





Gardening your way to health

Patients with many different physical and mental conditions can benefit from finding peace, company and a sense of purpose in growing things

By Mary-Claire Mason

A King's Fund report published in May found overwhelming evidence of the beneficial effects of gardening on physical and mental wellbeing.

Commissioned by the National Gardens scheme last year, Gardens and Health – Implications for Policy and Practice shows how gardening can:

- » Help tackle obesity.
- » Reduce heart disease and cancer.
- » Increase physical activity levels.
- » Improve confidence, resilience and self-esteem.
- » Reduce falls.
- » Improve balance.

The report's author, King's Fund senior fellow David Buck, says gardening should be prescribed as a non-clinical treatment. He hopes the report will 'help bring gardening closer to the mainstream of health and care policy debate and practice'.

Practice nurse and diabetes specialist Lynn Hunt prescribes gardening at the Sydenham Green Group Practice in Lewisham, London. 'I know from my own experience the sense

of peace, achievement and pleasure you get from nurturing plants,' she says. 'I want to have a range of options to offer my patients, and gardening treatment fits the bill. It enables me to provide holistic patient care.' Conditions range from mental health problems and dementia to heart disease and cancer.

Meaningful activity

The practice has offered gardening therapy for 14 years via its Sydenham Gardens community gardening project, whose produce is sold to local restaurants.

GP and mental health lead Jim Sikorski set up the project supported by local residents and others in the practice. 'We wanted another way of giving hope and support to people with mental health conditions who otherwise had little structure or help in their lives,' he says.

'The gardens provide a place where people can

FAST FACT

14

The number of years Sydenham Green Group Practice has offered gardening therapy

carry out meaningful activity working alongside others. Gardening therapy is an appropriate intervention healthcare professionals can offer to transform patients' lives for the better.'

Sydenham Gardens is five minutes' walk from the surgery and has wheelchair access. Other activities offered include cookery and art classes, with individually tailored support for each participant.

Combating diabetes

'Many of the people I refer to Sydenham Gardens have diabetes, are overweight, and feel lonely and isolated,' says Ms Hunt. She recalls one patient with diabetes, a keen gardener whose wife had passed away, leaving him grief-stricken and lonely, with worsening diabetes. He could not move around easily and had to pay someone to look after his garden, which caused him distress. Ms Hunt suggested he visit the Sydenham Gardens. 'He said it was one of the best things he could have done – he made friends, shared his expertise and felt part of life again.'



Sydenham Garden
A growing community

▲ Gardening at the scheme can improve a range of conditions

Ms Hunt also refers patients with leg ulcers, as walking around while gardening can help improve circulation and pain. 'Patients with arthritis may feel better because gardening with others can help take their mind off the pain,' she says.

Originally funded by charitable donations, Sydenham Gardens received extra support from the local clinical commissioning group three years ago. The additional funding was to provide services for adults with mental health problems and patients recently diagnosed with dementia.

Sydenham Gardens also gets a social care grant from Lewisham Council. Hundreds of patients have been referred to Sydenham Gardens from Dr Sikorski's practice.

In a self-assessment survey of 37 patients, 68% said it had improved their quality of life.

Cancer therapy

Jan Chalkley, Macmillan lead nurse cancer and palliative care at Luton and Dunstable Hospital, wants to open a therapy garden there. She believes it will help many of her cancer patients who have been through painful and highly stressful treatments.

Ms Chalkley works with a local exercise pilot programme where cancer patients can be referred for 12 free physical activity sessions. The pilot is run in partnership with Luton Active gyms, a not-for-profit sports centre run on behalf of the local council.

'Being physically active is important for cancer



Setting up a garden in a GP surgery

- » Find a space at the practice for a tub of colourful flowers or hanging baskets, or a growbag of seasonal vegetables. This will help trigger interest in the garden.
- » Set up a support network of people who use or work in the GP surgery. Have a clear, consistent message about the gardening group's purpose.
- » Find a champion in the local community who can help with marketing the project.
- » Make sure the local clinical commissioning group have evidence about the benefits of gardens and gardening.

patients, but the gym is not for everyone,' she says. 'Patients moving towards palliative care may find gardening a gentler way of being active. We are extending our offer so there is something for everyone.'

'We have now been given a green space in Luton by the council and need to get the money to develop it into a garden,' she adds.

The private garden will be for patients with cancer who may be in treatment, recovery, facing recurrence or in palliative care. 'I hope this will provide a safe haven where people can make friends, enjoy the peace and beauty of the garden, and take part in gardening,' says Ms Chalkley.

Lambeth GP Food Co-op in London, a 2013 social enterprise project, was highlighted as particularly impressive in the King's Fund report. Patients, doctors, nurses and local people have

created a network of food-growing gardens in 11 GP surgeries in the area.

Nurses have played a leading role in the Co-op, says project director Ed Rosen, with four developing and three now leading groups.

Patients learn how to grow food under expert guidance, and the produce is then sold to King's College Hospital.

The Co-op plans to open a garden in another part of the borough in partnership with two GP surgeries. It is looking to recruit nurses with experience of group facilitation and horticulture to lead groups on a paid basis. To find out more, email edward.rosen@nhs.net

Building active lives

GP William Bird is a pioneer of the health benefits of gardening. In response to research that showed walking is good for health, he set up Green Walks. Now called Walking for Health, it is a national charity led by the Ramblers and Macmillan Cancer Support.

Dr Bird also implemented a Green Gym for patients. He set up Intelligent Health, an organisation that aims to get everyone active and outdoors. Dr Bird says the health benefits of connecting to nature are well established.

'Gardening improves muscle strength, which is important for diabetes prevention and helping to maintain mobility. The sights, sounds, scents and touching the soil connect us back to our roots, which is healing.'

Mary-Claire Mason is a freelance journalist