



*Geranium sanguineum* painted in 1918 by Lilian Snelling (1879-1972); the RHS Lindley Library holds more than 600 of her works.

# Your local park: use it or lose it

The Garden columnist Lia Leendertz on why we should love noisy parkers

There is a park 20 minutes away from me in Bristol that has it all. A classic Victorian park criss-crossed by pathways and shaded by mature trees, it is overlooked by large, handsome Victorian villas. There is a sandpit, a paddling pool, and fancy new basket swings that you can clamber into with your kids. A small, mobile café bedecked with bunting serves tea in vintage china cups to mums sitting in dappled light. It is cosy, comfortable and quite delightful.

It also happens to be two streets away from the house I grew up in, and although I am now most likely to be found having a sedate picnic by the paddling pool, I am always aware that I once tobogganed down that hill on a tea tray in the dead of night. On summer evenings under those trees I got giggly on cheap cider. And I remember trying to look so cool on the swings while fighting back the horrible, choking sensation of my

first rebellious drag on a cigarette. Of course this park draws people to it to do proper park things – sunbathe and throw Frisbees and the like – but it is also a place where people play out their real, messy lives. It feels loved.

In all its well-maintained glory, it has nothing to fear. If someone tried to create a new retirement complex on its northeast corner, the middle-class outcry would be heard all the way to the Dordogne and back. It is secure, but not all parks are so lucky.

## Week of action

At the end of this month is Love Parks Week, organised by parks charity Greenspace. According to them the equivalent of 67 football pitches worth of park, playing field and allotments have been sold off by London boroughs alone in the past three years. The week is designed to encourage people into their local parks through a series of events (fun days, nature trails, even jazz nights for those so inclined). 'By holding, or simply attending a Love Parks Week event, you can help drive the message that our parks and green spaces are essential to healthy, happy and strong communities,' goes the blurb. Essentially: use it or lose it.

It is such an important message. There is another,

more troubled park, much closer to where I now live. The remnant of a once-large chunk of ancient common land, it is sliced through by a main road and nibbled away at by housing. Its name – Horfield Common

– derives from the old English for 'filthy open land' and it once had a reputation as a place of lawlessness, where thieves and vagabonds lurked. It has none of the gloss of its more popular neighbour and – one suspects – none of the cachet among the local authority officers.

Open and wind-swept, with a touch of the bleak, there are far-reaching views across Bristol to the hills on the other side. This may not be the spot for cosy dappled picnics, but it isn't bad at all for booting a football as far as you can, for flying a kite, and for allowing over-exuberant kids to run until they're exhausted. But two years ago a corner of it was earmarked by the local authority for potential sale for development, based on their idea that it was only used by a few dog walkers. A massive and heroic effort by a Friends Group saved it, but here's the thing: it was representations from the Scouts groups that practice their camping skills on it, the local boys club that plays football on it and – yes – the dog walkers that walk dogs on it that pulled it back from the edge of becoming Park Crescent and Common Close. The message is clear: if you want your park, use it. Have picnics in it, set up tents along its edges, toboggan down its hills, listen to jazz in it, smoke your first cigarette on its swings (obviously don't really, kids: smoking kills), drink cider under its trees. Make it a part of your real, day-to-day life, and make it feel loved. ●

❖ Love Parks Week, 21–29 July 2012; [www.loveparksweek.org.uk](http://www.loveparksweek.org.uk)



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