achieve it.

**b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.**

1. It takes a lot of practice to \_\_\_\_\_ the patience required for gardening.
2. She is studying \_\_\_\_\_ because she wants to start her own organic food business when she graduates.
3. Spring is the best time to \_\_\_\_\_ onion seeds. You can then \_\_\_\_\_ them and eat them in the summer and autumn.
4. I could never quite \_\_\_\_\_ the Southern accent. It still sounds strange to me.
5. Butterflies are important for the environment because they are \_\_\_\_\_.
6. The town grew in size under the influence of \_\_\_\_\_.
7. There is an \_\_\_\_\_ of wild berries everywhere in the summer.
8. He did not stop for a moment and was always working in constant \_\_\_\_\_ of his goals.
9. You need to be fit to be a construction worker, since it can be \_\_\_\_\_ work.
10. Hummingbirds fly from flower to flower in search of \_\_\_\_\_.

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#### ***Cultivating organic produce may be backbreaking, but it's the most important thing I've ever done***

**Claire Ratinon**

**10 October, 2022**

- 1 In July 2016, I was sitting on the rooftop of a building in central London, listening to the gentle sound of a nearby beehive, when I realized that my life had changed entirely. I didn't intend to quit – quitting crept up on me. After eight years of working in the media, I was on a path to becoming an organic food grower, with a temporary side hustle of city beekeeping.
- 2 Not long before that point, I was just like the people in the office building below me. My work days were spent behind a desk or lugging around camera equipment, but now I am devoted to a life of nurturing the soil and growing the plants that end up on our plates.
- 3 I'm actually pretty comfortable with being a quitter. I used to work in television production, and with its short, temporary contracts, I'd grown accustomed to making big changes every few months. In fact, it was a desire to evade a contract extension that put me on a plane to New York in 2010 without a return date.
- 4 I was growing tired of my life in London and I wanted to explore somewhere new, and it was in New York that a seed was (literally and figuratively) sown for my unexpected change of profession. I encountered the magic of food growing for the first time at Brooklyn Grange – a rooftop farm that sits above New York's busy streets and overlooks Manhattan. Dusky leaves of Tuscan kale, peppers and tomatoes in unexpected shapes and colours, striped – chaos of abundance in the most unlikely of places. I was captivated.
- 5 From that day, all I could think about was getting through each week of working in documentary production so that, come the weekend, I could join the other farm workers at Brooklyn Grange while they harvested, planted out and raked the earth, ready for the next sowing of seeds. After two seasons of volunteering there, I was determined to make growing food a bigger part of my life. So I boarded a plane headed for London.
- 6 By the time I'd moved back to Hackney, I had a job working in the evenings – and occasionally nights – which left my days free to seek out the unlikely spaces where edible plants could be found growing in the city. After a year, I quit that role and tried to take on any job – each day a different one – that meant I could spend my days outside, my hands in the soil. I stepped into all kinds of roles and every one taught me something precious.
- 7 Working as a school gardener showed me how little room there is in the school day and national curriculum for children to learn about how food arrives on their plate; training as a beekeeper taught me that growing nectar-rich flowers is a far better way of supporting pollinators than keeping hives; and growing organic salad leaves to supply a veg box that filled the plates of people in Hackney made me realize there is nothing quite so ordinary and yet somehow remarkable as the act of feeding people.
- 8 Leaving London in 2019 to move to a more rural location changed the shape of my life. Now, in a garden of my own, I grow vegetables and fruit of my own choosing, and I write and talk about the importance of doing so while encouraging others to give it a try. I also write and talk about the issues around food growing that have captured my attention along the way – such as the inherently political nature of working the land and issues around land justice, the dynamics of race and belonging, especially in rural spaces, and how the effects of colonialism manifest themselves throughout agriculture and horticulture.
- 9 I'm probably too romantic in the way I speak about working the land. The fact that it is a difficult way to make a living is worth stating – if only not to seem delusional. It is work that is backbreaking, exhausting and underpaid. I have sacrificed my bodily wellbeing at its altar many times, yet it remains the most important thing I've ever done. This essential work has given my life more meaning than I have ever known and more purpose than I ever found pursuing a career in the media.

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- 10 Learning how to grow the plants that feed us has enabled me to cultivate a sense of deep connection with the natural world that had, before then, been entirely absent. It is a humble, skilled and determined pursuit, and I happen to believe it was meant for me. I'm certain I would always have found my way back to the soil, one way or another.

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### 3 Comprehension check

a. Complete the statements below with information from the article.

1. The writer's aspirations to become an organic food grower ...
2. The writer thinks that working all those years as a freelancer ...
3. Experiencing the rooftop garden at Brooklyn Grange ...
4. Back in Hackney, the writer had several part-time jobs, ...
5. The best way to help bees is to ...
6. Some of the issues the writer has found while changing professions are ...
7. The writer feels that learning to grow her own food has helped her to ...

### 4 Key language

a. Identify the stressed syllable in each word below.

1. abundance
2. backbreaking
3. colonialism
4. cultivate
5. horticulture
6. organic
7. pollinator
8. political
9. temporary

b. Use the words in your own sentences.

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## 5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “You are what you eat. It’s important to know how your food is grown.”
- “All children should learn to grow food at school.”
- “Cities need more rooftop vegetable gardens.”

## 6 In your own words

- a. Use an internet search engine to find information about easy-to-grow edible plants that would survive in your local climate. Take into consideration the space where you live and the environmental conditions (light, exposure to animals, space limitations, etc.).
- b. Report your findings to the class.