



What I did this summer...

FORCED TO FIND NEW WAYS TO PASS THE TIME, MANY OF US LEARNED SKILLS AND TOOK UP NEW HOBBIES DURING LOCKDOWN. BUT ONCE YOU'VE MASTERED THE BASICS, WHERE DO YOU GO FROM THERE? WE ASK THOSE WHO'VE GONE BEFORE FOR ADVICE - AND IF YOUR LOCKDOWN WAS TOO BUSY TO EVEN BEGIN, THERE ARE WISE WORDS ON GETTING STARTED, TOO

'Thanks, I made it myself'

Being complimented on a home-sewn outfit was a new but welcome experience for many

Take a look at the hashtag #isewlation (and our photos of homemade sews) and you'll see how lockdown helped transform our wardrobes. There was something about the combination of our existing clothes not feeling quite right and an unease about buying more, coupled with perhaps a bit more time – not to mention a well-scheduled series of *The Great British Sewing Bee* on TV – that convinced many to give dressmaking a go.

The classic way to begin is using cotton to sew something like a basic top or skirt. That's a great start, says Alex Whatley of dressmaking shop and site Sew Over It (sewoverit.co.uk). "Once you've done that, try building on that with a simple dress or pair of loose-fitting trousers."

Or rather than launching yourself on a new pattern, you could re-use one that you enjoyed previously, using it to try out a new kind of fabric. "Lots of us really like wearing jersey T-shirts, so if that's you, try a cotton knit fabric such as French terry. Go for something fairly stable (not too lightweight), so it won't be too tricky to sew." (Alex suggests this as a good first project for a men's wardrobe, too). Try Viscose or Tencel if you prefer flowy or drapey clothes.

As Alex points out, just because you're starting to sew your own clothes, it doesn't mean having a style transplant. "It's tempting as a beginner to choose the wildest fabric prints and cutest pattern details, but often these aren't what you'd normally wear, and can end up languishing unworn," says Alex (who has probably seen her fair share of such projects). "Being thoughtful and intentional about



what you're making will ensure that you make garments you'll want to wear again and again."

For help with fiddlesome but necessary techniques, like buttonholes and invisible zips, there's YouTube, of course, but Sew Over It also run a 'Stitch School' (sewoveritstitchschool.co.uk) – online sewing classes taught by experts. Pattern companies also often run 'sewalongs' – where people virtually make the same pattern at the same time – Alex recommends the ones run by By Hand London (byhandlondon.com).

Like following a dressmaking pattern, keeping up the habit is really all about taking it step by step. As Alex says, "Add one new skill to your sewing repertoire with every new project, and before you know it, you'll have a bank of dressmaking skills and confidence that you can call upon to make anything you like!" »

One way to expand on your sewing skills is to take a pattern that you've already mastered and try it out in a new fabric



What did you call yours?

Maybe we loved sourdough starters because they're like pets – needing regular attention and feeding – and a name, of course

Congratulations if you've kept your new starter alive and well. You've probably mastered your favourite basic loaf by now – the next step is getting creative, says Roly Allan, who took up baking when made redundant and is now author of *How to Raise a Loaf and Fall in Love with Sourdough* (Laurence King). "This could mean a shopping opportunity, as while you can get great results with no specialist kit,

there are a few items that make things easier or your loaves more beautiful. A baking stone retains heat better than metal trays, while a banneton helps keep your loaf's shape while proving. Then there are glaze brushes, a lame (razor-sharp knife to slash the top of your loaves with style)." Or your creativity could be about adding to your loaf; think olives, sultanas, sunflower seeds, herbs – probably not all at once, though. Trying new flours or creating a signature crust are also allowed. If you're feeling confident, Vanessa Kimbell, who runs The Sourdough School (see issue 87, *The Simple Things*), suggests trying a sweet starter, which means you can give pastries, doughnuts and brioche a go. Her new book *The*

Once you have the basic starter under your belt, try adding new flavour mixes, or have a go at a sweet starter for tempting treats

Sourdough School Sweet Baking (Kyle Books) is a complete guide. Some of us may not yet have found success with our starter: "Don't give up," says Vanessa, "you do really only need two ingredients; organic stoneground flour, which will still have wild yeast in it, and water; a warm room – not hot but somewhere pleasant to be in; a glass or plastic container; a whisk to incorporate air and a breathable cover or lid, such as a clean tea towel, then you follow the instructions and wait."



