



Small spaces Kate Weinberg is caught between spring and summer telegraph.co.uk/gardening

It's better to share with the Joneses

A new study tells us that wanting to outdo the neighbours is bad for your health. It is also deeply unfashionable, says Jessica Fellowes

Keeping up with the Joneses is making us ill, according to a study published yesterday. Comparing salaries with neighbours and friends or worse still, those younger than you, is bad for our health and wellbeing. "Man may well be a social animal but constantly looking over one's shoulder seems to make the world a less happy, more unequal place," according to the authors of the Europe-wide study, Professor Andrew Clark and Claudia Senik.

But who are these people, notching up lifestyle triumphs as though that was all that mattered in our pared-down, recession-riven world? Nothing could be more last century than this self-centred, competitive approach. The rest of us are living in a "we-economy" – a system of selfless giving and sharing – and are happier for it.

Only last week the usual sickening thud of envelopes landed on the doormat, promising bills, not offers of platinum. Gone are the credit cards or several "guaranteed prizes!!!!". Those days are over. So I was delighted this time to discover a letter from a friend asking me to post a used paperback to an address she had provided, forward a copy of the letter to 20 friends and sit back and wait for 36 books to arrive. A chain letter, yes, but of the nicest sort. On the same day I got an email asking me to send on a favourite recipe as part of a similar system. It seems that we're all cashing in on the "we-economy" to battle the recession: exchanging books, recipes and even household goods for nothing.

Freecycle is a good example. Established in Tucson, Arizona in 2003, it has spread around the world and there are now several UK branches. The premise is simple: if you have any goods you want to "offer" (get rid of) or need, you post a brief ad on the Freecycle website (www.freecycle.org). Anyone who wants your goods can have them free, provided they collect them. For this reason, Freecycle members tend to be local (though you can join any group you want) and it's a great way to get to

Help your neighbours and help yourself is the modern way to the Good Life, below



know neighbours.

Hope Dickson-Leach, a filmmaker, moved to a small flat in London and found some of her old furniture didn't fit, "so I gave away a TV, a bedside table and a box of books, and I got a hairdryer and a much-loved cat from a couple too old to look after it any more".

It's not just personal needs that are met in a we-economy, but those of the community. A pioneer in this new social set-up is Richard Reynolds, 31, an ad planner by day and a gardener by night. After moving to London five years ago from Devon, Richard missed exercising his green fingers and was dismayed by the neglected verges and grassy patches in his neighbourhood. So he turned "guerrilla gardener", planting flowers and sowing seeds wherever he saw a need. Not that Southwark



council is grateful. "They should embrace this as a solution to think imaginatively and improve the community's landscape when there are few resources. But my neighbours and I are being charged £4,000 a year for the right to garden on the grounds round our tower block."

Richard was determined not to be thwarted and created a website (www.guerrillagardening.org) exhorting others to "fight the filth with forks and flowers", which has attracted global and national interest with thousands of fellow GGs writing blogs and posting pictures of blossoming primulas in car parks and roundabouts. "Something like this happens at the extremes of the economic cycle: either when people are priced out of being able to afford properties with gardens, or when they have time on their hands because they've been made redundant," explains Richard. "It's such an approachable thing to do, people will always say hello when you're gardening. I now know the majority of my neighbours and even met

my girlfriend this way." These are the real green-shoots of the we-conomy.

Those who lack the talent to nurture nature can turn to "yarnbombing" instead: "improving the urban landscape one stitch at a time". This idea began in Canada in 2005: enthusiastic knitters cover trees, lampposts and benches with colourful woolly creations, prettifying the locale as effectively as flowers. (The best results are posted on www.yarnbombing.com.) In the UK, a "fibre arts collective" known as ArtYarn was set up by artists Sarah Hardcastle, 31, and Rachel Elwell, 28. "People are incredibly responsive," says Sarah. "Perhaps because there's a collective memory of knitting, as well as a nostalgia for the days of self-sufficiency." ArtYarn last month began a residency at the Contact Theatre in Manchester, running knitting and crochet design workshops for youths: "It's less about functional garments and more about being creative," says Sarah. (Find out more on www.art yarn.blogspot.com.)

But why should a recession mean that people are interested in improving their neighbourhood? Kevin Harris, author of *Neighbouring and Older People*, thinks that while one can't simply point to a link between a downturn in income and an upturn in neighbourliness, "it is key that people do seem to be more open to neighbourly schemes. Also, there is a link today with the environment – we understand better the responsibility of collective behaviour." Kevin thinks that the time may have come for "time banks", whereby you babysit a neighbour's children for two hours, in return for two hours' work on your garden. "I don't know what it will do for the economy but it's great for social connections," he says. And yes, Kevin knows all his neighbours and frequently exchanges soup for warm scones with the one next door.

Perhaps the recession is encouraging the much-invoked British "spirit of the Blitz". Certainly, charities, which one would expect to be hard hit, still seem to be upbeat. Justgiving.com, which facilitates charity donations, says that one in 10 donors is reconsidering direct debits, but that generally while people are giving less, they are giving frequently. Paul Connew of Sparks, a children's medical research charity, says that they have noticed an increase in people wanting to take on personal challenges on behalf of the charity: "There are more people than ever wanting to run the marathon for us – more than we have places for." The Rainbow Trust, which provides support for families with seriously ill children, says: "We haven't noticed any drop-off in donations. People usually have a personal motive for giving, so that hasn't changed."

Prof Tony Cassidy, who specialises in community psychology, says that it is true that people pull together when the chips are down, "but this very much depends on the make-up of the community. Inter-group conflict will increase but a homogenous group will pull together. It helps if there is a single focus – a pub or club where people tend to meet." This is borne out by the Churches Conservation Trust, which has restored over 340 abandoned churches. Its chief executive, Crispin Trueman, says: "When you fix the roof, the church becomes welcoming again and brings people back to it. They have confidence in their community again. St Peter's in Sudbury, Suffolk, is run by a local group of friends who put on concerts, bring and buy sales, talks and so on. There's a big church in Bristol that is now a circus training school. And in Vange in Essex there was a tiny, derelict church that had been vandalised. We spent £150,000 restoring it, and got the children from the primary school to design the replacement stain glass window. They take immense pride in it now and protect it from any damage."

Whether you knit a jumper for a tree, leave a book on a bench for a passerby (see www.bookcrossing.com), plant pansies by the bus-stop or offer to bake your neighbour a cake in exchange for flowers, there's no doubt: having less money can make you feel richer. It's the we-conomy, stupid.

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