

It's really easy to work out why a green alternative is a great way to keep yourself fit

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Different type of 'gym' a success

GROWING fresh vegetables or building a greenhouse from recycled bottles are not "traditional" gym workouts.

But a network of green gyms in Wales are beginning to attract people who don't want to pound the treadmill in a bid to keep fit.

Green gyms, which were developed by conservation charity BTCV, provide an alternative to conventional gyms, giving people the opportunity to burn off calories and improve their mental and physical wellbeing, while working in the great outdoors.

The range of activities in the various green gym projects varies widely, from planting and growing fresh vegetables to conservation projects and countryside walks.

They also help those who would not normally attend a conventional gym or sports centre get and keep fit.

Marcia Coleman, the green gym project officer in Merthyr Tydfil, said: "Green gyms are friendly and create an environment where people can socialise and that is a great motivating factor.

"We carry out all sorts of activities from country walks to dry stone walling and gardening. People get a great deal of satisfaction from growing their own produce and taking it home.

"Getting fit is a by-product of this outdoor activity - you can



BENEFITS: Marcia Coleman a Green Gym Officer from Merthyr Tydfil

burn off as many calories digging an allotment as you do working out in the gym

"Being outside, carrying out physical tasks with a group of people is also a great stress-buster and makes those involved feel good about themselves."

The green gym projects in South Wales include a vegetable plot at a nursery in Aberfan, which encourages pre-schoolchildren to enjoy fresh vegetables from a young age, and a project at Thomastown House in Merthyr Tydfil, which has been funded by Mentro Allan.

The Thomastown House project is designed to help improve the wellbeing of people with health problems.

Ms Coleman said: "We have regular members who have formed a close-knit group, something that's as important as the physical health benefits.

"People get immense satisfaction from seeing a project through from start to finish. For example, at Thomastown House,

we have built a greenhouse from recycled bottles, a pagoda and a barbecue area."

Green gyms also provide a lifeline for the unemployed, helping to provide a stepping stone back into work by teaching new skills such as dry stone walling and footpath maintenance.

The green gym concept was originally developed in the late 1990s by Oxford GP Dr William Bird, who is also a member of BTCV. He was awarded an MBE in the 2010 New Year Honours for his contribution to health and physical activity.

The first pilot was held in 1997. By 2006 there were 55 projects running throughout the UK, with an estimated 6,000 people taking part.

Research by the Oxford Brookes University school of health and social care, which evaluated the green gym projects in Oxfordshire and East Sussex, found that they contributed to significant improvements in cardiovascular fitness, provided



CLEAR: Terry Ryan from Dowlais with his greenhouse built from recycled bottles **PICTURE:** Matthew Horwood

that they are performed regularly.

The evaluation also identified improved muscular strength in participants, which in turn led to increased coping ability and reduced risk of functional limitations in later life and a significant improvement in the mental health component score in the first three months of participation. Depression scores of participants also fell.

Some of the green gym activities burned almost a third more calories in an hour than a step aerobics class.

Ms Coleman said the proof that green gyms are a success is the fact that participants keep coming.

"Our regulars have become friends and get stuck into a range of projects with great enthusiasm," she said.

"And I'm delighted that the green gym project I started in Swansea is now self-supporting, which is testimony to the pleasure and satisfaction people get from working together outdoors."

■ For more information about green gyms contact Marcia Coleman on 07811 190 253 or Calum Macintosh on 07970 540 616