

Green Shoots

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'We're in an incredibly unsettling period, globally, nationally. Can I allay some of my anxieties about what this means for me and my kids by buying a few instant mashed potato and extra chickpeas and corned beef? Well, maybe. Does that make me ridiculous? Possibly. Do I feel a bit better about it? Yeah, I do, so it's kind of helping me manage my own mental health and my response to what's going on. And I'm very happy to be proven wrong and not actually use any of this. In some respects it goes to the heart of what you are as a parent, or what you are as a family, you know, if you can't put food on the table - as a dad, y'know, or a mum - what are you up to?'

These words, spoken by an (unnamed) man in Chatham, Kent, were broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in late January 2019, during an episode of the long-running series, [The Food Programme](#), which examined what a 'no-deal Brexit' might mean for food supplies in Britain.

As it appeared then, this possible outcome would have coincided with the Hungry Gap, a point in the year in early spring when supplies of foods grown and stored over the winter are dwindling but new crops are not yet ready for harvest. Usually, in the UK, this means relying on imports from continental Europe, but suppliers were worried that, in the event of 'no-deal', fresh produce would get stuck in lorries at new border checkpoints in France. Showing the presenter his stash of food, the man in Chatham explained that, as well as having supplies in during what was also a period of job insecurity for his wife and him, he wanted to have food to share with others, so he'd also ordered 10kg of seed potatoes to plant on their allotment.

What a difference fifteen months makes.

With the rapid spread of Covid-19, stories of stockpiling and panic-buying have become so routine as to be almost cliched. As well as food and the by now infamous toilet paper, there are reports of people loading up with equipment to support activities that might help pass time during a period of 'lockdown', from craft materials and jigsaw puzzles, to exercise and gardening equipment (Wood and Partridge, 2020; Higgins 2020).

Food-growing is in many ways an obvious thing to turn to in a time of crisis. Early on in the UK's faltering response to coronavirus, my own thoughts turned to my allotment as a potential [haven](#). Growing your own promises crops in a time of insecure supplies, the physical and mental health benefits of gardening, a way of getting outside (here in the UK it is a government-endorsed activity under lockdown) and, let's face it, if you live with other people, having some time and space to yourself.

Food-growing can also be a way of enacting ethical and political principles, perhaps with the hope that what we do during this crisis might help change the political-economic trajectory of the world, as many have speculated, especially in reference to the related issue of climate change (Shiva 2020).

I am in the midst of data collection for an ethnographic project on seed-saving and seed activism in London. Currently, 60% of commercial seeds are sold by just 4 corporations (Barber 2019), raising questions about food security, biodiversity loss, adaptation to climate change and the ability of farmers to have sustainable livelihoods.¹ This corporate enclosure of seeds can be resisted by sourcing open-pollinated seed from organisations such as

¹ For those who are interested in finding out more about this, you can watch the documentary, [Seed: The Untold Story](#) (dirs. Taggart Siegel and Jon Betz, 2016) on Kanopy, a streaming service that is free through many university and local library subscriptions.



[Real Seeds](#), [Vital Seeds](#), [The Seed Cooperative](#) or [Heritage Seed Library](#) in the UK and by saving seeds from your own crops to plant, share or swap.

Whilst wondering what the coronavirus pandemic would mean for my research, a friend drew my attention to another aspect of this crisis, encapsulated in a Facebook post from Real Seeds on 10th March:

In the caption accompanying the rather vertiginous photo of seed orders stacking up and the post that follows, which says, 'I like to think this is so that if people have to self-isolate they can spend the time happily in their gardens, rather than through a sense of panic!', the unexpectedness of facing state-enforced lockdown (or, 'apocalypse') is juxtaposed with ideas of planning, getting organised and making the most of a difficult situation.

The question, implicit in the caption, is why people should be ordering open-pollinated seeds in such quantities. A few commenters suggest that one reason for this is that people trust Real Seeds' seed. It may also simply be that sales are booming across the board

(Wood and Partridge 2020; Higgins 2020). Other suppliers of open-pollinated seeds, including Vital Seeds, the Seed Cooperative, London Freedom Seed Bank, and Irish Seed Savers and Brown Envelope Seeds in Ireland, are similarly reporting overwhelming demand for their seeds.

