

seeds to solutions

Pam Warhurst explains why the small local actions of groups in the Incredible Edible network can make a huge difference to our response to many of the major global issues that we face



Clifford Harper

This article is a story—a story based on real people doing real things that are making a huge difference, not only in their communities, but across the planet.

In 2008 a few folks in a northern market town decided that it was about time they started doing some things differently, so they kicked off an experiment that came to be known as Incredible Edible. Over the past 13 years those of us involved in that experiment have experienced some great things, and some not so great things. But just as important, if not more important, are the things that we *could have done*, as ordinary citizens in our own townships, if the national rules had been different; if policies and laws had actually put wind under our wings rather than trying to clip them.

Thirteen years ago we began to demonstrate that it is possible—without shed-loads of lottery funding or qualifications, and without permission from above—for people to get up in the morning and start to make the place that they live in and love a

stronger, kinder and more confident community—simply by planting food and sharing it. We are only part way along our journey: we have learned a lot, but we also know where we still need to get to. And we know the changes in policies and laws that we want to see to enable everyone to be ‘incredible’.

The experiment started in Todmorden—but not because Todmorden is particularly different. It is a typical northern market town, situated in the Manchester-Leeds corridor, but it is the place that I call home. It faces all the struggles typical of so many places; things that are not news stories and are familiar to all of us—searching for identity and purpose, meeting aspirations and supporting good health, and providing jobs and reviving a failing local economy. But if you’re going to try to start a revolution, where better than in the place where you live? Todmorden became the birthplace of a grassroots movement that has used growing food as a Trojan horse to demonstrate that we, the people, can

change the spaces of our lives ourselves, can connect and learn new things ourselves, and can start to believe in our own gifts—not because someone has given us a policy directive but because we evidence all this as every day we plant, share and buy food.

Todmorden can be a bit grey and windy, and it is not necessarily the place you might think of as the site of a food revolution. We most certainly could not guarantee sunshine, but what we could come up with was the idea of ‘propaganda gardens’—places (very public places in the middle of towns and neighbourhoods) where people get inspired to do a bit of growing on a patch of ground near to them; where friends can get together and strangers can be introduced to each other, and then remember how grandma used grow or cook, smell herbs that they had not smelled for ages, or remember what they used to do in homelands that may be many miles away. They are places where some people take what they need, but most folks are just inspired to grow what they know how to grow.

We could have called them ‘guerrilla gardens’, but that seemed a bit too full of testosterone—so we called them propaganda gardens because they are places where conversations about different futures could take place.

But those propaganda gardens are just the start of a story—and in bringing about change a good story is really important. This Trojan horse of food-growing is actually a way into empowering each and every one of us to do our bit when it comes to the big changes of the present and the future, whether on immediate issues around health or on long-term issues around climate change. We started Incredible Edible because we believed that it was time that people were enabled to play their part in finding their own pieces of the jigsaw to put into that big climate change crisis picture—time to say that we are not victims and we are not going to wait for permission

to do things; we are not going to be ‘done to’ and we are going to do things for ourselves.

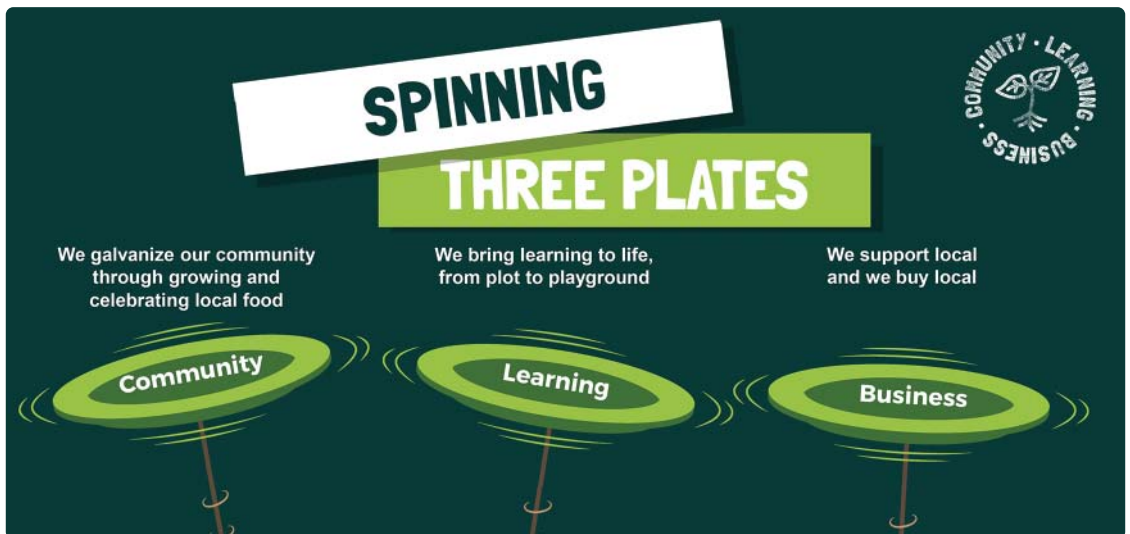
Incredible Edible’s ‘three plates’

