

I still find it hard to believe that I now grow plants for fun, or even to give away.

For most of my working life, plants were grown to be sold: at a profit. Yes, that dirty word, *profit*.

In fact, selling plants was just like any other job, A profit meant paying the mortgage, putting food on the table and, maybe, having a holiday!

Ten years before retiring, plants were to be my introduction into working in "The World of Autism". How chance encounters change one's life!

For a while into retirement, I had a large garden and still sold a few plants



Now, however, my personal garden is a small, very small, balcony, just 8 foot by 9 foot (2.8x2.9m).

This is proper gardening! A very wide range of container grown plants. What a challenge!

The range varies from trailing Lobelia, Hydrangeas, Runner Beans, Sunflowers, Sweet peas, Cryptomeria (one of my favourite conifers), Box and even a small "Wild" area of weeds or, as I now call them, Wild Flowers!

Top dressing my pots with garden compost from a "friend", means that Scarlet Pimpernel, Sow Thistle even Figwort, (and these are just some of the weeds that I can identify), share a corner with a Hydrangea, Taxus, Camellia, Gerberas etc. Top left in this pic.

I now spend a lot of my day sitting down, writing a book, even, a website,

At least every hour I step out onto my balcony to stretch my legs. Deep Vein Thrombosis is a reminder!

It does not matter how many times a day, there is always a small job that needs doing.

Sweet Pea, large Seed Pod



I must have missed that pod for days when deadheading my pot of dwarf sweet peas



Normally, I catch the little devils early. See them in the centre of this picture. I just pinch off the pods.
If not deadheaded, plants tend to stop flowering,

I dead head something several times a day. An essential little job if my plants are to divert plant energy away from making seeds.

Gerbera and Trailing Lobelia



My Gerberas, on the other hand, need a bit more care. Here I slide a finger down to the base of the stem and gently twist/pull it away' offshoot.
ore about these jobs in my blogs.

- [HOME](#), [PAST EVENTS](#), [ABOUT](#), [GARDEN DIARY](#), [BLOGS](#), [AUTISM](#), [COMMUNITY GARDENING](#), [DISABILITIES](#), [WHY ABLETOGROW?](#) [CONTACT](#),
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Abletogrow



John Roberts

Now, at 80, I need to use many of the strategies I once used for other people when I gardened in *The World of Autism and other Disabilities*

- THE Online Community Garden
 - A Little Bit of Gardening
 - Can help with
 - Personal Growth and Development
 - Whatever your ability or disability
 - Be it Mental or Physical
 - *Every person is capable of something!*



Sunflower
©Margaret Daniels

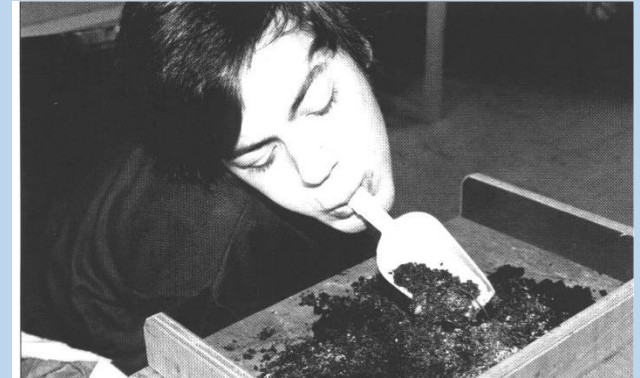
Each day, I try and do a **JOB that is NEEDED** Half today and half tomorrow. **MAYBE!**

So, let us look at a
few
Quotations on Life
and on Gardening

Stephen Hawkin,
Opening
Ceremony
Paralympic
Games 2012-

*"However
difficult life
may seem, there
is always
something you
can do and
succeed at"*

.....



xxx Thrive

Kipling

The Glory of the Garden

“There’s not a pair
of legs so thin,
there’s not a head
so thick,
There’s not a hand
so weak and white,
nor yet a heart so
sick.

But it can find
some needful job
that’s crying to be
done,
For the Glory of
the Garden
glorifieth every
one.

