

GROWING WELL IN GARDENS

This is a story of gardens and how people can grow well in them. There is something in the whole metaphor of gardening that helps us to understand the way we ourselves grow and thrive and blossom. You see, it starts right away in the language we use to describe our well-being. We ‘languish’ or we ‘flourish’. We talk of people, especially children, ‘blossoming’, and pregnant women are ‘blooming’. We speak of our work ‘bearing fruit’, young girls ‘in the flower of their youth’. Elderly people are sometimes described as ‘withered’. When we look at the story of the garden, it is the story of ourselves. We are intricately intertwined.

Why do we create these places? Is it to provide safety and protection for plants that would otherwise fail? Is it an attempt to make a safe place for ourselves to retreat to? What is it about them that brings us such pleasure? Is there an innate connection and bounty? The studies made of the ‘green effect’ are numerous and convincing, from Edward Wilson’s *Biophilia*¹ and *Shin Rin-Yoku*² (Japanese tree bathing) to the discovery of beneficial bacteria in the soil having an effect similar to Prozac in alleviating depression³. This study, however, is a story based on a lifetime’s experience rather than scientific study, although several studies will be alluded to.

The purpose of this book, and my desire in writing it, is to capture some of what I and many others have learnt – and indeed discovered daily – through the experiences of working over decades in therapeutic and community gardens. It is noteworthy how what works for plants replicates closely the way we grow and develop as humans. We will explore the parallels

THE GARDEN CURE

between the phases of work in the garden and how they mirror human needs.

“What is true about a healthy mind and body is true in creating a healthy garden.”

Monty Don⁴

I’ve been lucky to work in remarkable places with remarkable people throughout my career. At a young age, just eighteen years old, a chance decision undoubtedly changed the course of my life and work. After what would have been described then as a working-class upbringing in Edinburgh, instead of taking up a university place I decided to volunteer as a Community Service Volunteer (CSV)⁵ and was sent to a hostel for pregnant homeless women, mostly very young girls, in London. The principles there were of dignity, respect and unfailing kindness. This served to steer my path towards an interest in the politics of poverty and distress and to learn about the means to alleviate those conditions.

I went on to work in a grim psycho-geriatric ward in a Glasgow hospital. Then, after a three-year course in community education, I spent ten years working as the gardener in the walled garden of a pioneering residential school for emotionally distressed young boys. It was here that I first discovered the power of the garden to influence a fragile state of being for the better. I was privileged to learn more about the healing powers of compassion and humane and clever inventiveness. Twenty-five years followed, working in therapeutic gardens for adults experiencing mental health problems, gaining new insights every day, even and especially on the worst days. I have spent the last seven years working in community gardens in the Scottish Borders and I am loving every minute of it.

GROWING WELL IN GARDENS

COMMUNITY GARDENING

Community gardens come in all sorts of different shapes and sizes. Some can be several acres, others can be the size of a typical council house back garden. Some are managed as a part of a much bigger mental health, environmental or social organisation; some are national, some are small, individual and local. They can also vary in management styles. As part of a big organisation, some gardens have a paid staff team and have to adhere to company rules and guidelines, while others are managed by boards of trustees or committee and may have a very small staff team or a single worker. Then there are those that have no structure at all and are run democratically or even anarchically by a small group of unpaid individuals with no budget. They all involve volunteers and as such share a great deal of common experience. I have worked in all kinds of these settings and it is this commonality I would like to describe.

In these pages, I have distilled some of what I have observed and learnt along the way about the close interaction between horticulture and better mental health.

The garden itself is a wonderful metaphor for health. Organics in horticulture is all about creating the conditions for health rather than treating the symptoms of disease. It is easy to see the parallels with the human condition. In horticultural terms when we try to create a healthy growing environment, we look at good nutrition and regular watering specific to each plant's needs. We need good hygiene routines, to prune out unproductive growth and concentrate energy on the healthy branches, to keep on top of the weeds, to encourage fresh air, with time to rest and room to grow and unfold safely. Does this ring any bells?

Here is just one story that illustrates how powerfully this can work. We will explore many such examples throughout

THE GARDEN CURE

the course of the book. (As mentioned before, every story and example in this book is drawn from the real experiences of different people, but I have distilled common elements of these into a single story – and I have always anonymised them.)

