

Gardens and gardening for people with dementia

Why have a garden for people with dementia?

The belief that a garden is a source of pleasure and a place for relaxation and meditation has been a part of our culture for many centuries. Gertrude Jekyll commented: "The first purpose of a garden is to be a place of quiet beauty such as will give delight to the eye and refreshment to the mind." A garden therefore serves to promote the activity and health of body, mind and spirit.

These benefits seem to be increasingly appreciated with age, and it should be no surprise that they have been established for people with dementia (Sempik et al, 2003). The most obvious benefit of a garden or other open space is the provision of multi-sensory stimulation, a fact reflected in the development of sensory gardens. Sight, sound, smell, taste and touch are all involved (see Thrive Briefing Sheet 1: Sensory Gardens).

The enjoyment of gardens and gardening has been described as a 'soft fascination': the activity draws us with a fascination that does not require work in the sense of having to push ourselves to be involved, and yet is not so all-consuming that our minds are completely taken over.

Is gardening and are gardens of value to everyone or only to those who enjoy them? There is no clear answer, but many consider that we are all responsive when given the opportunity or encouragement to be involved. However, just as not all adults are attracted to gardening, it should not be a surprise if some people with dementia do not respond immediately to this activity.

In addition to enjoyment and the associated experience of 'feeling better' when involved with a garden, it seems that behaviour patterns of people with dementia improve. Various studies have shown that the tendency to violent incidents, pacing, incontinence and trespassing are all reduced. These reversals of the effects of the disease are termed 'rementia'. In addition, there is evidence that those who garden (or travel, carry out odd jobs or knit) are less likely to develop dementia than those who do not take part in these activities (Sempik et al, 2003). The adage 'if you don't use it you lose it' applied here. The mechanism is not clear, but it appears that these complex activities may stimulate cognitive functions and thereby protect them. Part of the role of gardening may be the acceptance of responsibility and the encouragement to continue to make decisions, which is another example of cognitive activity.

Sempik, J., Aldridge, J. and Becker, *Social and therapeutic horticulture: Evidence and messages from research*, pp. 11-13 and pp. 42-43, Thrive in association with The Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University, 2003.

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Thrive

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The Secret Garden at the Thrive Trunkwell Garden Project, near Reading, has been designed with people with dementia in mind. Visits by appointment only, where possible.

Examples of good practice

– Thrive may be able to put you in contact with a garden project in your area.

Dementia Services Development Centres

Regional and national support, research, news and training e.g.

University of Bristol:

www.dementia-voice.org.uk

University of Stirling:

www.dementia.stir.ac.uk

The National Trust/ Alzheimer's Society

Sensory Garden at Charlecote Park near Warwick has been designed to demonstrate the principles of design for people with dementia.

In one study, people who were encouraged to make decisions for themselves became more active, felt happier and were judged to have improved mental alertness and increased involvement in a range of activities. Reading, watching television and playing parlour games, which do not make use of such a wide range of physical and mental activities, do not appear to lower the risk of developing dementia.

Designing a garden for people with dementia

People with dementia tend to be older so the general principles for designing gardens for older people should be followed. The features of dementia also need to be accommodated, for example, short term memory loss, which gives rises to confusion and anxiety. Here are general principles of dementia-friendly garden design (Pollock, 2001):

- gardens should be accessible for people who use wheelchairs: avoid steps, steel ramps and uneven surfaces
- straightforward way-finding: the layout of paths – essentially a loop – could take the visitor on a journey and return them to the starting point, and specimen trees and features such as pergolas, sculptures, bird tables and large pots can act as landmarks
- create a series of places to sit, with focal points to look at; these should also be protected from bright sunlight, chilling winds and deep shade
- think carefully about safety – avoid obvious hazards such as overhanging branches, irregular steps, slippery fallen leaves in autumn and ice in winter; and avoid any species of plant, shrub or tree which might cause harm, e.g. poisonous plants or those with thorns, prickles or other parts which might cause injury or allergic reaction
- all parts of the garden should be visible from adjacent windows if people are to use the garden unaccompanied
- solid boundary screening/fencing should help the garden feel safe and enclosed and discourage people from trying to leave
- stimulate all of the senses all year round – colourful, fragrant plants and flowers, water features, wind chimes, etc.
- prompt reminiscence by incorporating familiar, traditional plants and garden features
- create places for carrying out familiar activities
- avoid too many stimuli at once – this could become overpowering and the person with dementia may become agitated
- use gentle changes rather than strong contrasts. For example, avoid strong shadows on paths, which might look like holes; abrupt changes in paving materials may look like steps; or reflective materials which might look like water. These might give rise to general confusion and agitation and also present trip/fall hazards.

