

Horticultural Therapy - Fiann Ó Nualláin

Horticultural therapy is an emerging field of clinical practice based on proven benefits to the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing that accrues from gardening as a healing or therapeutic process. 'Nature interaction', 'outdoors activity' and the 'nurture reward' that gardening brings have all been vehicles utilized to engage people with special needs, the elderly and infirm, children at risk, as well as people with mental health problems. Evolving to work as a social cohesion and socialization tool with youth offenders, adult prisoners, and people in drug and alcohol rehabilitation, horticultural therapy has lately moved into a positive intervention mechanism in the form of community gardens in disadvantaged or troubled communities.

The psychological impact of gardening is that it is considered a serene occupation, an oasis of calm, a grounding experience. The combination of the fresh air and the physicality of the tasks helps oxygenate the bloodstream and energize the physical body while simultaneously releasing endorphins involved with stress alleviation. Numerous scientific studies validate the calming effect of the garden by showing findings that reveal simply being in a garden lowers blood pressure.

The physical impact is such that gardening not only provides fitness via calorie burning and muscle toning activities but offers opportunities to improving strength, endurance and flexibility in legs, arms and hands. It has been shown to help with hand to eye coordination and improved motor skills, not to mention that the process of gardening stimulates appetite and fosters a good night's sleep. The latter two being the key benefits to rehabilitation of the infirm, those in recovery or those coming to terms with trauma or cognitive difficulties.

Gardens stimulate, they engage all of our senses not just the sights, sounds and smells around us, but touch too; the textures of soil tell a story, and feeling; the emotional satisfaction of a harvest or a successful cutting as well as the deeper side in a sense of belonging or a realization of a spiritual connection or spiritual/emotional peace.

Gardening can offer strides in the development of social and intellectual skills, especially those required for social inclusion or rehabilitation. Gardening involves personal initiative, personal effectiveness, a nurturing responsibility to living things. It can involve team work and encourage dialogue. It reveals our capacity to become involved and offers opportunities for accomplishment. Gardening is also a form of self-expression; creativity builds confidence while enabling a healthy outlet for emotions.

Furthermore gardening can assist with fundamental skills like literacy (labeling a plant, reading seed sowing instructions) and numeracy (measuring planting distances, counting seeds) etc, building more confidence and self esteem. While the spiritual and holistic side of horticultural therapy sees value in gardening as meditation. Many practitioners espouse how it quietens the conscious mind, allowing the subconscious mind to discover solutions to

problems and negative thinking patterns. In the main those attracted to gardening are reflective, not always introverted outside the garden, but 'considered' inside it. Optimistic too, for you sow in hope to reap a harvest many months away. Part of the job description is positive thinking and to a degree lateral thinking too, when it come to ingenious ways to weed, water, control pests, time save etc.

Gardening makes one philosophical in outlook; we come to accept that not every seed germinates, not every slug falls into the trap, perfection is a myth, but we as a whole are flexible and undaunted and we happily adapt to circumstances beyond our control – the non germinated seed did not dislike me so much that it chose not to enter the world. It simply was not viable and a lot of things in life are not viable but wow look at how tall the ones that did germinate are now.

Horticultural therapy weaves many disciplines from education, psychology and social work, through vocational rehabilitation and occupational therapy to focus on clients, goals and treatment activities. It is often considered that the 'perceptual aspect' yields the biggest harvest; where a client/participant through an interaction with the environment, through manifesting a change on that environment; from a weedy patch to a flowerbed or vegetable yielding plot, will positively affect the psyche towards self believe and towards acknowledgement that we can impact our own environment/circumstance /destiny and in the process find personal growth, restoration and even enjoyment.

Apart from addressing innate psychological needs, and as a motivator in behavioral management, gardening as a therapeutic practice can serve physical health. Linda Ciccantelli, founder of Horticultural Therapy program at Magee Rehabilitation Hospital in Philadelphia, works with patients who have suffered strokes, spinal-cord and head injuries. She recounts that she has " seen standing tolerances improve while people are planting. When you are in the flow of an activity, you aren't as aware of your pain. Gardening helps our patients focus on the ability, not their disability."

Horticultural therapy as a career in Europe does not have at present a one stop degree or even diploma accreditation. The best starting place is to train as a horticulturalist to develop that skills base and undertake research in the fields of occupational therapy and holistic therapies to round your education.

My personal route was to read everything I could find on therapeutic effects of gardening from herbs and medicinal plants to colour therapy, vibrational medicine to sacred geometry and ecopsychology. I cert'ed myself up with courses over a 10 year period covering everything from human anatomy, nutrition, herbalism, aromatherapy, massage etc as part immersion in the therapy side but also as a paper trail of validation to what I was trying to develop: a genuine merge of horticulture and therapeutic mechanisms. I also studied child psychology, classroom delivery, training skills and adult education

while researching extensively on behavioural therapy. All of it invaluable. It is not an easy road but the job satisfaction is well worth the journey.

I am not advocating you take my route. Simply being in a garden has healing potential and many hospitals, schools and community garden projects hiring horticulturalists are simply hiring a horticulturalist to be present with help and advice to the gardening participant. Garda clearance is more vital than a PhD in physical therapy or doctorate of psychology. The 'horticulture' is the key, it unlocks the potential of the client to physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual resolution and wellbeing. All the other disciplines simply provide you in therapist mode with an understanding and options; options to develop a task or programme around client needs, understanding of the client as a person with a need.