One morning Josh came into the garden and his body language was the picture of dejection. He wore a baseball hat firmly pulled over his face. His shoulders were slumped, his back was rounded and his eyes were downcast. He was carefully trying to avoid catching anyone's eye or engaging with anyone. His body language was saying very clearly: "I am feeling very fragile and afraid. Please don't come near me." When I watched him put his boots on I could see he was trembling. We knew from experience that this was not a good time to try and talk to him about why he was feeling low, so we assigned him a task in the garden as usual. His job for the day was to tie back the branches of the apple trees on the south-facing wall. Luckily, it was a warm sunny day.

Two hours later when I went to check on him he was fully engaged in the task. He was standing with the sun on his back, which was easing all his muscles, he had his arms outstretched on either side in order to reach the bits of the tree he had to tie up. His back had straightened, his chest had opened, his head had come up, he was breathing deeply and he was talking to the person standing next to him – because he had to, so that they could put the ties up together. It was like a lesson in several alternative therapies – yoga, Alexander Technique, tai chi, mindfulness, massage and talking therapies all rolled into one – AND the tree got supported and we got apples!

GROWING WELL IN GARDENS

It's that subtle combination of things that opens people up and helps them to talk and feel more at ease.

I refer frequently to four gardens that were also mental health services. The lessons learnt there apply just as readily to community gardens, allotment groups and indeed creative groups of many different kinds. I worked in these gardens for more than thirty-five years, and they are dear to my heart. Together, we cultivated them into healthy, thriving organic havens for people recovering from mental health problems – and indeed, as the adult ones were open to the public, they provided an oasis for anyone who came into contact with them. My hope is that these accumulated experiences may be of interest and use to you and those whom you may meet or work with, just as all gardens and all people can grow and flourish with a little attention and shared knowledge.

Throughout the book, I will refer to people attending these gardens as volunteers (with the exception of the children's unit), and the gardens as therapeutic gardens as opposed to community gardens. By volunteers, I mean people who have made a personal choice to come to work in the garden without payment, with the hope of finding a safe space, some peace from their distress, and inspiration: places that neither look nor feel like a medical setting, but a place of work.

The gardens and the work that happened within them were the result of very dedicated and skilled teams of people who were willing to give their best. They were creative, curious, honest, and a privilege to know and work with.

I loved going to work and looked forward to every day. Even the difficult parts, like when someone was telling me about something awful that had happened to them, gave me the privilege of being trusted with something very special – despite

THE GARDEN CURE

it being about stressful and often deeply sad situations. I was always inspired by the courage that people showed. The world feels a better place to me with the knowledge that there are places where people feel safe enough to open up and share and support each other and believe in a future for themselves.

The beauty of working with people in a garden is that it is most definitely a place of work with a clear 'firmly rooted' agenda of 'creating growth' for the future. (As you may have realised by now, it is also a place that yields metaphors!) We, and others, benefit from it, but it is not about us. It's a chance to have a break from our own problems and dilemmas and to get involved, immersed, absorbed in a completely different universe: the world of plants, the weather, nature and its many creatures. It's both hard work and restful at the same time. After a day in the garden you feel pleasantly tired, rather than worn out. Gradually, your body becomes fitter and your mind begins to relax.

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE COME HERE?

If I had a pound for every member of the public who came to visit a therapeutic garden and asked me this question in the last twenty-five years, I would be dining out every week. What kind of people come here? Their implication seemed to be that it couldn't possibly be the kind of people they knew, and certainly not themselves. My usual response would be, "People like you and me. There is no special kind of person who comes here. We have professional people, craftsmen, teachers, doctors, plumbers, chefs, artists, manual workers, and some people who have never had paid work. We have visitors from a whole range of educational achievements, all ethnicities, religious backgrounds, and physical abilities".

As one person in the garden noted, she had never worked with such a diverse group of people in her life. Usually we

GROWING WELL IN GARDENS

spend most of our lives with people in the same profession – whether engineers, architects, teachers, social workers or other occupations – or their client group, customers and suppliers. The mix in the garden makes for a different kind of learning experience in itself.

While out walking recently, I was thinking about this and suddenly realised that there was in fact a common denominator. People come to a therapeutic garden because they want their lives to be different. They have that very particular kind of courage that it takes to walk through the gates of a strange place and meet someone like me – someone they don't know. Moreover, they have the courage to admit that their lives are not going the way they want them to, and that perhaps they need help to change things. I still don't know after all these years whether I would have the courage to do that myself.

The people I worked with taught me a language to describe their emotional inner journey and their recovery experience, especially when it followed a lifetime of abuse or trauma. They laid an easier path for someone who would come after them, and this helped me to work more effectively with the next person. Although we never go down the same recovery path twice, the person before often provided a gate or a stepping stone into the next person's story, aiding a better understanding. Indeed, as everyone wore the same clothing – steel toe-capped boots and work jeans – people visiting the garden were often not aware of whether they were talking to a member of staff or a volunteer.