After the promises of the Rio Earth Summit, and the excitement when the world’s leaders struck a deal to do things differently for people and the planet, we were all encouraged to think globally and act locally. It looked promising. But after the further summits of Kyoto and Copenhagen, and the total lack of leadership, both nationally and internationally, on recognising our over-use of resources, we were sleepwalking into the climate crisis; and sadly there certainly seemed to be a lack of trust in people-powered solutions.

But then, in 2008, leaving a conference in London at which Tim Lang, a professor of food policy, was addressing these big issues, it suddenly became clear to me that we could either become incredibly depressed about it all, or we could start thinking about what we can do in the place we call home to show that we are up for change; to demonstrate that we are not going to be seen as people that need solutions presented to them. It occurred to me that when it came to food—growing it, sharing it, and nurturing our communities—we, the people, could do that for ourselves.

On the train home, in the run from London to Manchester, drawing on a Virgin serviette I invented an action-based model which came to be known as Incredible Edible. The model I drew up on that serviette is based on three spinning plates (see the illustration below), and these three plates—of ‘community’, ‘learning’, and ‘business’—are at the heart of the story, and that story can be understood by everyone, whether or not they think about peak oil or know what to do about their carbon footprint.

When we spin our Incredible Edible plates we automatically start to live our lives in a different way.



Incredible Edible’s ‘three plates’ model

With the 'community' plate, we create propaganda gardens everywhere—on grass verges, in planters, and in neglected spots, turning horrible dog toilets into herb gardens. Sometimes we ask for permission; and sometimes we don't—and nobody has been sued. But each and every one of us involved is giving to our communities what we've got, whether that is big or small.

Despite our focus on edible landscapes, we know that many people do not know how to grow, and many do not know how to cook—and if they don't know how to cook, would they want to plant food? This is where the 'learning' plate comes in. Instead of thinking about how to draw up a Big Lottery bid (a process that can all too often stymie innovation), we seek out people who can bottle and pickle and grow tomatoes and potatoes and graft a tree. And we get them to spread their knowledge to others. And this, too, helps to create community through food.

The third, 'business', plate is perhaps more clearly something of an experiment. It goes like this. If someone is walking through edible landscapes every day of their life, and if they are starting to pick up on how to do things with the food that they see growing there, and are tasting the raspberries and smelling the rosemary, then they may be more likely to spend their money in support of a local food producer than they would be to rely, without further thought, on the local supermarket. They might stop buying those beans in their plastic bags that have been flown half-way across the world, clocking up carbon emissions, and which would be much better used in feeding people where they were grown. They might just go to the local food market and talk to the people from a farm up the road who are producing their own meat or cheese. It was worth a go.

So I took the idea to my friend Mary, and around her kitchen table we decided to invite local folks to a meeting in a café to explain the model and what it could mean to the town. We were going to plant food everywhere and see what happened. Wherever people were, we would plant food to share. We would create signs that encouraged, and we would cook what we grew. We were going to search out local people who could cook, grow, pickle, bottle, and graft. And we were going to spend any pound in our pockets in support of local food—not in the supermarket, but in the local market.

We would define the future we wanted by the actions we were taking in the present—in community spaces, reviving lost arts, and producing and buying local food. The three plates would be kept spinning through an act of will and passion. They would not only put on a great show, but act as a framework to involve, empower and enable action, helping everyone to think differently about the future. The universal language of food would be used to begin a journey to live in harmony with the many species with which we share this planet. It was all an

experiment. Who knew if it would work? But the folks at the meeting we held loved it.

