

What is therapeutic gardening?

Many people testify to the therapeutic effects of gardening. Ask gardeners what they value about their pastime or vocation and you're likely to hear about its relaxing effect, how it reduces stress, helps us forget our problems, keeps us fit, leads to healthier diets enriched with fresh produce, and even offers social interaction via horticultural societies, flower shows, seed swaps and over the garden fence. So if one activity can have all these powerful positive effects, it makes sense to harness them and use them to our benefit.

Therapeutic horticulture has been defined as

'The use of plants by a trained professional as a medium through which certain clinically defined goals may be met.'

And also as

'... the process by which individuals may develop well-being using plants and horticulture. This is achieved through active or passive involvement.'

(Journal of Social & Therapeutic Horticulture, 1999).

At Trellis we define it as *'the use of gardening to improve the health, well-being and life opportunities for all.'* This encompasses the rich variety of projects operating within the field of therapeutic gardening across Scotland, and the world, today. These projects include gardens where people gain training, social or work skills and qualifications rather than the purely clinical or medical benefits that might come to mind if we spoke only about 'therapy' and 'health' and therefore the terms well-being and life-opportunities are included.

A bit of history

Gardening has been used as therapy since Ancient Egyptian physicians sent poorly courtiers to spend time in the palace gardens. In the 14th century, Irish monks cared for 'distressed souls' through gardening. Benjamin Rush, social visionary, wrote from the US in 1798 that *'...digging the soil has a curative effect on troubled souls.'* The Victorian Asylums were convinced of the benefits of gainful activity in the fresh air. The Dorset County Asylum ledger in 1856 notes that *'...patients shall be employed in gardening and husbandry to promote cheerfulness and happiness.'*

Today, though we've lost much of the land attached to the vast asylums, therapeutic gardening projects flourish in smaller plots within communities. Gardeners beautify and regenerate lots in urban and rural locations alike, in the process improving their own health and that of communities.

Garden projects settings

Therapeutic gardens and gardening practice can be found in a wide range of settings, where staff work with a variety of client groups:

- in secure settings like hospital units or prisons to help ex-offenders gain work skills and avoid the 'revolving-door syndrome' of unemployment and re-offending.
- in nursing homes - reminiscence work in sensory gardens can help those with dementia.
- in schools - wildflower meadows, vegetable plots, or planters enliven tarmac playgrounds.
- on allotment sites - community plots are used by day centres and self help groups, providing stress relief and social opportunities for people experiencing mental ill health.
- on community land - e.g. at GP surgeries, city farms, and community back-greens offering a social and recreational resource. Well-designed, accessible gardens enable people who have physical disabilities or limited mobility and those living with sensory impairments to garden independently and get active in their local communities.
- in skills workshops - offering training and work experience for unemployed people as well as numeracy, literacy and basic skills training for people with learning disabilities.

In all of these settings, gardening can help maintain build and well-being, develop new skills, abilities, confidence, and independence.

Contact Trellis for more information at info@trellisscotland.org.uk or see our online directory of therapeutic gardens in Scotland at <https://trellisscotland.org.uk/projectsmap>

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