Problems with perception increase as dementia progresses and people are affected in such different ways that it is sometimes difficult to predict which features of a garden might be an issue. For example, someone who perceives rectangular raised flowerbeds as 'tombs' may become confused and agitated and reluctant to approach them.

The design of the garden should be appropriate for the level of ability of users. So, a day care unit catering for people with mild symptoms should provide some challenge and stimulation along with safety, whereas a nursing home catering for people affected by the severe stage would emphasise safety, dignity and peace (Marcus and Barnes, 1999). Invariably, however, the garden has to be suitable for a range of abilities. A good example is described by Pollock (2001), another can be visited at Charlecote Park.

Using the garden

There are gardening tasks that do not necessarily require the participants to be very physically active. Provide chairs for people who prefer to sit and watch the others. Suggested activities are described by Cobley in Klocker (2002), and helpful work sheets for basic gardening activities are available from Thrive.

Using things from the garden

If the garden produces something that can be picked – flowers, greenery, or fruit or vegetables – then all sorts of other activities become possible:

- arrange flowers, living or dead
- press flowers to make pictures, greeting cards or bookmarks
- use leaf and potato prints to make pictures, greeting cards or to press into clay to make patterns
- dry lavender or other fragrant flowers and herbs to make lavender bags, moth bags (use thyme, mint, rosemary, sage, sweet marjoram and lavender, for example, which repel moths), herb pillows or pot pourri
- prepare and eat produce from the garden.

Simply looking at and talking about flowers, leaves, fruit, vegetables and herbs can be a stimulating activity in itself. The beauty of their colour, shape, texture and smell can be explored and shared. Older people may prefer more traditional garden plants such as roses, lilies and sweet peas, but do not overlook the humble daisy and dandelion, which may also spark memories. Look at them growing in the garden or pick them and grow them indoors. Alternatively, obtain plant materials from florists and garden centres.

Useful Publications

Thrive Briefing Sheet 1:
Sensory Gardens

Thrive Briefing Sheet 7:
A Rough Guide to Risk
Assessment

Thrive Back to Basics
Worksheet Pack

Pollock, A, *Designing gardens for People with dementia*, Dementia Services Development Centre, University of Stirling 2001.

Marcus, C.C. and Barnes, M., *Healing gardens*, Chapter 9, John Wiley, 1999

Klocker, S. *Alzheimer's Society Book of Activities* pp. 103–107, Alzheimer's Society, London, 2002.

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Prompts for reminiscence using plants, fruits and vegetables:

- how these were used during the Second World War (Digging for Victory!); unusual ingredients and recipes because of shortages and rationing such as beetroot cake, scrambled onions, sugar beet soup and primrose tart
- childhood memories such as making daisy chains, games of 'he loves me not'; making a wish whilst blowing a dandelion 'clock' seed head; playing conkers; picking blackberries
- folklore and sayings, e.g. "when gorse is in flower, kissing is in season"; a child picking dandelions would soon wet the bed; wild hawthorn (also known as May or whitethorn) warded off evil but bringing cut branches indoors invited death; and Cockney rhyming slang, e.g. 'apples and pears' for stairs, 'daisy roots' for heavy work boots
- history, e.g. the Elizabethans called tomatoes 'love apples'; the juice from bluebell bulbs was used to starch the lace ruffs of the Elizabethan gentry
- local names for indigenous plants and garden 'weeds', e.g. cowslip (*Primula veris*) is variously known as 'St Peter's keys', key flower, herb Peter, 'Our Lady's bunch of keys', 'galligaskins' and 'jackanapes on horses'
- old remedies, e.g. dock leaves rubbed on nettle stings, eating raw onions to help stop colds.

Safety

Safety in the design of a garden has already been mentioned. The number of plants that are either poisonous or may have irritant sap is quite high; consult a reliable reference book so that you are able to ensure that the garden, and plants that you buy for activities are safe. If you are in any doubt whether the plant is safe or not, do not use it. In discussion groups or for reminiscence activities, you can use photographs and pictures instead of real plants to avoid this situation. Source glossy plant books at your local library, good bookshops or from the internet. You may need to consider carrying out a risk assessment when you plan your activities. Guidelines are available in Thrive Briefing Sheet 7: A Rough Guide to Risk Assessment.

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