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Allowing Natural Mess into our Lives

We strive to have reasonably tidy houses because there is a level of mess indoors that can become inconvenient or even dangerous. But what about messiness outside? A level of tidiness here is also necessary for safety's sake, to reduce inconvenience and danger just as we have inside our homes, such as keeping pathways clear for walking or wheelchairs, dead branches from falling on our heads, junctions clear so we can see oncoming traffic, and grass short for amenities such as sports or picnics. But what about those patches of land that we don't actually sit, play or walk on? Are there any practical reasons why this needs to be 'tidy'?

You would be forgiven if you see overgrown roadside verges or untrimmed hedges as bad. Our culture has trained our eyes to see them that way. During wars and recessions tidying up our green spaces is a low priority, so some of us will associate uncut verges with times of stress or hunger, either directly or passed down through family history.

In the 18th century, the upper classes made a great deal of having a lawn: it showed they had the money and power to employ teams of servants, using scythes or even scissors to keep the grass short and even. With the invention of the lawnmower, the middle classes joined in. For them, lawns were a status symbol: anyone with a lawn had enough money to buy food so didn't need to grow crops on all their land.

'Weeds' have had a bad press too. In the past, common herbs and plants that women used as medicine became associated with witchcraft. They were persecuted along with the women who used them. In modern times, agrochemical companies

have been quick to advertise products to kill “evil” weeds, selling us the idea that you must have an immaculate, tidy garden or risk being looked down upon by your neighbours. But in the last few years, more and more evidence has shown that too much tidiness has a hugely detrimental impact on the natural world. We are losing insects, fungi and birds that rely on rotting wood because we clear up dead trees from the countryside. We have learnt that insects hide in the dead stems of plants, amphibians in tussocks of grass, and hedgehogs in piles of twigs to survive the winter, and our manicured gardens and over-trimmed farmland hedges are leaving nowhere for them to shelter. We’ve seen a reduction in scrubland as the so-called “green revolution” put marginal land to intensive agricultural use. Many insects need long grass in summer and wildflowers for their larvae to feed on: their numbers have crashed largely due to the loss of 97% of our traditional hay meadows since the Second World War.

Thankfully, nowadays more and more people are growing their lawns long, leaving the leaves and seed heads over winter, and relaxing what they tidy in their gardens. Forward-thinking councils, like ours, are mowing and tidying less in order to leave more habitat for wildlife.

If mess has been seen in the past as a sign of poverty, this is no longer so with the National Trust starting to grow wildflower meadows instead of vast expanses of lawn, and the Chelsea Flower Show embracing weeds in their show gardens. And if weeds were seen as evil, surely we must know now that is nonsense; if they have healing properties, perhaps it’s quite the opposite.

For nature’s sake we need to learn to look with different eyes, to spot the subtle beauty of a wildflower or hear the grasshoppers chirping in the summer, and imagine what

creatures we cannot see could be using the long grass, weeds and sprawling hedges as their homes. In the future, will our culture see it as a sign of intelligence, independence and confidence to have a wild garden? Intelligence to have understood that a bit more messiness in our natural world is a wonderful thing, and the independence and confidence to finally reject the outdated ideal of a totally neat and tidy garden.