

 Interview

Can you dig it?

Famous for his TV series *Grow Your Own Drugs*, James Wong will be at the Edible Garden Show this spring, inspiring people to get up and grow



TV botanist James Wong is on a mission to show that growing your own food is easy. He'll be explaining why, and debunking other myths that surround gardening, as a speaker at the upcoming Edible Garden Show at Alexandra Palace. Working out

how plants grow best, and with maximum nutritional value, is something James is passionate about. He studied ethnobotany (how plants are used) at the University of Kent and The Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew before appearing on BBC2's *Grow Your*

Own Drugs, where he tested remedies made from plants. James has since appeared on *Our Food*, *The Great British Garden Revival* and BBC Radio 4's *Gardeners' Question Time*, as well as writing books and holding talks all over the country.

"The people at the Edible Garden Show are a lot younger than your usual gardening show audience," says James. "You've got a lot more 20-, 30- and 40-somethings all interested in growing their own food. It's the connection between food and lifestyle, and wanting to know where food comes from, that's really getting younger people into it – rather than wanting to be Alan Titchmarsh and have 500 acres of walled rose gardens. It's about growing food that tastes so much better than it would if you bought it from a supermarket."

Having grown up in a family of keen gardeners in Singapore, James has always been fascinated by plants and their practical uses. "There was always a use for everything we grew. Plants in the garden are beautiful but that's by-the-by to me. I see them as solutions to problems we may have. What excites me most is looking at plants from a scientific perspective. I love being able to say I'm not doing this because it's an old wives' tale, or because some Victorian guy did it, I'm doing it because it works, and here's the evidence to prove it. Every idea I have about how to grow plants better, everything I write or talk about, I have to test first."

You'd expect James to have a massive garden at home where he tests everything out. In fact, he lives in a flat in Bayswater and uses his mum's suburban garden in Croydon

as his allotment. "Initially, I thought mum's garden wasn't an ideal testing site because I could only get there once a week at most," says James. "But that's exactly the situation I should test in, because it's closer to how most people garden. If it was at my house, I'd be out there 24 hours a day, pruning, misting, weeding. No one's going to do that. If something survives in this situation, it would survive in anyone's garden."

So what are the easiest edible plants to grow now? "If you don't have much time, grow fruit instead of vegetables. Raspberries are much more expensive to buy in the shops than carrots, and growing carrots takes a lot of watering, weeding, thinning – and you have to plant them every year. Plant raspberries once and, other than a good prune each winter, you do nothing, but you'll get fruit every year."

"Right now, I'm growing a variety of blueberry called Rubel, which contains twice the average amount of health-boosting antioxidants compared to regular supermarket blueberries. They grow in really poor soil, slugs don't attack them, and you don't have to prune, water or fertilise them. They have lovely, white scented flowers in the spring, brilliant red-gold foliage in autumn, and one plant produces six kilos of fruit, worth over £100, every year.

"I've researched that if you cook the fruit, you can more than double the antioxidants. So just one slice of Rubel blueberry pie has six times the amount of antioxidants than a cupful of your average supermarket variety. Why would you not grow them?" theediblegardenshow.co.uk For a Greene & Co ticket offer, see opposite.

CREATIVE REVIEW

Many of the UK's best creative forces in architecture and design will be showcasing their work at the internationally renowned Clerkenwell Design Week. Galleries, studios and showrooms in the area will be open to all and presenting their most innovative projects. Plus in the subterranean Victorian prison at The House of Detention you can see the work of talented, up-and-coming designers, while The Design Factory will present

high-profile UK and worldwide brands, and a dedicated lighting floor. The Crypt on the Green at St James Church, will exhibit small design pieces and accessories, while high-end decorative interiors will be at the Detail exhibition. Also expect street spectacles, pop-up workshops and Conversations At Clerkenwell, a series of seminars by established and rising stars of the A&D world. *May 19-21, clerkenwelldesignweek.com*