The next quotation
was my inspiration
in the World of
Autism

Kaare Bolgen

(D Pratt Curriculum Planning.
Harcourt Brace Publishers. 1994.
P234)

'There Are No
Hopeless People'

There is no "method"
in reaching the
unreachable. It is an
all out effort,
opportunistic, using
the entire arsenal of
human communications:
touch, feel, song,
sounds, drawing,
music, psychology,
games, words,
objects, illustrations,
allegories, fairy
tales, action, acting,

projects, hobbies,
sports, physical and
mental exercises,
jokes, humour,
nature, animals,
affection, love, hero
worship, father
figure, identification,
suggestion, auto
suggestion, hypnosis,
rewards, dreams,
science, history,
logic, semantics.'

'Whatever works
is the method'

We all use our own
METHOD

MINE,

is GARDENING.

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*As a gardener, I believe
that
Plants are like People!*

That simple belief will, I
know, offend a few
people.

If so, I hope that will
not prevent them from
reading on.

Hopefully, plants
cannot read so I
should not have any
complaints from them

The AIM of,
Abletogrow,
is to

Promote
Healthy
Growth and
Development
Be you a plant
or a person!

Let us do This
by participating in

a

Little

Bit

of Gardening,

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Now, I need to qualify my belief that plants are like people.

In order to do so, I need to briefly say that my working career began in the World of Horticulture and ended in the World of Autism. You can read more about that by using several of the links on the Home page,

So, let me start explaining my belief. During their lifetime, people and plants have similar requirements!

When very young, if they are to flourish rather than just survive, , they all need a lot of **Tender Loving Care**.

Some people and plants will need this **TLC** throughout their lives.. However, the lucky majority will need less careful naturing as they grow and develop.

When we move on to people, it becomes a little more difficult. This is where the clash between personal rights

and responsibilities becomes very contentious.

Too much control and we have a dictatorship.
Too little control and we have anarchy.

Obviously, there are people who will fit into one or other of these extremes.
That's life folks!

Let us move on. and have a look at how I now garden.

Now at eighty, the ground is further away. So far, in fact, that I now think of myself as being in a **BOX Labelled Disability**. I would like you to join me in that box to see gardening from a disability point of view.
Now, comes the really difficult part. **JUMPING OUTSIDE** of that box to figure out solutions to the problems if you were **INSIDE**

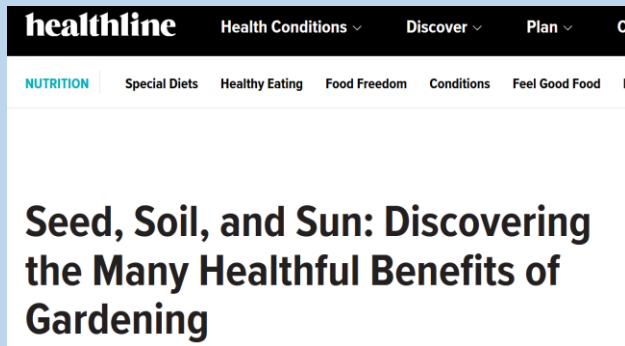
Note, I talk of PROBLEMS. These are challenges to be resolved.

In the 1990's, in the world of disabilities, I often heard the phrase "Oh, if they can't do anything else, perhaps they can do a little bit of gardening". I, like many of my horticultural peers considered this phrase demeaning.

Attitudes have now changed.

The benefits of gardening are now widely recognised in the world of disabilities

[tps://www.healthline.com/health/healthful](https://www.healthline.com/health/healthful)



At the age of 80 I now find myself having to use many of the strategies that I employed while teaching students with a wide range of Profound and Complex Disabilities

It's a long way to the floor



these days!

Potting "Bench"?

A plastic kitchen bowl makes great potting bench.



Small, cheap, easy to carry and to store.

ABOUT

Born in Skewen the highlight of my early life was the weekly visit to Grandparents, and other family, in Lonlas. My lifetime of gardening started here, in the garden of the first cottage on the left. These cottages were demolished to make way for the Lon Las Interchange,

J44 of the M4 near Swansea.



I remember toddling after my Uncle Gad around his garden during WW11. In later years, I was then able

to follow Uncle Ivor around his garden in nearby Birchgrove. Unfortunately, neither of these uncles were able to know what a great influence they had on my life.

Gad and Ivor will appear frequently during my reminiscences.

PAST EVENTS,

Gardening is much more than growing plants.

