

Q&A

In *The Well Gardened Mind*, psychiatrist and psychotherapist Sue Stuart-Smith explores the many positive effects of gardening on our mental health and wellbeing



You weren't a gardener yourself when you met your husband (landscape architect and garden designer Tom Stuart-Smith), but you are now. What do you take from gardening?

When I met Tom I was a garden sceptic and I didn't have any inkling that gardening might become so important to me in my life. I take many things from it, and different aspects at different times. I love working with seeds and I don't think that will ever leave me. Sowing seeds is a wonderful reminder of the mystery of life. My job is quite sedentary so the physicality of gardening, the immersion and the contact with the elements is important. It forces me to slow down, too. When you garden you have to work at nature's pace.

Broadly, how does gardening aid us?

The structure of the seasons is important. When you work with nature, you are part of something much larger than you and you are never completely in control of that – which can be a good thing. When you work with nature you're immediately empowered; you're creative and that has a profound effect on us all. The joy of creating is important.

Along with many other cases, you thread the attachment that both Jung and Freud had to their gardens throughout the book.

Most people know about Jung's attachment to nature, but Freud's is much less well known. Although his daughter Anna tended their garden, he was particularly devoted to flowers and their beauty. People form relationships with plants. We experience the cycle of life through plants. Unlike people, plants don't have complex emotions; nature doesn't judge us and we can easily underestimate the value of that. Gardening allows people who have experienced violence or other forms of trauma to be vulnerable and express care without feeling threatened.

How and where is gardening being integrated with established healthcare systems?

There are a lot of good programmes out there; many are small and run by committed community groups. GPs now offer social prescribing, which ties in with this. The charity Horatio's Garden is leading the way in reintroducing gardens to hospitals. It works with long-stay, spinal-injury patients and is part of a growing movement for hospital gardens, which benefit patients, relatives and staff. Most newly built hospitals now have gardens. Thrive provides horticultural therapy, and Bridewell Organic Gardens in Oxfordshire has been running since 1994 working with people with longer term mental health problems. Tom and I work closely with the Sunnyside Rural Trust, a learning disability charity in Hertfordshire, on the Orchard Project, which pulls together local charities and horticultural resources.

What are some of the ways gardening can help recovery from mental illness?

Green nature has well-proven anti-stress effects and it also has a pro-social effect; people connect better with each other. If you start gardening you can identify with being a gardener quite quickly, and that's very helpful in terms of people's self-esteem. There is currently a lot of emphasis on mindfulness, which is important, but a future orientation is also essential. If your life has been derailed it is difficult to think about the future. Gardening gives you a way of doing that. ■



The Well Gardened Mind
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