

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Of Australia

Report by Paula Paananen

2004 Churchill Fellow

An investigation of the use of horticulture as a tool for developing vocational, social and therapeutic benefits for people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups.

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Signed: Paula Paananen

Dated: 24th January 2005

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INTRODUCTION

The fellowship enabled me to travel to Canada, the US and the UK in order to study the use of horticulture as a tool for developing positive outcomes for people with a range of needs. This report provides a summary of the emerging field of Therapeutic and Social Horticulture.

I extend my appreciation to the Churchill Trust: the opportunity to pursue one's passion is indeed priceless. The experience was made even richer by all those I met along the way who offered their friendship and support.

Thankyou also to my family who banded together to enable me to take time out from being a Mum to pursue this research. This experience would not have been possible without you.



The Geoffrey Udall Centre, Trunkwell Park, Reading UK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The fellowship travel was undertaken between the 15th October and the 22nd November 2004. The aim of the fellowship was to visit programs where horticulture was being used as a tool for developing beneficial outcomes for people with disabilities and other groups. I visited horticultural programs, and met horticultural therapists in hospitals, disability services, nursing homes, schools, secure facilities, accommodation services and public gardens. In terms of researching vocational outcomes, I was able to visit small cooperatives, work crews, nurseries, and large-scale farms. The experience was further enriched by the opportunity to attend Hortifair, in Amsterdam, and the American Horticultural Therapy Association Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

Highlights:

- Visiting Providence Farm, a therapeutic 400-acre farm at the foot of Mt Tzouhalem, British Columbia, Canada.
- Experiencing the award-winning Enid A. Haupt Glass Gardens, Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine, New York City, USA.
- Attending the American Horticulture Therapy Association Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.
- Meeting Woody Woodruff and his team at Red Wiggler Farm (Washington DC).
- Enjoying an organically homegrown lunch with the residents of Grayson Gardens, Washington DC, USA.
- Viewing the Battersea and Trunkwell projects operated by Thrive, UK.

Recommendations:

To further the growth of horticultural therapy in Australia it is necessary to:

- Raise the awareness of those working with special populations about the therapeutic benefits that horticulture can offer.
- Provide support, networking opportunities and information about the latest developments to those already involved in horticultural activities in Australia.
- Develop formal training opportunities for those who wish to work with horticulture as a therapy.
- Recognise that more important than the idea of a sensory garden *per se* is the issue of access for people with specific needs to experience all the sensory elements of the landscape setting.

Implementation and Dissemination

- The principles learned will directly inform my development of a horticultural therapy demonstration project on the NSW Central Coast.
- Findings will be disseminated through articles submitted to industry-associated publications and by public presentations to community groups.

FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

15th-22nd October, British Columbia, Canada

- Providence Farm
- Healthy Harvest Coop
- Lifecycles
- Butchart Gardens

23rd-26th October, New York City, USA

- Rusk Institute Glass Gardens

26th - 31st October, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

- Skyland Trails
- Woodlands Rehabilitation Centre
- Atlanta Botanical Gardens
- American Horticultural Therapy Association Conference

31st October-3rd November, Washington DC, USA

- Grayson Gardens
- Red Wiggler Farm

4th - 7th November, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

- Hortifair

8th - 20th November, London and surrounds, England.

- Battersea Garden Project
- TWIGS
- Thrive Geoffrey Udell Training Centre
- Elder Stubbs Allotments

22nd November, Return to Sydney, Australia

HORTICULTURE AS A THERAPY

I met Janie working in a horticulture program for people with mental illness, just outside Washington DC. She was weeding a small patch of herb garden and seemed lost in the task of removing weeds and spent flower heads. I approached her and asked her about her patch. She impressed me with her knowledge of the plant types and their uses. After a thorough tour of the garden, Janie showed me her special plant and told me her story...

"I didn't really want to come here. Three years ago, I was really down, didn't want to be anywhere. I was in a really bad place. Then I just came to the gardens one day, worked a while and at the end of the day, the other gardeners said see you tomorrow, so I guess I just came back. Joanne (the horticultural therapist) showed me how to plant some seeds and I wanted to see them grow. It kind of kept me alive. I thought if I can just make it through one more day, then I would see how much they had grown.

Then, after a while, I got my own patch...it was the only time I would forget about myself and my worries. With some help, I chose my plants and planted my garden. The days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into seasons. So I kept going until I could see the next season. Now I figure I have seen this plant drop its leaves and come back again each year since I started coming. This is my plant; it reminds me where I have been."

During my Churchill travels, I had the opportunity to witness time and time again the benefits that can be gained from people and plant interactions. Janie's story is one of thousands that plays out in horticultural therapy programs across the world. The idea that gardening and being with nature is good for the soul is not a new one. What I studied was trained therapists taking this idea a step further by using horticulture to aid people with different needs to reach for specific goals, as the following definition demonstrates.

