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## **The Humble Front Garden in North Halifax**

In 2021 there were over 28 million households in the UK. Of these it is estimated that about 87% have a garden. During the first COVID-19 lockdown between March and May 2020 depression, stress and anxiety were all higher during this period compared with usual population levels. A survey carried out by researchers at the University of Surrey in 2021 found that the more respondents visited their gardens during this time, the more happy and cheerful they felt. Those visiting their garden less than once a week reported feeling substantially more anxious and depressed than those who visited it more often. Front gardens are the first thing we see when we leave the house and the last thing we see before returning to home. Although fleeting the front garden will have an impact on our mood as we set out on our journey to school, place of work, shops or other daily activity. Similarly, as we arrive home the front garden attends our transition from our activity outside to the comforts of home life. Research published in 2020 examined the effect on participating households of adding plants to previously bare front gardens in deprived areas of Salford in Greater Manchester. The percentage of residents with healthy levels of cortisol, which can reflect stress, doubled and more than half of residents said their front garden contributed to them feeling happier.

Paths are lines along which people travel in urban areas but they are also places where people start and finish their quotidian journeys. Whitehill Road and Moorbottom Road are in Illingworth, a northern suburb of Halifax. Some 94% of households in Illingworth have access to a private garden, which is above the national average. The median size of garden is 182m<sup>2</sup> which is slightly below the national average of 188m<sup>2</sup>. Generally front gardens are much smaller than back gardens, research indicates they are roughly a third of the back garden area. They are however important not just for the individual household but collectively for the area.

Gardens are in decline. A study in London found there had been a 12% drop in the vegetated area of London gardens in the decade prior to 2008, the equivalent of 2.5 Hyde Parks each year. A survey on parking by the RAC, published in 2012 found that 7 million front gardens are concreted over. A Royal Horticultural Study (RHS) in 2015 found that 4.5 million front gardens contained no plants at all and about one in four front gardens are completely paved over. The trend to pave front gardens increased from 1995 when regulations changed to allow kerb-

drops without planning permission. This regulation was changed in 2009 to apply only to front gardens less than 5m<sup>2</sup>. The increase of hard surfacing in front gardens;

- contributes to flooding as runoff increases
- increases the amount of litter oil and other pollutants being washed away into drains and rivers
- increases urban temperatures as hard surfaces absorb and store daytime heat
- reduces the number of plants which can absorb carbon dioxide
- means less space for wildlife such as bees, butterflies, hedgehogs and birds
- increases the risk of subsidence
- can reduce the value of the house if it is dominant in the street

Whereas front gardens which are planted;

- reduce run-off as the soil and plants soak up rainfall
- help to moderate urban temperatures
- provide additional spaces for wildlife
- contribute to people's well being
- makes the road or street more attractive

In 2015 the RHS launched a campaign 'Greening Grey Britain' to encourage more people to 'transform hard, cold grey areas into living, planted up beautiful places, to enrich lives and benefit the environment'. Since its launch more than one million more UK front gardens contain nothing but greenery and the number of front gardens containing no plants at all has halved.

The front gardens photographed along Whitehill and Moorbottom Roads reflect the diversity of town and city gardens. From completely paved to fully planted. Some reflect a balance between the need for parking and the possibility of planting in beds or pots. What we do with our front gardens matters and has consequences for flooding, pollution, heatwaves, wildlife and the amenity of an area. The humble front garden can support people's health, relaxation and well-being as well as reduce flooding, cool temperatures, limit pollution and add to biodiversity.