

WORDS: Claire Masset

FEELING GREEN

Psychiatrist Sue Stuart-Smith is convinced of the beneficial and therapeutic effects of plants and gardening

Photo: Anne Kelly/istock



PHOTO: ANDREW LAYTON

ABOVE The Barn Garden in Hertfordshire has been created by Sue and Tom Stuart-Smith MSGD over many years

I took Sue Stuart-Smith five years to research *The Well-Gardened Mind*, and it shows. This unique and timely book combines recent scientific research with history, literature, psychoanalysis, aesthetics, philosophy, and even anthropology. Using contemporary case studies and also past examples, it brings to light the benefits of nature, gardens and gardening on human beings, describing many successful instances of therapeutic gardening. It is a thorough and often lyrical investigation into the benefits of nature, gardens and gardening.

Stuart-Smith is a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, who read English Literature at Cambridge before qualifying as a doctor and working in the NHS, becoming the lead clinician for psychotherapy in Hertfordshire. She teaches at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust in London and is a consultant at DocHealth – a not-for-profit psychotherapeutic consultation service for doctors. But she is also a long-time gardener and married to acclaimed

garden designer Tom Stuart-Smith MSGD, with whom she has created their garden at The Barn in Hertfordshire. She sees gardening as “a counterpoint to a rather screen-based working life”, describing the “intangible nature of something like psychotherapy”, compared to gardening, which “gives you results you can see and touch and taste”.

Communing with nature

Like her garden, Stuart-Smith's book is also satisfyingly tangible. It came about after Christopher Woodward, director of the Garden Museum in London, suggested she create a lecture for their collaborative literary festival, about gardening for the mind. “It was while I was putting my talk together that I realised how much more I wanted to say on the subject. I saw that there was a lot that wasn't being explored.”

Gardens, says Stuart-Smith, provide an ideal setting in which people can recover. “Trees, water, stones and sky may be impervious to human emotion, but they are not rejecting of us either. Nature is unperturbed by our feelings, and in there being no contagion, we can experience a kind of consolation that helps assuage the loneliness of loss.” Nature is “a sympathetic presence”.

Often the primary, or at least overt, aim of designing a garden is to create a beautiful environment. Stuart-Smith cites research that looks at how beauty nourishes the brain, increasing our dopamine, serotonin and opioid

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Photo: Lucy Sheppard

systems, while at the same time reducing our fear and stress responses.

But the act of gardening, she explains, allows you to enter a rhythm – sometimes referred to as a ‘flow state’ – which can be profoundly restorative. “Gardening helps people when they are stuck in life, because you get carried along with the process.” A long session in the garden can leave you feeling dead on your feet, she writes in the book, but strangely renewed inside – “both purged and re-energised, as if you have worked on yourself in the process. It’s a kind of gardening catharsis”.

Getting your hands in the earth is beneficial too. The smell of wet earth – known as geosmin – is released through the activity of soil bacteria called actinomycetes, and has a soothing effect on most people. A recent discovery is that a bacterium found in the soil, *Mycobacterium vaccae*, can boost serotonin levels. It thrives in ground that has been enriched through manure and composting and, when weeding and digging the earth, we inhale and ingest it. In experiments by neuroscientist Christopher Lowry, mice exposed to that bacterium exhibited lower levels of inflammation and an increased resilience to stress. Other studies found that mice that consume this bacteria are able to complete a maze test in half the time of other mice, and that, through unknown mechanisms, it acts directly on the part of the serotonin system that supplies the prefrontal cortex and the

hippocampus with serotonin. Studies into soil microbiomes are one of the biggest growth areas in health research, and it is possible, likely even, that other types of bacteria commonly found in garden soil might also have similar effects.

Aiding mental wellbeing

Stuart-Smith is particularly fascinated by the ‘sociability effect’ of nature. “Not only does nature have health-giving effects such as lowering blood pressure, stress hormones, cortisol levels and improving concentration, but we now know that people are more empathetic, more trusting, and more giving when enriched by nature.” It has been a long-held notion that access to gardens and natural spaces has a beneficial role to play, especially in urban environments, but now it seems the science backs it up. Environmental scientists Frances Kuo and William Sullivan from the University of Illinois have published a →

ABOVE
Therapeutic gardens such as Haratio’s Garden London & South East, designed by Tom Stuart-Smith MSGD, are of benefit to hard-working healthcare workers as well as patients in recovery

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Photo: Russell Galt

ABOVE Sue Stuart-Smith will be speaking more about green spaces and health at the SGD Spring Conference

number of influential studies demonstrating that access to greenery and trees helps reduce levels of domestic and neighbourhood violence. Their research showed that people living in deprived social communities in Chicago who had greenery around them felt more hopeful and less helpless about their circumstances in life than people living in similar housing with little access to green space. They also reported lower levels of aggression at home. Another of their findings calculated that introducing green space where it is lacking could reduce offending by as much as 7%.

Life changing effects

The presence of street trees has also been found to have a significant impact on how people feel about their lives. A team led by Marc Berman from the Environmental Neuroscience Lab at the University of Chicago studied the distribution of trees in residential streets in Toronto. They combined this info with a survey in which inhabitants were

asked to rate their own health. After making adjustments for income, education and employment, the team calculated that having just 10 more trees on a city block was associated with lower levels of mental distress of the same magnitude that an extra \$10,000 of income would be expected to bring. Recent research done by universities and the RHS into front gardens reinforces the idea that planting improves people's sense of well-being.

Another interesting discovery is that the more biodiversity there is in an environment, the more restorative it is. "We need to increase biodiversity anyway, but if you are looking at restorative potential, then you need to think about that too," says Stuart-Smith. She believes gardens can – and should – be specially designed to maximise their health benefits. To her, one of the fundamental principles of successful garden design is the prospect/refuge idea. "People should have enough of a sense of safety and being held within a space, but without feeling trapped or confined in it".

In this past year of lockdowns and loss, we have become all too aware of the importance of such spaces. They are, Stuart-Smith believes, vital to our well-being. ○

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Sue Stuart-Smith will be speaking at the upcoming SGD Spring Conference, as will Tom Stuart-Smith MSGD – turn over to page 33 to find out more.