"Horticultural therapy is a process in which plants and gardening activities are used to improve the body, mind and spirit of people. It is an effective and beneficial treatment for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. As a cognitive therapy, HT helps clients learn new skills and regain those lost. Improved memory, initiation of tasks and attention to detail are recognised benefits. Social growth occurs: people caring for plants learn responsibility and experience hopeful and nurturing feelings. HT used in physical rehabilitation retrains muscles and improves coordination, balance and strength. In vocational HT settings, people learn to work independently, solve problems and follow directions." American Horticultural Therapy Association website (www.ahta.org).

A GROWING INDUSTRY

Horticulture has been recognised since ancient Egyptian times when physicians used to prescribe walks through the gardens for people suffering from mental health conditions. It wasn't until after World Wars 1 & 2 that with American Veteran hospitals overloaded, physicians were open to trying new modes of treatments and gardening programs became more common. During the 1940's, Horticultural Therapy, under the Occupational Therapy banner developed into its own treatment modality. The field has continued to grow, particularly in the USA and England with the establishment of professional associations such as the American Horticultural Therapy Association and the peak body in the UK 'Thrive'.

Horticultural therapy is being practiced in America, UK and Canada with the following groups:

- People with mental illness
- People with an intellectual disability
- Stroke patients
- People with acquired brain injury
- People with eating disorders
- People suffering loss and grief
- People with life threatening illness
- Dementia and Alzheimer's patients
- People with physical disabilities
- People experiencing sensory loss
- Offender rehabilitation
- People with substance abuse issues
- Adults/children who have suffered abuse
- School children
- Seniors
- Immigrants
- Homeless

WHY HORTICULTURE BENEFITS PEOPLE

When looking at why horticulture is such a useful tool for working with people there are some key points to consider:

- Unlike people, plants are non judgemental. They don't care whether you are young or old, rich or poor, happy or depressed, agile or arthritic. They respond purely to the care that they are given.
- Working with plants gives the individual control over another living thing. This is particularly empowering for people who have little control over their own

lives, for example people experiencing long-term hospital stays, or institutionalisation.

- Gardens and plant settings are generally of a benevolent nature. Gardens provide safe, aesthetically pleasing places where everyone can be made to feel welcome.
- Gardening provides a form of self-paced exercise. There is now a substantial body of evidence documenting the beneficial physiological effects of plants on people. This data was well evidenced at 'Hortifair', Amsterdam, where the People Plant Council exhibited. For more details refer to the Council's website: www.plantsforpeople.org.
- Plants symbolise hope and growth. They provide a positive focus for people who are receiving care by reversing the relationship and allowing them to become caregivers. Skyland Trails is a rehabilitation centre, in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, for people with mental illness. The Horticultural Therapist there successfully uses Bonsai Trees in her program to symbolise the long-term rehabilitation of people.
- Working with plants provides an ongoing learning experience. With each change of season, new plant type, or garden setting comes a new set of challenges. This changing landscape provides therapists with the flexibility to find a setting, task or medium that suits individual needs.
- Horticulture may usefully be broken down into simple, often repetitive tasks. This provides an ideal opportunity for work place or vocational skill training. Many of the programs I visited were indeed vocational training programs.
- Plants may also provide a bountiful and intrinsically satisfying harvest...as anyone who has tasted their own homegrown tomatoes, or admired their hand picked flowers will attest!



Produce from the Healthy Harvest Coop, British Columbia, Canada

I was able to attend the American Horticultural Therapy Association Conference as part of my fellowship. This provided an invaluable background to the people and plant relationship. There is a close tie here to the field of environmental

psychology, and I would recommend anyone interested in horticultural therapy to further their reading in this area.

THE HORTICULTURAL THERAPY SETTING

Horticultural therapy programs take place in a range of settings. The setting depends on the outcomes sought and the group the program is targeted towards. Of all the programs I visited, the one that leaves the most profound impression in terms of therapeutic environment is the Enid Haupt Glass Gardens at the Rusk Institute, New York City. The Rusk Institute is a rehabilitation hospital located in Midtown Manhattan. The horticulture program is based in a series of small glasshouses and an award winning children's garden, all within the hospital building. The entry is through the hospital foyer. As you step into the main glasshouse, you enter into what can only be described as a haven; an escape from the noisy, polluted, hectic atmosphere of the city. This glasshouse is home to a large fishpond that gently trickles, doves coo softly in the aviary, and the plants are layered in a fashion reminiscent of a tropical jungle.



Entry to the Glass Gardens, Rusk Institute, New York City.

All patients within the hospital have the opportunity to attend a horticultural therapy group session, which is facilitated by a qualified horticultural therapist. Typically each session lasts 1 hour and focuses on a different type of plant. Participants learn about the plant's history and its uses. They divide and pot a tuber or take a cutting. The age of patients ranged from 3 to 107 years. During these sessions, I was able to observe a great deal of social interaction from people who were typically isolated in wards. I also observed people who had had strokes

beginning to use their affected limbs in order to pot their plants. Patients were able to take their plants home with them upon the conclusion of their hospital stay. Because the environment is fully accessible, it provides patients with an ideal place to meet visitors, and also provides a talking point for people who are typically focussed on their medical condition. Another point of interest at the Rusk Institute is the use of animals. Birds, reptiles, fish and even the odd rabbit all provide an incentive for people, who may not necessarily have an interest in plants to visit the glass houses and gardens.

