



John Little



A beautiful disruption

For the past 35 years at his Horndon on the Hill garden, Hilldrop, **JOHN LITTLE** has been pushing every sort of boundary to create a garden – and an approach to gardening – that makes more sense for the planet.

WORDS AND PHOTOS: Barbara Segall

Through his work at his four-acre garden, Hilldrop, John Little encourages creative gardeners to get disruptive.

The result, as is the case here at Horndon on the Hill, is a garden that teems with wildlife; a place that makes sense not just for people, but for the planet.

'It is not all about the plants. Structure, topography, dead stuff and gardeners drive biodiversity in gardens and green spaces,' John explains.

Many of us rely solely on plants as the gateway to bringing biodiversity to our gardens, but John believes we need to be open to more varied approaches.

Increasingly, landscapers and designers are signing up to the philosophy of keeping any demolition waste on site, transforming it, usually through crushing, into novel substrates and growing media.

Using unconventional materials results in changing the topography of a garden and opens the door for different and more species of insects and wildlife to enter. It's all about creating, complicated landscapes, disrupting things for the greater good.

John knows from entomologist, James McGill, and entomologist and gardener, Benny Hawksbee, both of whom work with him, that his garden count of invertebrate species is 1,530, with numbers of native bee species going from 30 to 118 in the last eight years.

He knows, too, that most of the increases can be attributed to landscape changes that he, as the garden's 'disruptor in chief', has made.

They may be complex changes but, equally, many are simple. And if there is a wide range of invertebrates, there will be a wider range of birds attracted to the garden, so doubly increasing the biodiversity.

Having realised that weren't enough bare, sunny sandy, spots to attract ground-nesting bees, nor was there sufficient standing deadwood to attract the thousands of species that need it for habitat and forage, John set about remedying the situation.

Some of the standing deadwood on site has died *in situ* but some has been brought in and 'planted', or hung from trees, to attract birds, bats and beetles amongst other wildlife. Dead hedges, made with sticks and logs, or even bundles of cut-back, spent perennial material, will bring in numerous species of wildlife, including birds.

Meanwhile, the garden's splashes of sand – mounds that look as if the sand has just been tipped straight from a wheelbarrow – have become sites for those ground-nesting bees, missing from the insect count before the sandy intervention.

John Little came into the realm of public-sector landscape when he worked on the grounds of a social housing scheme, the Clapton Park estate, in London's >



Containers are filled with sand and topped with about an inch of garden compost, with a built-in seedbank



One of several ponds

Hackney, in 2002. Here he learned to listen to what the residents wanted from the green space around them.

He cites an example of strimming around roses and seeing coriander seedlings, which he knew had been planted by one of the residents. He understood immediately that the seedlings were not to be disturbed and instead the roses were removed. Zaineb, who grew the coriander, was subsequently able to develop her space for fruit and vegetables, showcasing the wonderful cook and grower that she was.

The 18 years John spent working in this sector formed the bedrock for his work today: he believes that horticulture is not the most important skill in the care of public greenspace. This part of south Essex is where he

for alleviating flooding and lowering urban heat, and for increasing biodiversity’.

One of the slides that John shows to attendees at his courses is of a heap of fly-tipped waste. Though he’s not an advocate of fly-tipping, he shows how rich a habitat the mound is, with five or six different substrates, loads of niches and voids for plants and animal, and insects beyond the usual pollinators.

John’s own garden features waste materials that he’s actively imported from the local demolition recycling plant plus spoil from the road-widening of the A13. All have been used to good effect in creating habitats and growing spaces. He realises that using bulk demolition waste may not be an option for most home-owners

‘Students on his training courses in 2026 have made new habitats for wildlife’



grew up, playing on and around the disturbed landscapes of local sand and chalk pits, as well as brownfield sites. These are places that fascinate him and inform his work today: they are so disrupted and yet have become some of the best sites for wildlife.

John’s own early projects, delivered by his Grass Roof Company, include green-roof cycle shelters, bird hides and bin shelters.

Today he runs Modern Gardener courses, part of his Care not Capital organisation, from his Hildrop site. Its aim is to help gardeners explore subjects including community spaces, green infrastructure and ecology.

Students on his training courses in 2026 have made new habitats for wildlife, such as cob and woven structures, and last year made dry-stone walls from demolition waste. Such structures, says John, are ‘essential for our health,

and advises that simply removing some of the garden’s topsoil to expose the subsoil is an easy route to varying nutrients and changing a garden’s topography. If you want to experiment by adding sand to your own garden, however, you’ll find it at garden centres and builders’ merchants, he says.

The original growing medium at Hildrop was basically heavy clay but over the years topsoil, recycled building rubble and random recycled sand mounds have been added into the mix.

The wildflowers he originally sowed have been added to and today wild carrot, strands of fennel and teasels dance with visiting insects.

John has also used sand as a surface on top of clay to make a suitable growing site for Mediterranean plants, such as cistus, that don’t thrive on clay.





Wild carrot buds opening

‘Fiona Little, John’s wife, grows fruit, vegetables and herbs in greenhouses, in the open ground and in the sinuous raised beds made by John from the galvanised steel sides of a grain silo’



He has also used sand as the base growing medium for numbers of large containers grouped on the steps and decking at the front of the house. They are finished with a one-inch layer of garden compost, a natural seedbank, that germinates and is then weeded, to leave the pot display John wants to grow on.

Fiona Little, John’s wife and the family’s renowned gardener-cook, grows fruit, vegetables and herbs in greenhouses, in the open ground and in the sinuous raised beds made by John from the galvanised steel sides of a grain silo. Her side of the site is more conventionally gardened, with tomatoes, cucumber and sweet corn among the highlights. John knows not to intervene on this side of the garden unless specifically bidden.

Together, what the couple encourage at Hildrop is the triple nurture of people, wildlife and the land. ●

COURSES & VISITS

Courses and open days are accessed by registering at carenotcapital.org

Contact John Little  [@grassroofco](https://www.instagram.com/grassroofco) or sign up to the newsletter

left: Woven habitats made by students on a Modern Gardener course