

## Restorative Gardens: Respite From Illness

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Gardens have been part of human life for ten thousand years. Christians believe that life began in a garden with the first humans as caretakers of plants and animals. Historically, gardens had meaning to those who planted them and uses ranged from medicinal, nutritional, rehabilitative, and soothing environments. Today, psychological benefits of gardening persist. Gardens are used as therapy; places for physical and emotional pain relief and opportunities to regroup. These conditions create what is known as Healing or Restorative Gardens.

There is currently an interest in the role of gardening in healing. The process of recovery from illness involves not only the expertise of providers and technology, but something less defined. Medical and psychological research supports this connection.

A Restorative Garden is a plant dominated environment including green plants, flowers, water and other aspects of the outdoors, designed to facilitate interaction with the healing elements of nature. There is no precise formula for building a garden; however, it must appeal to the five senses: sight, touch, smell, hearing and taste, and provide an interactive experience.

Hospitalizations are confusing times where one is vulnerable, stressed and ill. Hospitals are places for treatment, not healing. Healing takes place over an undefined time until stability is reached and a feeling of wellbeing is established. Keeping patients in the hospital until fully healed is not a healthy choice for patients. Oliver Sacks, physician and writer, states that a garden is most valuable outside of acute care. Following his own hospitalization, he observed that "some part of me came alive in the garden." He felt that hospitals with access to light, plants and fresh air are ideal healing environments.

Many early Restorative Gardens were found in monasteries which had a deeply felt set of values. At that time, the importance of nature and the recognition of the positive influence of immersion in nature during illness was paramount. Gardens provided flowers, food and herbs. In Colonial times, the theory of disease focused on "noxious vapors" and fresh air was valued as a part of recovery from disease. Patients were encouraged to tend the gardens as part of their treatment. Psychiatric hospitals used gardens as "Moral Treatment", a kinder way of treating the mentally ill. As technology overtook healthcare and high rise hospitals were erected in cities, Occupational Therapists began using garden therapy as a method of engaging patients in their own healing.

The point of Restorative Gardens is to reduce stress through multi-sensory avenues. These venues include distraction, exercise, social support, and instilling a sense of control. Distraction can be established through the use of varied textures in plants and flowers, sights and sounds of water and wildlife, fragrance, and movement of grasses in the wind. Exercise is encouraged through walking paths. To encourage social support, seating, visiting areas for children, quiet places to process diagnosis and treatment options, and a place for staff to recharge are important. Most hospitalized patients feel a loss of control, so providing choices in walking directions, moveable seating, natural art, and the opportunity to participate in garden maintenance can all foster independence.

It is noted that healthcare facilities today which incorporate gardens in their plans are thought of as valuing the individual patient, since adding a garden humanizes the environment. Successful

institutions integrate interiors and exteriors in a smooth transition by having large windows allowing easy views of the outdoors to patients in bed or personnel in the halls.

Restorative Gardens are meant for all people. In healthy times, gardens encourage socialization, promote relaxation, meditation, and a sense of community. For those who are ill, a garden relaxes, soothes, and allows the mind and body to heal. In today's world, gardens enhance rehabilitative hospitals, cancer centers, psychiatric hospitals, nursing homes, addiction recovery centers, veteran hospitals, incarceration facilities and hospice venues.

The idea of Restorative Gardens is gradually settling in the York Area. Horticultural therapy, patients guided in gardening activities, exists at Jessica and Friends and Leg Up Farm. WellSpan Gettysburg Hospital has a Healing Garden which can be seen from the inside of the hospital and accessed easily. Wellspan Surgery and Rehab Hospital at Apple Hill in York also has a Healing Garden. This summer, a Breast Cancer Meditation Garden was installed at Rudy Park in collaboration with the Garden Club of York and Pink Power. Regionally, Johns Hopkins Medical Center has a Children's Healing Garden at the downtown Baltimore site modeled after the book "The Little Prince." Notable gardens are found in New York at the Howard A. Rusk Institute of Rehabilitative Medicine, in Virginia at Lake Taylor Transitional Care Hospital and many other places across the country.

There is evidence that suggests that gardens fill a critical void in the approach to healing. Restorative Gardens are not an alternative way of healing, and they are not a replacement for traditional medicine. They are an enhancement to medicine and make important contributions to the sense of well-being and improved body function. They can be considered as an essential part of the recovery process.

Every society values nature as part of tradition and culture. The fact that the value of gardens is universal alludes to a deep-seated need. Having to be attentive to so many things in our lives simultaneously creates a high stress and fatigue level. Recovery from this type of stress can be facilitated by contact with nature. Research suggests that interaction with the outdoors is among the most healing experiences.

We need no prior experience to be calmed by a garden. The soothing occurs at the most psychological level. A garden is pure refuge; a safe place that promotes serenity and recuperation. Gardens help us heal and when healing is not possible, gardens bring us peace.

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