The three plates of Incredible Edible reflect how we live our lives. And it is the simplicity of the message—essentially about health, happiness, and kindness—that people seem to love. There are now around 150 groups spinning these plates all over the UK, telling their own stories and redefining their community spaces to create edible landscapes.¹ The idea took off in France, in New Zealand after the earthquake, and all over the world wherever people gave a damn about the wellbeing of their family and community, but were uncertain about what their first step should be. The answer was simple: plant food.

'We would define the future we wanted by the actions we were taking in the present'

Sometimes groups start with business—the interested restaurateur who starts to put little signs on his plates: 'Everything on this plate was grown within ten miles of this business.' Or things might begin with people who want to extend learning beyond the school gate, growing and cooking to give kids the chance to find out what great food tastes like, rather than going home to a Pot Noodle—and then maybe encourage mum and dad to do a bit of growing themselves.

But, more often than not, people start with the community plate, because it gives the fastest return. It creates a buzz, it redefines the greenery of your community, it starts to bring back bees and pollinators—in fact it does all sorts of things that might never have been thought of. Apathy has dragged so many of us down, but there is nothing like purpose to get you going in the morning, not least if that purpose is to do what you can for the place you love and the place you call home.

As we turned out to plant those first propaganda gardens, we were doing so much more than putting cabbages in the ground. We were actually redefining our public realm. We didn't start with that fancy concept, but wherever the Incredible Edible groups are—on the Isle of Bute or in the middle of Lambeth—they are redefining their public spaces themselves, without feeling they are beholden to somebody else to let them do it.

And the impact has been tremendous. The images at centre top in the illustration on the following page show a very simple example of how actions can still be very powerful even when they are small: in Ulverston an unloved back alley has been taken over by people who are growing beans, kale, and all manner of things to share. In the Marshland area of the East Riding of Yorkshire they grow in wheelbarrows using abandoned telephone boxes for storage. All over the world we grow in what we've got.

SPREAD NOT SCALE



Examples of Incredible Edible in action

In the early years in Todmorden we turned our canal corridor into an edible canal corridor, impressing the Prince of Wales on a visit and causing the Chair of what was then British Waterways to observe that it would be great if everywhere was like this. Outside Todmorden police station there was a strip of hard surfacing that was calling out for raised beds. When we asked the police (we do ask on occasions), they told us we could go ahead as long as we didn't ask for money and as long as they didn't have to guard over what we did. We created raised beds growing sweetcorn and salad crops (also shown above), and 13 years on they are still there and still loved. This has created great conversations between citizens, and the police themselves have noted a reduction in environmental damage in the town, as people do not seem to vandalise food in the same way that some have vandalised daffodils — another of those interesting unanticipated spin-offs.

Food growing and health

Health is a particular area of interest. We noted early on that much of the grounds around Todmorden Health Centre had been planted up with prickly plants. At the time the NHS was running an 'eat five vegetables day' campaign nationally, at the cost of millions. There seemed to be an illogical contradiction there, so we asked if we could remove the prickly plants and plant food, so that people could walk into a health establishment while seeing what good, healthy food looks like. Again, the Health Centre agreed as long as they didn't have to plant and fund it. We created an apothecary garden so that the nurses could pick chamomile and mint on

their breaks, and we grew apples, raspberries, strawberries and other soft fruit so that children could taste them fresh, and so be encouraged to want to do the same thing back home.

And because of what we did in Todmorden, the Chair of the Clinical Commissioning Group in Halifax invited us to turn his surgery into an edible surgery. Within months, dozens of local residents and patients were digging and planting in an edible health centre. In Wales, Incredible Edible Porthmadog created an edible corridor linking the health centre, schools and the station, to encourage people to walk around the town rather than drive.

The impact that such initiatives are having in bringing demonstrations of paths to good health back into the NHS is something that we should be shouting about from the rafters. Of course, we have lived through two years of what has been a terrible time for many people, and it is probably not going to be the last time that we are hit by a virus in this way. We will need a huge push on population health if we are going to be able cope with the next virus that our changing planet brings us.

It also does not take a genius to work out that, as 20% of visits to the GP are related to loneliness (and who knows what percentage is lifestyle related — and we, the people, are going to have to take back some of the responsibility for our wellbeing), policy-makers need to encourage the creation of great places in which to live and work — places that put green edible spaces at centre stage and encourage us all to be more active and better nurtured. There is no better way to do this than by changing the rules to help make edible town centre landscapes the norm.

