

Horticultural therapy: How gardening assists people's health and wellbeing

By Dr Chris Reed

We all know that, without plants, humans would cease to exist. All of our food comes directly or indirectly from plants. It is through transpiration that plants help circulate the world's water, moderate climate by storing carbon and give off oxygen. That's the big picture, but there is also a more direct and subtle relationship between plants, gardens and people.

The term horticultural therapy implies that horticultural activities are beneficial for human health. Over a hundred years ago people who were not able to afford their medical care would work in the hospital to pay for their treatment. Tasks included working in the laundry, chopping wood and working in the gardens, including growing vegetables for the hospital kitchen.

Over several decades it was found that gardening had unique attributes, beyond simply the physical benefits of working. People observed that gardening greatly assisted recovery and contributed to improving the health of patients. It wasn't until

the early 1980s that formal research provided the proof that nature, gardens, and even views of gardens, provided a range of health benefits.

Since then there have been hundreds of research documents published supporting gardens for their health benefits. The *Lancet Neurology* (2014) article, 'Gardens that take care of us' summed this up by saying that "gardening reduces social isolation, reduces self-harm, reduces stress, can lower the body mass index, provides low impact exercise, reduces negative thoughts and damaging behaviour, improves rehabilitation, is calming and is empowering for people".

So there you are, gardening is a physical workout and a provider of mental wellbeing all in one convenient package. Understanding this, and having a way of applying this, is called horticultural therapy and there is little doubt that most of our population can benefit from being part of it in one form or another.

One of the most frequent questions about horticultural therapy is "how do I do it". It's simple for most people. Those who are regular gardeners already know the secret although few could clearly articulate what it means. They will say that they were in the garden and "time got away from me" or that being in the garden "makes me feel good" or it "cleared my head". I am sure many of us can also relate similar experiences. There are scientific answers that explain these feelings and it all goes back to nature.

Most of the research says that people need nature and we city dwellers don't get enough of it. There is far too much going on all the time and, although we can cope with the constant demands of modern life, we are paying a toll with our mental and physical health. Some scientists say that the reason our health is being compromised is because we have not had time to neurologically evolve to manage the demands of busy city environments. However, we can find refuge in areas of nature and one of the most convenient areas of nature is a garden.

The garden gives us a break; it provides an opportunity to be away, to truly relax and to de-stress. These are the things that regular gardeners know and experience themselves all the time. Ideally, this should be known to the entire population so that gardening can help make people healthier and maybe a little happier. Countries such as South Korea and Singapore have done exactly that; they have now introduced horticultural activities as an important aspect of their health systems. Australia is yet to follow suit.

There are many areas in our community where people could benefit from gardens and gardening but don't have



Sometimes we need to return to nature

the physical, mental or cognitive ability. For others, lack of opportunity or motivation is a barrier to therapeutic horticultural activities. People with disabilities, people in rehabilitation, those with mental health disorders, people in aged care and many children, often need professional leadership to be able to access the benefits of nature in the form of gardens. This is the role of the horticultural therapist. Using a range of highly defined skills, the horticultural therapist assesses the needs of individuals and groups and designs programs that specifically meet their needs. Horticultural therapy is an ideal way of providing gentle and effective responses to many health issues in our communities.

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