The overall tone of the comments on the Real Seeds post is thoughtful, with wishes for good health and encouragement of their work. There is, also, a dash of typical British humour, with one wag asking if they have any toilet paper seeds in stock - 'organic, obviously'. The original post, which discusses heroism and niceness and implicitly extols the virtues of hard, 'honest' work in a jokey, familiar way, models this set of values. Alongside these supportive comments, there are more individualistic ones, with some expressing hope that their orders are

included in the boxes in the picture and grumbling about having to wait to receive their deliveries.² This goes to the heart of the debates people have been having in the media and in Zoom calls across the country about the morality of stockpiling.

Stockpiling is, though, nothing new when it comes to seed-saving. Just think of the Millennium Seed Bank, with its millions of seeds, cryogenically suspended in time and space, an 'insurance policy' against a very uncertain future, especially in the face of climate change (see Lewis-Jones 2019). Thom van Dooren has written about the differences between in situ and ex situ plant conservation, pointing out how the latter - like the work done by the Millennium Seed Bank - conceptualises seeds as valuable genetic resources, deprioritising the social and environmental contexts in which they usually grow. He argues that we should be wary of how this approach restricts access to seeds and determines which seeds are valued enough to be banked in the first place. It is possible to 'bank well', he says, but '...these practices must be premised ... on understandings and systems of banking in which resources are not stockpiled, but are rather shared and kept moving in more-than-human agricultural communities' (2009: 374).

In response to the Facebook post by Real Seeds, someone asked how their current orders compared with their usual expectations for this time of year. Real Seeds replied that the peak time for buying seeds is usually earlier in the year, though last March was also very busy because 'everyone was panicking about Brexit'. This returns me to the man from Chatham and his living room full of tinned food, and the seed potatoes which he intended to grow and share with his neighbours. Buying in bulk might be about securing your own survival at the expense of others, but it can also be about having enough supplies in your home to ensure you can self-isolate for two weeks, which we have been told is the responsible thing to do in this current crisis. If we get bogged down in simplistic binary moral judgements about people being either selfish or heroic, we can miss the chance these moral debates present to rethink what is normal and whether we should even try to get back to it.

Here in the UK, at least, the government's instinct seems to be to shift responsibility onto individuals - the answer to the question of how long lockdown might last is met with the deflection, 'it depends how people behave', as if it were the general populace who had been acting like feckless children and not the government.

Since the result of the 2016 referendum, we have become increasingly aware of the divided nature of British society, a point discussed already by [Rebecca Irons](#). As her analysis suggests, the perception of such divisions - and their mobilisation by political parties - may cause as much harm as the divisions themselves.

While the British government is prioritising the economy and protecting the NHS - and the latter not for any socialist principles, but to maintain the illusion that it has not already cut this highly popular institution to the bone through its policies of austerity, the hostile environment and 'getting Brexit done' - many British people are reflecting on and enacting their own ethical principles, actively seeking ways in which to care for and support others, including other species.

It's not easy, of course. Whatever our particular situation, we all feel overwhelmed and anxious. We are in the grip of a severe crisis and I am not going to argue that we should seize this as an opportunity. A crisis is not an opportunity, certainly not in the usual neoliberal sense that that word has come to primarily mean. Instead, it is something more like the 'portal' or 'rupture' that Arundhati Roy describes in her recent article in the Financial Times. It is a point at which, whilst most of our time is taken up with the business of surviving and, if possible,

² Nearly a month on, Real Seeds have posted that they have the capacity to mail 100 orders per day but are currently receiving 8000 orders a day. As they point out, if they try and fulfil these orders, they will have no time to plant their crops for next year's seeds. Some have responded by saying they will aim to save more of their own seeds this year to build up their own supplies. (Real Seeds, Facebook post 7th April 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/realseedcatalogue/posts/3035910689798473>).

helping others survive, we can also, as Roy puts it, 'rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves' in terms of both economic orthodoxy and political representation. This is another reason why it seems natural to turn to growing food in a time of crisis - whose heart doesn't leap at the thought of [green shoots](#), literal or metaphorical and the fresh start of spring? In contrast to the invisible spread of a virus, growing plants - something we have been doing for millennia - feels rejuvenating, promising, hopeful.

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