Over the years, so many different gardens have brought me enormous pleasure

Some for the plants.
Some for their calm.
Some for their grandeur.

However, it is the vast range of events, experienced in so many gardens, that stay in my memory.

Trentham Gardens



<https://trentham.co.uk/>

So many years ago my father. and I spent happy hours listening to a Brass Band in Trentham Gardens.

Dad could be left listening for hours if I needed to chase after my children!

As a family, Trentham Gardens was a favourite day out

The following are just a small sample

National Botanic Garden of Wales

As a dance venue and a Wedding Venue



Picture 2007

In the 1990's, we were walking my black Labrador, Bess, through the muddy

patch where the Great Glasshouse now stands

As we plodded through the mud, Mavis said,
"When The Garden opens, we will organise a "DAY of DANCE HERE"

We held the first one in 2000.

15 Welsh Folk Dance Teams joined by 14 school teams.

In total, over 700 Welsh Folk Dancers took part
We repeated the Day of Dance in 2005.

Again in 2007 when we stopped dancing for a while at 4pm while Mavis and I were married in the Great Glasshouse.



The Day of Dance is now an annual event organised by Bobbie and Dafydd Evans of The Welsh Folk Dance Society, Dawns Werin Cymru.

Pembroke Community
Garden, St Oswalds
Ivy project

Aim of this major Project

To manage the Ivy growing on the Community Garden walls. Further damage to the walls will be minimised while the "binding" effect of the plant roots is maintained.

This will help hold the walls together until such time as they can be professionally restored.

Objectives

Remove all heavy plant growth which, by its weight and wind resistance, is jeopardising the stability of the walls.

Also, regularly cut back the remaining growth, treating it like a well-maintained hedge. This will protect the walls and provide habitats for wildlife.

Be warned

If you are trying to control Ivy on an old wall, do NOT cut the main stems above ground level. This is a mistake as the ivy then uses the wall as a soil substitute. See future Blog.

The Town Walls of
Pembroke are
under attack by Ivy

, Help was in hand in
2017,



**Luckily, Town Councillor
Gareth Jones is a
qualified climber**

He did the dangerous work
of removing the heavy
top growth of the Ivy
that threatened the
Walls. of St Oswalds
Community Garden

Gareth was fortunate
that, there were plenty
of us who volunteered,
including **the U3A Garden
Group South.**

We did the **DONKEY,**
sorry, the **unskilled, safer,**
work of tidying up after
him!



WHO NEEDS A SHREDDER?
when Joan is around?

We burned some of the waste.

A few people complained.

However, they did not volunteer to help!

November 5th 2017

A Guy Fawkes bonfire was, a welcome opportunity to enable volunteers to create

A clear site for future work. This was essential.

Two new volunteers stacked the larger prunings in a very professional manner;

All the butts facing the same way for ease of future handling.

Smaller prunings were then cut up into a manageable size by so many different people.

Some of us started a "re-cycling" system, using second hand bulk bags from builders merchants; enabling us to dispose of the thinner prunings in a compostable and sustainable way. Heavier prunings were stacked to provide wildlife habitats.

July 2023

Gareth, we need your help again in

St Oswalds Community Garden!

Can you spare time from your Town Crier duties?

You did quite well at the



Pembroke River Rally

I hope that you still have your climbing gear!

Llangennech Daffodil Project

<https://www.llancentre.com/index.html>



Grandchild number 9.

helping me with a bulb planting scheme. He is now 17!
A couple of years ago, I walked a short length of the **Pembrokeshire Coastal Path**.
Number 9 was **my** carer!

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Gloucester My first allotment

December 2010



I rented this allotment.
No other potential tenant wanted it.

Yippee, they did not realise that **X marks the spot** of an ancient compost heap.

Previous Wilding (Well, NEGLECT really) [see Blog on Wilding], was to become part of my part of my "NO DIGGING" plan. All that lovely compost hiding below the brambles and nettles! I could compost my spuds instead of earthing up!

June 2011



Grandchild number 6
The water tank was a **VERY** long way away!