Many horticultural therapy programs are attached to nursing homes, rehabilitation centres, and schools. Some include specifically designed gardens established in addition to existing facilities such as shade houses and glasshouses. Examples include:

- A figure 8 garden, for people with dementia/ memory loss, to prevent them from getting lost.
- A butterfly and fairy story garden that was planted and maintained by children who had suffered abuse.
- A women's herbal garden for women suffering from depression.
- A courtyard garden designed specifically for neuropsychiatry units, where people who experience dementia with agitation are able to participate in horticulture.
- A soup garden designed for people with intellectual disability to develop independent living skills.

Suitable land is a problematic issue for many groups wanting to develop a horticulture program. Some groups have overcome this hurdle by teaming up with a local park or botanical garden. For example 'Thrive' in the UK, have a team of workers, led by two horticulture therapists, who are re-creating a neglected section of Battersea Park, London. This particular area of the park has historical significance as it housed the original Victorian Herb Gardens. This project provides much needed labour for the maintenance of public facilities, a venue for horticulture activities, and a chance for people to integrate into their local communities. This arrangement benefits participants and park managers alike.

There are organisations that either lease or own land which is used specifically for horticultural activities. The organisations I visited primarily facilitated vocational training. Many were attempting to raise funds through their activities that included vegetable plots, flower picking gardens, allotment gardens, herb gardens, and plant nurseries. An excellent example of a training facility is the Thrive Geoffrey Udell Training Centre Reading, Oxfordshire, UK. This series of accessible gardens was established to serve as a horticultural-skills training facility for people with various disabilities.

A note on 'sensory gardens'. After viewing many different types of gardens designed for wellbeing and healing, I am now of the opinion that all gardens are sensory in that they have the potential to stimulate smell, sight, sound, touch and taste. More important than the idea of a sensory garden *per se* is the issue of access for people with specific needs to experience all the sensory elements of the landscape setting.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Horticulture is often used as a vocational training tool for people with varying needs. The programs I visited offered training to either people with intellectual disabilities, mental illness, or the long-term unemployed. Horticulture is also used as a training tool in secure settings such as prisons. Some programs are accredited training centres whose focus is on training work entry skills such as getting to work on time, wearing appropriate clothing and the like. Others take on a horticulturally specific role by training in areas such as nursery work and landscape management. Many of the programs started with horticulture but subsequently developed offshoot opportunities in related areas such as woodworking, preserves, and garden crafts. Providence Farm (near Victoria, British Columbia, Canada) in addition to managing their 400-acre property, provide opportunities for people with disabilities to develop skills in cooking, animal husbandry, woodworking, nursery production, machinery maintenance, organic vegetable growing and sales.



Providence Farm, British Columbia, Victoria

Other groups have started businesses that are either run by, or employ people with disabilities. These range from the smallest allotment gardens to the larger groups such as Red Wiggler Farm (Clarksburg, Washington DC, USA). Red Wiggler farm grows organic vegetables, herbs, and flowers that are sold from the farm gate. Built on the philosophy of concentrating on what people can do well, Red Wiggler employs people with intellectual disabilities to run the farm. Despite having high support needs, these employees perform the tasks of planting, growing and harvesting crops. When I visited them, they were in the process of moving from their five-acre farm to a larger one to accommodate their growing business. This example proves that horticulture programs, regardless of individual support needs, can produce an economically viable and marketable product. This in effect allows people to be

formally recognised as contributing and productive members of society when they otherwise may have not been.

VOLUNTEERS IN HORTICULTURE PROGRAMS

Volunteers in horticultural therapy programs require special mention. Each program I visited relied on the commitment of volunteer labour in addition to their paid staff. These programs were successful in obtaining volunteers because of the:

- Overall popularity of gardening, especially amongst retirees who may have more time to give as a volunteer
- Involvement of local garden clubs
- Positive, restorative environment that horticulture provides
- Self-paced physical exercise that gardening allows
- Accessible environment in adapted gardens

Some volunteers had become involved in the horticulture programs initially as participants and had either recuperated or developed enough skills to no longer require support. They were subsequently able to be involved in the ongoing life of the garden.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To further the growth of horticultural therapy in Australia it is necessary to:

- Raise the awareness of those working with special populations about the therapeutic benefits that horticulture can offer.
- Provide support, networking opportunities and information about the latest developments to those already involved in horticultural activities in Australia.
- Develop formal training opportunities for those who wish to work with horticulture as a therapy.
- Recognise that more important than the idea of a sensory garden *per se* is the issue of access for people with specific needs to experience all the sensory elements of the landscape setting.

I am developing a horticultural demonstration project in conjunction with Central Coast Post School Options, a service provider for young adults with disabilities living on the NSW Central Coast. After experiencing other programs first hand, I anticipate that this demonstration project will allow others to view horticultural therapy in action. The project will act as a vehicle for raising awareness of the benefits of horticultural therapy in the lay and professional communities alike.

The information gained through this fellowship will be disseminated through articles submitted to industry based publications and public presentations to community groups. In addition, I will remain an active member of the International Advisory Board to the American Horticultural Therapy Association, which will enable the further building of international links.