

The last decade or so has been an interesting journey for our garden and for me personally. In 2007 I had (reluctantly) to take ill-health retirement from my job as a consultant paediatrician due to a debilitating rheumatologic disease, subsequently complicated by treatment for breast cancer. I became dependent on using an electric wheelchair.

Beyond the conventional treatments for my many and complex illnesses, I also became interested in the

more holistic aspects of healthcare, in particular the possible benefits of gardens and gardening on physical and mental well-being. With the idea of reinventing our garden as a therapeutic garden for the surrounding community, I read extensively about 'healing gardens', and 'social and therapeutic horticulture' (STH) – an umbrella term for how nature, gardens and gardening may benefit patients' well-being. My research yielded much evidence of the benefits

Nurture nature: growing a healing garden

Helena Davies

patients enjoy through their involvement with gardens¹⁻³.

The research suggested that therapeutic gardens of any type should have a number of characteristics in common.



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Fig. 1 Aerial view of the house and garden

1. The King's Fund. Gardens and health: Implications for policy and practice. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/gardens-and-health>.
2. MIND study of ecotherapy as a benefit for mental well-being. <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/336359/Feel-better-outside-feel-better-inside-report.pdf>
3. THRIVE (<https://www.thrive.org.uk/>), the national charity for Social and Therapeutic Horticulture, provides a wealth of information, and both on-line and face-to-face training.



Fig. 2 *Allium schubertii*



Fig. 3 Hellebore hybrid

Planting should address all the visitors' senses: smell; touch; visual impact – both large and small scale; hearing (such as running water), and even taste, through access to edible produce grown on site. Plantings should include vibrant colours and soothing, calmer areas. Sculptures, whether man-made or as topiary, can provide additional interest. Also important are secluded seating areas for privacy or meditation, and shared seating areas to promote

social integration. Planting that encourages wildlife is also encouraged.

A visit to Helmsley Walled Garden in North Yorkshire, which contains a therapeutic garden with two full-time therapeutic horticulturists, was a further source of inspiration for me. Its climate is similar to ours and so it provided specific guidance in regard to plants I could try.

My research reinforced my intention to develop our garden as a healing garden which would be available to the local community. To this end, much of the existing planting was pulled up and, faced with largely empty beds, we undertook a radical redesign along the lines of 'good practice in healing gardens'.

Our garden, in South Yorkshire near Sheffield, is just over an acre in size, with the house sitting approximately 9m above most of the garden. Figure 1 is an aerial photograph of the house and garden. The house itself is an old stationmaster's house, and at the back of the house is the old railway platform that has large, accessible, raised beds as well as numerous pots, which allow a wheelchair-bound person to garden independently. Pots are also good for individual 'showstoppers' such as *Allium schubertii* (fig. 2) and eucomis.

The rest of the garden,

in front of the house, consists of a number of defined areas including a small woodland garden; a bed of grasses which provides tactile as well as visual interest; a bed containing mainly plants native to New Zealand (my family's country of origin); a hellebore bed (fig. 3); a vibrant 'hot' bed; and a pastel 'cool' bed. In addition, an area of the garden contains plants that have a medicinal history, such as yew and *Geranium sanguineum*. Yew clippings are still used in chemotherapy products (taxanes), while *G. sanguineum* was used historically to stop bleeding.

The garden as a whole is surrounded by a stone wall which in places is up to 10m high. At the far end of the garden is a large pond, supplied by a culvert which runs under the track approaching the house and is in turn supplied by a reservoir about 5 miles away. Outflow from the pond then runs over a sluice and under the rest of the garden, the adjacent road and houses, and into the River Don. Yellow flag irises (*Iris pseudacorus*) thrive adjacent to the pond and a *Gunnera manicata* is expanding rapidly by the sluice.

Steps descend from the house towards the more formal area of the garden which can also be accessed by a ramp from the path near the entrance gate.



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Fig. 4 Box topiary adjacent to the house

One of the features which survived the redesign was a collection of square box topiary bushes adjacent to the house (fig. 4). A boardwalk is currently being built to ease access from this more formal part of the garden to the garden's lowest point by the pond. We plan to build a Japanese garden adjacent to the boardwalk, which will include a secluded area for meditation. It will be planted with grasses such as *Hakonechloa macra*, topiarised pittosporum and *Ilex crenata* as well as trees including the weeping pear (*Pyrus salicifolia* 'Pendula'), chosen for its shape and scented flowers in spring. Also to feature are *Acer palmatum* Dissectum Viride Group, *Rhododendron stenopetalum* 'Linearifolium' with its curious spider-like flowers (fig. 5) and *R.* 'Palestrina', in keeping with the simplicity of Japanese gardens. These are currently waiting patiently in pots to be planted.

The formal part of the

garden consists of a lawn divided by a path with pleached hornbeam on one side and a 'stepover' apple on the other (fig. 6). Both are underplanted with *Iris* 'Katharine Hodgkin' providing interest in early spring, followed by dwarf, white *Allium cowanii* and yellow *A. moly* 'Jeannine'. Subsequently, *Anthemis tinctoria*, both 'EC Buxton' and 'Kelwayi' provide long-lasting interest, and the stepover provides delicious apples.