June 10th 2023

**Pembroke and
Pembroke Dock Lions**



Tony Wilson collecting donations for the **LIONS**. Some passers-by donated even if they did not take a "**FREE**", sunflower plant

Fund Raising



FREE SUNFLOWER PLANTS

I grew a few sunflower plants on my balcony, in order to raise funds for local charities

July 1st 2023

David, Landlord,



collecting box for the **RNLI (Lifeboats)**
All Donations were gratefully accepted Two people even donated paper money. Much easier to count!

Garden Diary

Week 27,

Monday July 3rd 2023

Christmas potatoes

Order NOW if you want a few pots of new potatoes for Christmas.



A pre-Lockdown crop grown in an old flower bucket.

Feeding

I am still in the process of finalising (?) the Blog on feeding your plants

Suffice, for now, to say that some pots are having:

High N, others High K while the rest are having a "Balanced" NPK diet!

(Nitrogen Phosphate Potash)

Deadheading



A never-ending job

The dwarf Sweet Peas in the previous picture need frequent deadheading, if flower production is to take precedents over seeding.

The seed pods are easy to "pinch" out.

These Gerberas, however



need a little more care. I slide a finger down the stem a twist/pull. No pieces to rot.

Watering

Another challenge

[see Blog on Watering)

Some plants need a lot of water, some need just a little.



The Cryptomeria, above, is being given a lot of water.

Sufficient to drain into the tray below. Note the air bubbles.

With such a wide range of pot grown plants, I have a chance to practise the skills I started to learn 70 years. **And I can still get it wrong!**

*My poor, new, white
Gerbera.*

*I should have realised when I
bought it that it had been
OVERPOTTED*

The roots had not yet had time to search out the new

compost. **The plant was sitting in a bog.**

Gerberas do not like that

It is now in the ICU unit for a few weeks.

That is, re-potted, into a smaller pot, shaded and sheltered from the wind and watered,

very carefully

BLOG

S

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Wilding ¶

I am a recent
convert to
Wilding! ¶

What a surprise
I had when
reading my July
2023 copy of ¶
¶

¶
Gardeners'
World. ¶

¶
Two of my
favourite
subscribers
were casting
aspersions on
people like
me. ¶

Does Wilding
seems a little
bit beneath
them? ¶

¶
What a
challenge
Monty and Alan
for a BLOG ¶



Excerpt from the Daily Telegraph June 22nd 2023

Don said of the wild garden trend: "I sense a degree of guilt about this at the moment. It is as though a so-called 'wild' garden that mimics natural conditions is somehow worthier and more moral than one in which mankind's creative skills are more obviously played out. This is puritanical nonsense. If you want a truly wild garden then simply walk away. Leave any patch of ground completely untouched by human hand and it will happily become whatever it wants to be."



Excerpt from the Daily Telegraph June 22nd 2023

Titchmarsh said in his column: "Gardening is about growing things, sowing seeds, taking cuttings and beautifying our little bit of earth to feed us body and soul. It is there to improve our lives and our outlook, at the same time as being hospitable to birds, bees and other forms of life. And yet, if you have been brainwashed by current trends you would assume that the garden is theirs alone, and the less we interfere the better. I will have none of this." He argued that not properly cultivating a garden.....



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*Come off it Monty And Alan!
Wilding a Garden can take as much skill as the highly manufactured gardens of the last few hundred years.*

Different skills, yes!

Over the last few years, my lifetime passion of gardening has had a "Damascus moment" as I try and blend traditional gardening and wilding

Page Break

Wilding

Wilding a garden seems to be a contentious subject. Recently, Monty Don and Alan Titchmarsh have joined in the clamour, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/06/22/monty-don-alan-titchmarsh-wilding-not-gardening/> so I must respond!

For me, how I was able to garden changed dramatically, after the sudden diagnosis of bowel cancer and subsequent ileostomy bag. Until then, rewilding was just an obscure phrase. Now it took on new meaning. Could wilding mean that I was still able to do, a "*Little Bit of Gardening*" (LBoG)?

Even that simple phrase is still seen as demeaning, by many of my professional peers. Until a few years ago, I had held the same opinion of LBoG. However, more on that subject some other time.

Since I could first walk, I had been a gardener, both amateur and then, later, a professional. Gradually, the ground became further away, and the eyesight was fading, I had been struggling to garden, **as I wanted**, for quite a while. Slowly, very slowly, my options on how to garden started to change. Unconsciously, I started to embrace LBoG. This meant my attitude to, and practice of

gardening underwent a complete and utter change. After the cancer struck, I became a zealot for LBoG.