Incredible Edible's 13 years of experience lead us to ask for three key changes in health policy. First, NHS estate policies should be changed to ensure that food-growing is always factored into the design of hospitals, health centres, and surgeries. That could be simply through small but carefully designed tubs, or it might be through providing raised beds that the community and patients can look after, or using land within the site for an orchard. Whatever the approach, people should be steered through well maintained sites of good healthy food-growing as they walk up to our NHS buildings.

Secondly, we need to associate health with good cooking, and one way of doing this would be, where possible, to create community kitchens within or adjacent to our NHS facilities. There are hospitals that are already looking into this and working out what they can do within their resources to make it possible to bring together patients, doctors, nurses and the wider community to share meals that have been grown on-site. Leicester Partnership Trust comes to mind here.

Finally, NHS institutions should look at how to bend their big procurement budgets to make a step-by-step transition into the procurement of local food—which would not only offer greater quality assurance, since sources would be locally known and more easily monitored, but would encourage the creation of more local jobs that give people a chance to do something meaningful in helping to improve the population's health.

Towards a new normality of a kinder prosperity

But, as important as it is, Incredible Edible's concerns extend beyond health. At heart, we want a new normality—a kinder prosperity. We have demonstrated that we, the people, are prepared to do the things that we can to deal with the crises that we face. But to fully bring that new normal about we need policy to shift with us, providing a new framework within which we can operate: we need a change in some of the rules, with the three Incredible Edible plates as touchstones for a sustainable investment pattern that enables us to live within planetary boundaries.

First, we need a re-purposed public realm, opening up the many pieces of land in the hands of local government, the NHS, housing agencies, even the utilities, to a citizen's right to grow food—from the town square right through to the rural hinterland. Our lived experience at Incredible Edible is that people are ready and willing (or ready and willing to learn how) to responsibly grow food, respecting and nurturing the soil and each other. And we know that, desirable as a fully thought-out national food strategy is, doing things *to* people does not work half as well as letting people get on and do things *for themselves*, if the obstacles are removed from their way.

Then we need our structures to be designed—bringing all that we know from the STEAM subjects

of science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics—so that we can grow food up, across and on top of our buildings. There are all sorts of things we can do, through hydroponics, through aquaponics, to make our settlements 'edible' if we are creative and innovative. And we need to make sure that every house that is built has at least a patch of open space in which people can grow food.

And thirdly we need to invest in the next generation of urban farmers, and in our markets, market halls, and local supply chains—they are all going to be key to how we live well and prosper in the future. In Todmorden, after getting people talking in propaganda gardens, after spreading food-growing and cooking skills, cafés and restaurants in the town are now putting local food on the menu. Our market hall is busier than ever before, more business is being done with local farms and producers (with the bonus that we are more likely to see more local jobs in that sector), and more people are moving to Todmorden or coming there to shop because they are attracted by the local food and they like the idea of 'sticky money' that stays in the area where the spending happens. The same is true for markets and towns across the network, from Radcliffe, Bury to Southall, Greater London.

But while decision-makers waver over the need to urgently embrace these changes, at Incredible Edible we are just going to keep on doing things for ourselves—collectively spending thousands of hours growing every single week, sharing, and challenging. And we are going to continue to tell our stories, to show that together we can change the look and functions of our towns and cities, investing in the green infrastructure needed to ensure that we can nurture ourselves. We have demonstrated the amazing gifts that our citizens bring to their communities as they become part of the solution to living within our means. It is not such a stretch to ask those with responsibility for the public realm to re-purpose it, take away obstacles, and trust the people to build kinder futures through the power of small actions.

The American anthropologist Margaret Mead said it all: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.' Believe in the power of small actions. They are far too often belittled, but they are the building blocks of a more self-sustaining future.

● **Pam Warhurst CBE** is Co-Founder of Incredible Edible and Chair of Incredible Edible CIC, and Chair of Todmorden Town Deal Board. The article is based on her 2021 Sir Frederic J Osborn Memorial Lecture. The views expressed are personal.

Note

- 1 See the Incredible Edible website, at www.incredibleedible.org.uk/what-we-do/ See also P Warhurst and A Sikking: *Seeds to Solutions: The Power of Small Actions*. Incredible Edible, 2021. Available from www.spsquare.org/product-page/seeds-to-solutions