

Horticultural Therapy

Therapeutic gardens and the right time for flowers

By Dr Chris Reed

Sometimes it is difficult to understand the difficulties others have faced in their lives. War in any form is destructive and traumatic; for those in areas of conflict it is very personal and often life changing. However, it has been found that for those affected by trauma, gardens can have a very positive affect in recovery. Although the use of horticulture as therapy goes back thousands of years it has largely evolved in relatively recent times as a response to the needs of people physically and psychologically damaged through conflict.

In the early days of World War 1 the term “shell shock” was widely used to describe a terrible debilitating condition. At one time shell shock made up almost 40% of casualties but it was found that many of those reporting shell shock had not been near any exploding shells. Accordingly these soldiers were often regarded as malingerers or cowards. Some were even executed as a consequence of their illness. Late in the war it was found that “shell shock” was not physical damage to the brain, as first thought, but rather it was a neurological condition needing new forms of therapy. Occupational Therapy was developed to meet this need and, through this, horticulture therapy evolved.

It wasn't until 1980 that PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) was formally recognised as a condition bought on by trauma and it was finally accepted that the soldiers with PTSD were not responsible for their condition.

Horticultural therapy continued to develop as an effective treatment for PTSD over many years and is still used in rehabilitation for service personnel. In the US Dr Steve Mitrione noted that “therapeutic gardens have the potential to

alleviate suffering, provide for recovery and therapy, enhance the veteran's experience of care, and reduce costs.” It is estimated that 30% of current and past military personnel have or will experience PTSD regardless of whether they have been directly involved in conflict or not.

‘Gardening leave’ was established in 2007 in the UK to improve the mental and physical wellbeing of ex-service personnel with PTSD using Horticultural Therapy by improving their social skills, emotional resilience and health and fitness (*Gardening Leave, 2008*). A new charity – HighGround – is a natural progression of Gardening Leave as it also provides horticultural therapy for injured serving personnel at the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre at Headley Court in Surrey. Here horticultural therapy is used to improve health and wellbeing and to restore confidence as part of the long term rehabilitation and recovery process of military personnel.

In addition to this, HighGround also provides practical rural and horticultural based employment training for service leavers and veterans.



Australian War Memorial Canberra.

Australia is also catching on to this phenomenon of therapeutic gardens. Australia has a number of therapeutic garden programs for veterans. Although they are not as formal as those in the UK and US, they are no less effective and appreciated.

Peter Cundall, gardening icon and humanitarian, has long been a champion of gardening for veterans in Australia. As a former soldier himself, Peter clearly sees the benefits of being actively involved in gardening, stating that, "There is a strange, almost tenuous link between involvement in the horrors of war and gardening. Perhaps this is because they are almost completely opposite. One is destructive, the other completely creative".

Therapeutic gardens are now used extensively in many countries across the world, not only for military personnel but also for any person experiencing or recovering from many forms of trauma.

One emphatic indication of the ultimate belief in the therapeutic power of gardens for communities was reported during the war in Iraq; park workers in Baghdad defied personal risk to replant public parks. Even after 30 park workers were killed doing their job, they continued, defiantly "planting two million flowers, shrubs and trees". This, they declared, "is the right time for flowers".

Anna Baker Cresswell, the founder of Gardening Leave and Highground in the UK, will be a keynote speaker at this year's Therapeutic Landscapes Conference being hosted by Cultivate in NSW. This one-day conference will be held on Friday 14 October at Padstow TAFE in Sydney, and will draw a diverse range of delegates interested in Therapeutic Horticulture.

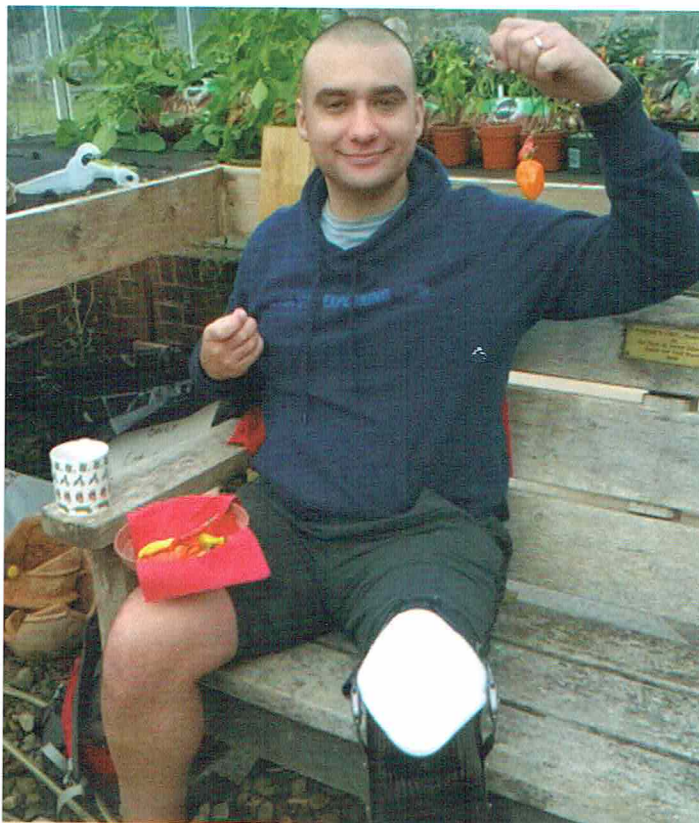
For more information about the conference please visit www.cultivatensw.org.au

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References

Allam, H., 2006. *Gardeners shed blood to beautify Bagdad*. Retrieved: July, 2010. Available: <http://defiantgardens.com/category/iraq/>

Mitrione, S. 2012. *Returning Home: The Veterans Therapeutic Gardens Project*. Retrieved: September, 2012. Available: <http://www.asla.org/ppn/Article.aspx?id=25302>



High Ground - threading chillies at Headley Court'



Carol Sales, Horticultural Therapist at Headley Court with Lee planting an apple tree



Anna Baker Cresswell with Group Captain Griffiths, Commanding Officer Headley Court.