Some of practices that I had previously employed, with seriously impaired students, were suddenly relevant to me! Adapting how, and what, gardening jobs I tackled, became very urgent. Tools, for example, needed adapting or changing, as did my attitude. This latter change was the most trying of all.

Attitude, as we know, is one of the most difficult changes to make.

If I was to continue gardening, I had to learn new skills, adopt and adapt old ones.

In retirement, I had wanted a perfect lawn; with all the hard work, and commitment, required! Remove the old turf, cultivate, level and lute out the bumps and hollows
Regular mowing, edging, weeding, feeding, topdressing; you name it! Phew! Might there be an alternative?"

With my new attitude, perhaps weeds were now "Wild Flowers", to be encouraged and even cultivated. My mantra that "*we are all only one breath away from a life changing event*" was now a reality for ME

Roll on wilding! The lessons were hard, and still are, but I enjoy every moment of learning new gardening skills.

In the July 2023 Gardeners' World, Monty Don called wilding "*puritanical nonsense*", while Alan Titchmarsh implied that people, like me, had "*been brainwashed by current trends*".

Personally, I love this nonsensical trend; sorry Monty and Alan, long may it continue. I think of myself as "*a puritanical convert who encourages rewilding*".

I have found that to rewild, sympathetically, has challenged my lifetime range of gardening skills. Alan, I was toddling around my garden before you were born.

Monty, I was just starting my career in horticulture when you were born.

Wilding has been just one of the ways in which I have been able to continue my passion for gardening in old age. Sorry lads!

However, I do agree that, wilding can be just a "cop out". For too many individuals, organisations and public authorities, "*Wilding*" is an excuse to save time, energy and money by giving Nature a free hand. "*Look folks we are Green*" is the clarion call.

The danger is that this call can become neglect, as you both imply.

However, a problem that, with diligence and persuasion, can be slowly resolved.

The early days of my wilding.

I decided that I did not want to spend so much of my time and limited energy on this patch of grass. I started by allowing the longer grass to grow along one edge. Forget the straight lines and twice weekly mowing.

There must be another way!

In a previous garden, in Llanelli, Mavis had created a clover "lawn", in her own patch having removed the weeds, wildflowers, that she did not want. It remained green throughout the year, and the bees loved it. A whisper of my ways ahead?

So, MY wilding continued. allowing the beautiful buttercups, daisies, primroses, clover and other small wild flowers to thrive opened my eyes. I would have to learn new skills!



Mowing was, once again, a pleasure, now that I could restrict it to just a few paths, cut once or twice a month. As the seasons changed, I could even alter the layout of my paths.

The weeds, sorry, "wildflowers", were allowed to spill over into the borders. Rampage was, I think, one of my early comments as Nature was allowed to have her way!

My wife, Mavis, designed one of the borders to mimic her beloved Pembrokeshire lanes. Mentally, that was a challenge for my values. Some of the hedgerow plants she loves, like the Champion, Cow parsley, Wild Gladioli,

Ferns were soon joined by Hellebore and Sweet William. Snowdrops, Daffodils, especially the true Tenby Daffodil, cultivated locally in Manorbier

<https://www.springfieldsfreshproduce.co.uk/>
)

happily, shared the space to extend the season. Very little work was required after limited initial planting and sowing.

The early paths in the "lawn", see below, were mown to allow the primroses daisies etc to flourish. Later in the season, after they had seeded, the path layout was changed. Now, the once hated clover had priority to do its own thing. If clover and common daisies were hard to grow, they would cost you a fiver in the local garden centre!

xxx



Unfortunately, for health reasons, we had to move. Thankfully, the new owners are not control freaks who wish to **try** and dominate nature.

We now live in a small flat with a tiny private balcony. A Little Bit of Gardening is "just right!".

Perhaps the communal meadow behind the flats is due for managed wilding! Time will tell.

Trimming primroses to ground level

after seeding. Just to Tidy up!



Then, a little TLC.
to
help nature along.

*These two pictures were taken a few years ago. When I could still bend
Nowadays, I would need to
use
a long-handled shears*



Then, a small amount of a dry balanced fertiliser!