This book is a tribute to all those brave people and everything they were able to teach, however painful that process was for them. Hopefully many of them feel that by sharing their stories they've opened up possibilities for others to be helped, and that some good will have come out of their distress.

THE GARDEN CURE

I have seen over and over how people's lives can be transformed – put back together and changed for the better – by the richly healing rhythms of growing together in a garden.

If I contributed in any way to make the gardens I worked in better places for anyone to be in, then I feel grateful to have had that opportunity.

THE MAGIC OF A WALLED GARDEN

The majority of my working life has been spent in walled gardens, which all dated from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. A walled garden is not a passing whim. It's built to last for centuries. There is something very reassuring about being in a space that has been dedicated to gardening over a long period of time.

Each of these gardens had to be restored from a sadly neglected state. Visitors and volunteers would often comment on the sense of sanctuary, even of enchantment, in these beautiful spaces. Beauty and magic were created every day by the people who worked there.

The basic layout of the gardens tends to be similar in design. Here's what a typical one might look and feel like.

The garden is built on a slight slope, south facing and about the size of a couple of football pitches, with a river running along just behind the bottom wall. The walls and the whole garden are cleverly designed to keep a flow of warmer air travelling through, to protect the early blossom and help ripen the fruit of the trees trained against the top, south-facing wall.

As you walk along the path towards the walled garden, the gate beckons to you, and when you pass through it's as if you've stepped into another world. A walled garden is almost always a fair distance from any modern road, and so there is no traffic noise. It is surrounded by mature woodland, which adds to

GROWING WELL IN GARDENS

the special kind of hush, broken only by the birds singing, the sound of the river, and the occasional voices drifting up from one of the beds where people work quietly away, and maybe the hum of a lawnmower somewhere nearby.

Once inside the garden you will find that it is divided into a series of ‘rooms’ – different and distinct spaces – and pathways with hedges giving only tantalising glimpses of what lies behind them, of what comes next. The paths will invite you to walk round, and as you do you will come across herbaceous flowerbeds with their riot of colours, leafy arbours and rose beds. You will find quiet places to sit and contemplate, herb beds quite formally laid out, often in the shape of a wheel, and shrub borders along the north facing wall. In the heart of the garden there is likely to be a pond somewhere; ponds look beautiful and frogs and toads are great for keeping slugs at bay. The sound of water adds a real sense of tranquillity to the garden and helps to create the calming atmosphere of this special place.

There will be vegetable beds: potatoes, cabbages, beetroot and parsnips, onions and leeks, tall canes supporting peas and beans. People will be working in all these beds at their own pace, to keep on top of the weeds and care for the crop. As you move up the garden to the south-facing wall there are likely to be currant bushes, raspberries and gooseberries all growing under cages of netting to keep the birds from stealing them. Strawberries will have straw tucked under them to keep them clean and fresh. Against the wall there will be apple, pear, plum and fig trees basking in the warmth radiated by the wall itself, which holds the heat of the sun.

The hedges that surround each area will be home to lots of wildlife: birds, mice, voles and insects. These hedges will take it in turn to flower and fruit and provide an ever-changing

THE GARDEN CURE

backdrop to these garden ‘rooms’. Often at the corners there will be trees that give shade and colour, and roosting spots for the birds you need to help control the insects – many of which also play an important role – and to bring more shade, colour and delight. There will surely be lovingly filled bird feeders hanging from the trees, regularly raided by cheerful and cheeky squirrels.

Last but most definitely not least will be the composting area. This will have compost heaps, leaf mould heaps, wood piles, stone piles and general recycling. Every year this corner sees the magical transformation of garden waste into rich, fertile compost. I always judge a garden by its composting!

It is this environment – rich in history; peaceful but dynamic; ever-evolving yet providing a still, calming centre; full of interest; and beautiful on so many different levels – which provides the therapeutic setting for the work and ideas which we will explore over the course of this book.

If I do my job right, then the world will be a little bit more beautiful and people will be a little bit happier. What more could anybody wish from their life?

James Alexander-Sinclair⁶

GROWING WELL IN GARDENS

KEY POINTS

- A garden is a place of work with an agenda firmly rooted in the future.
- People can work together without having to share or dwell on their past.
- Working in the garden gives people a chance to take some 'time off' from their anxieties.