Hens in the garden, eggs in the kitchen

The homebound hobby that keeps on giving

First it was all about eggs. Who had them, who knew where you could get them. And then, as people made hasty friendships with their nearest back garden henkeeper, they begged, borrowed or bought their own and hens themselves became scarcer than, well, hen's teeth. There's nothing tricky about keeping hens, says our editor Lisa Sykes, who has been keeping a small flock for over a decade. "A secure run is essential, especially now darkness falls early. If you took on some free-ranging girls over the summer, don't worry if they are no longer looking their best. It's normal for hens, especially pure breed varieties, to moult as the days get shorter, and they can look a bit 'oven ready' for a month or more as their new feathers grow back. They'll stop laying, too. Hybrid hens will likely start up again and lay every few days but many pure breeds will pack up the production line for the winter, traditionally starting to lay



again around Valentine's Day. They need plenty of protein as they moult, which they get from their pellets, so think of their mixed corn as more of a treat. And if they look a little peaky, add a spoonful of apple cider vinegar to their water as a pick-me-up." If you missed out on the big hen buy-up over the summer, now's the time to plan your coop, then you'll be ready for some point-of-lay pullets (young hens who have yet to lay their first egg) next spring.

Start planning your coop now ahead of a fresh egg supply next spring

Doing the write thing

Lockdown gave some of us some much longed for creativity time. And it's never too late to start...

How many of us, back in March, said "I might finally write that novel!"

How many of us ACTUALLY wrote that novel?... Don't worry. You're not alone.

For the many of us who were outfaced by the idea of turning out an entire novel, making writing a daily habit was the answer.

For some, that meant sitting down each morning and freewriting for three pages or a set amount of time. Exercises, like writing prompts, provided a jumping-off point for others, taking a single word and writing around that each day. You can find hundreds of these online; we like the Flash Face-Off Prompts at writershq.co.uk. For others it was poems, or a daily haiku that kept our arms in and our keyboards steaming when everything else slowed down.

But how to take that creative habit forward as life returns slowly and meanderingly to normal?

Author and writing mentor Susan Elliot Wright (susanelliottwright.co.uk) suggests keeping your daily writing habit achievable and building on what you've done: "Think of an amount of writing that is doable per day no matter what (I do 200 words) and just don't go to bed until you've done it. If you've been writing over lockdown you may have themes or characters developing that you'd like to take further, so write around those."

Susan also suggests turning writing into a community experience by joining local or online groups, or simply buddying up with a creative friend. But the secret of success, she says, is to think quality over quantity: "The quality comes later in the downtime, deep in the subconscious. But the *more* you write, the better you get." »



And, breathe..

How yoga stretched and soothed the nation

Along with beard trimmers and loungewear, yoga mats were one of the top purchases during lockdown and the most popular piece of new fitness equipment. With more time on our hands, achy backs from our makeshift home offices and soaring stress levels, it's no surprise that mind-calming, muscle-stretching yoga filled a hole in many people's lockdown lives. Yoga teachers in the know quickly moved their classes onto Zoom, online studios such as ekhartyoga.com offered free trials to their library of classes and YouTube yogi, Adriene Mishler, reached over 8 million subscribers. Our wellbeing editor Rebecca Frank was one of many who made yoga a more regular habit during