Gently helping **Nature** produce.
fresh new foliage

Imagine, the carefully managed plants saying "Thank you"

Again, I could not bend to apply dry fertilizer carefully enough. Time to use my watering can for a liquid feed.

My "WILD" primrose appreciated that little bit of TLC



*More about
fertilisers in a
future blog.*

© John Roberts. June 2023.

AUTISM?

AUTISM?

The historic diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was often based on the **TRIAD of IMPAIRMENTS**, a *subjective interpretation based on a person's behaviour.*

Hopefully, a more objective diagnostic tool, including genetics, will be freely available in the near future

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/diagnosis/diagnostic-criteria/all-audiences>

The curriculum I compiled for the **CARMARTHENSHIRE COLLEGE Ten Year Outreach Programme** in **THE WORLD of AUTISM**, was primarily based around people so severely impaired, that they lived

"IN CARE" 24/7 365 days a year.

Six curriculum areas were covered, with Horticulture at the core. Most, if not all, of these areas are relevant in all types of community gardening.

Brief details of the curriculum for the 2005/2006 appear on the next page.

Coleg Sir Gâr, Carmarthenshire
College, Outreach Programme
2005-2006

SWWOCN (South West Wales
Open College Network)
Programme ID 8430

Curriculum area 1 Personal
development

Communication/Teamwork/Problem solving/Portfolio building/Hobbies/Interests/Advocacy

Curriculum area 2 Health,
Safety

Safe working practices /Fire drill

Curriculum area 3 Horticulture
(Core)

Gardening, basic skills/Gardening, basic machinery/Trained plants (including Topiary)

Curriculum area 4 ILT
(Information Learning Technology)

Use a computer/Digital Photography

Curriculum area 5 Building
trades; General

Building: Basic skills/Plaster casting

Curriculum area 6 Arts, crafts
Seasonal decorations/Music and movement

My thanks to everyone who
helped deliver "The
Programme", students
and staff alike.

Together, we *endured*
three Estyn Inspections
and **achieved a Grade**
ONE every time.

One year we even received a
mention as having
"Particularly high
standards.

Thank you all. Diolch yn fawr
pawb. John.

COMMUNITY GARDENING?

Just like any garden is personal, and different, for each of us, so is a Community Garden.

I have been involved in Community Gardening for most of my eighty years;

long before Community Gardens, as such, became popular.

The benefits of these gardens have been many,

as have the problems. (More later!)

In order to give myself plenty of wriggle room, my definition of a Community Garden is as follows.

Anywhere we can get together in a friendly, and supportive manner to enjoy, learning about the needs of both plants and people.

If the plants that you grow are to fit into their environment, you have to decide, preferably early on what type of garden you need.

Do you like a very controlled garden?

Do you want a wild garden? (See blog on Wilding)

Or, like most people, would you like a something in between

DISABILITIES

Until the mid 1990s, I had not really given much thought to disabilities. Yes, there were people who were in wheelchairs and people who were blind. That was, probably, as much as I was aware that some people were living their lives with disabilities

WHY

ABLE TO GROW?

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Why Abletogrow?

I first coined the name "Abletogrow" in the 1990's when I became aware of "The World of Autism".

At the age of 50, after a working lifetime as a Commercial Grower and Garden Centre Manager, I was semi-retired. Now, I would renovate an old house and, perhaps, do a few odd jobs to bring in some money.

It seemed like a good idea to learn how to plaster, so I enrolled, as a part time mature student, at the Ammanford

Campus of Carmarthenshire College. There were a few students in the class who tended to act rather strangely.

In my very politically incorrect way, and not a lot has changed, I asked "What's up with them?" "Oh, they are Autistic" was the reply. Little did I know that this short reply was to change my life and give me a new career.

Within three months, I was lecturing, part time, in Horticulture at Carmarthenshire College. To help fill in the "Retirement"

void, volunteering part time seemed like a good idea.

The word "Autism" had struck a spark, "The South Wales Autistic Society" (SWAS) in Neath needed volunteers for their Gardening Project; Could I do it? This was a very strange world I hoped to enter. Could Gardening be my key to promoting Personal Growth and Development? I was hooked and became the **Outreach Course Lecture at Neath. Later, SWAS. became part of the National Autistic Society.**

The rest is history.

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