lockdown. "I'd been going to a weekly class (when I could make it), but in lockdown I got into the routine of joining my regular class on Zoom once or twice a week and also doing some extra short classes on YouTube. It really helped me sleep better and stay calmer whilst trying to juggle work and home schooling. I'm about to start going to a small class in person again but will continue with the virtual classes when I don't have time to travel or need to be at home with the kids." Bath-based yoga teacher Ruth Timms is gradually returning to teaching in person after streaming all her classes live during lockdown and is excited about "feeling the energy of people in the room and listening to the little conversations that crop up after class." Whilst home practice has many advantages, if you're wanting to continue a new yoga habit,

finding a local class is a good way to reconnect with your community again as well as having the advantage of a teacher in the room to ensure you're doing it right. And when you don't want to leave the comfort of your home there are many options for practising yoga from home without having to travel (or even brush your hair). "I've started a virtual Yin yoga class on a Sunday evening because it's slow and sleepy and you can just snuggle up afterwards rather than having to travel home," says Ruth. With more ways to access yoga than ever before, it could be the lifeline we need to get through winter. *For Ruth's classes, visit ruthtimmsyoga.com.*

Combining real-life classes with online sessions could offer the best of both

Putting down roots

Meet Liz Boyd, our picture researcher, who spent this summer making her garden grow

“Like many people, I was feeling lockdown anxiety,” says Liz Boyd. “People were panicking about food shortages, so I turned to planting seeds.” Liz’s south London front garden had an olive tree and lavender bushes, but was otherwise quite bare. She transformed it with peas, runner beans, courgettes, chard, mange tout, kohlrabi, tomatoes, cucumbers and lots of cosmos. The result was a jungle. “I had no idea how big and bushy everything would grow. The peas got crowded out by the runner beans, and I didn’t realise how pretty veg flowers are, or how exciting it would all be.”

Gardening writer Alice Vincent says focusing on one area of your garden, like Liz did, is the right approach if faced with an overgrown (or bare) plot. “Task yourself with fixing up just one corner, or a couple of pots,” she says. “You’d never try and tackle an entire home deep-clean or decorate your whole house all in one go.”

Liz’s plot was a success. “Our first crop was chard – we sautéed it and got just a spoonful each, but it was great. Then we were overwhelmed, particularly by the courgettes. Eating your whole lunch from the garden is quite an achievement.”

So, what could Liz be doing now? “In autumn, plants tend to go over, with leaves turning brown, yellow and crispy,” says Alice. “A satisfying job, and one that will build confidence, is having a good tidy up. Chop the crispy growth back. If the plant is an annual – it’s flowered and has reached the end of its life cycle – pull it out. If it’s perennial, and will return next year, leave the crown in the ground.”

As well as eating lovely fresh food, Liz found a community of growers



Gardening opened up an entire community of like-minded growers ready to help out

among friends and neighbours. “It felt normal to swap seedlings. You’d give someone a courgette plant, or receive an aubergine.” She’s now taken on an allotment with a friend, is finding delicious veg-based recipes and is installing a water butt.

Alice says it’s a good time to think ahead. “Sow flowers such as poppies, cornflowers and forget-me-nots that will come to fruition next spring,” she says. “It might seem like a long way off, but once you’ve clicked into the gardening calendar (usually at least six weeks ahead), there’s a time-travelling magic to knowing what lies in store.”

And if you didn’t manage any of this...

While you might not have a new ‘hobby’ to your name, you will have learned something new over lockdown. Perhaps you’ve become a queen of making tasty lunches from the odds and sods in your fridge. Perhaps you’ve reached new levels of prioritising, as you’ve juggled work and family lives. Maybe you’ve learned something about yourself: how you prefer to do work, perhaps, or that you’re actually far more adaptable than you ever thought possible. There might be little bits from your lockdown routine you’d like to continue: local walks, feeling closer to your neighbours, spending more time with loved ones. It might be worth carving out a little bit of time to reflect on how you’ve coped with this unique time (and to congratulate yourself on that coping!). And perhaps the biggest – and most reassuring – lesson that most of us will have learned? Just how kind, helpful and resourceful our fellow humans are capable of being. **S**