The 'hot' bed features one of the visitors' favourite scented plants, the perennial *Cosmos atrosanguineus* CHOCAMOCHA (fig. 7). Arguably hardy further south, its hardiness is unpredictable here, though by mulching and planting in a reasonably sheltered spot, we have brought it through a couple of winters. This bed is surrounded by *Carex comans* 'Bronze Curls' and *Hakonechloa macra* to provide both tactile interest and an enclosing perimeter



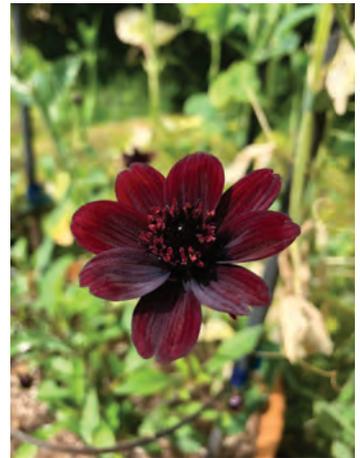
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Fig. 5 *Rhododendron stenopetalum* 'Linearifolium'



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Fig. 6 Path with pleached hornbeam, apple stepover behind fencing & herbaceous underplanting



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Fig. 7 *Cosmos atrosanguineus* CHOCAMOCHA



Fig. 8 *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle'



Fig. 9 *Cephalaria gigantea*



Fig. 10 *Lobularia* SNOW PRINCESS

for the informal planting of the hot bed.

Architectural interest is provided by a large *Dicksonia antarctica* which, filled with straw and wrapped in fleece, happily survives our hardest frosts and snow. Other sources of 'hot' colour include the perennial *Lobelia cardinalis* 'Queen Victoria', long-flowering *Geum* 'Mrs J Bradshaw', kniphofia, *Monarda* 'Cambridge Scarlet' and *Salvia* 'Hot Lips', the latter two also having scented foliage.

In contrast to the 'hot' bed is a soothing 'cool' bed with predominantly white, silver and purple planting. In spring and early summer, white *Allium stipitatum* 'Mount Everest' contrasts with the dark-red *A. atropurpureum*, and the *A. sphaerocephalon* of the hot bed. *Physostegia virginiana* 'Alba' flowers through the summer and a growing *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle' makes a bigger impact each year with its stunning white spherical flowers (fig. 8).

While *Verbena bonariensis* grows tall it doesn't dominate; planted both in the cool bed and the grass bed its narrow, branching stems allow it to be planted in front of, or in the midst of much smaller plants, without obscuring or overwhelming them. Elsewhere in the garden, tall but delicate *Cephalaria gigantea* (fig. 9) rises airily

above the grasses, reaching as much as 2m in height without support and, in another area, contrasts well with adjacent *Cynara cardunculus* with its blue flowers and large, silver, spiny leaves. Both were easily raised from seed.

Other scented highlights in the garden include *Matthiola incana* 'Pillow Talk', *Lobularia* SNOW PRINCESS (fig. 10) with its intense honey aroma (like *Cosmos atrosanguinea* CHOCAMOCHA, the lobularia has proven itself surprisingly hardy so far and overwintered successfully), and a variety of roses, with *R. GERTRUDE JEKYLL* having a particularly strong traditional scent. *R. 'Ferdinand Pichard'*, though only delicately scented, provides particular interest with its contrasting colours (fig. 11). *Camellia japonica* 'Candy Stripe' has similar mixed-colour blooms; they are one of the earliest sources of colour in spring.

Extensive planting with evergreen shrubs ensures year-round interest throughout the garden. Some in the woodland, such as the yew archway and the box, have been here for many years and are structural features. Elsewhere pittosporum, *Ilex crenata*, corokia and muehlenbeckia were planted only 3 to 5 years ago, but are already making a statement. Having experienced some problems

with box blight, we now use *Ilex crenata* instead. *Corokia cotoneaster* (wire-netting plant), a New Zealand native, has a fascinating branching habit that reminds me (with my medical hat on) of the structure of DNA (fig. 12). Another New Zealander, *Muehlenbeckia complexa* (maidenhair vine) climbs enthusiastically without needing wire ties or staking; it can also be trained into topiary shapes. These evergreen shrubs provide a formal contrast with the relatively informal planting within the herbaceous borders, in part inspired by the style of Piet Oudolf.

Further year-round interest is provided by widespread use of heuchera; there are a number of varieties around the garden. While the flowers of some varieties are of value in themselves, it is the foliage that is the main source of interest, with a huge range of colours and leaf patterns. *Heuchera* 'Lime Marmalade' in the woodland provides a striking contrast to the generally dark background (fig. 13), and also to dark-leaved varieties such as 'Plum Pudding' and *H. villosa* 'Palace Purple'. *H.* 'Lime Marmalade' is extremely hardy, ideal for our local climate, and is very popular at the plant sales. *Teucrium hircanicum* 'Purple Tails' has also thrived in the woodland despite the shade.

The garden is still at an early stage and very much a work in progress. Nurturenature is now a registered charity, increasing our potential sources of funding to develop the garden further. Completing the boardwalk, improving pathways and providing handrails to facilitate access for the less physically able visitors are current priorities.

The Kenneth Black Bursary, generously provided last year by the HPS, helped ensure that we had sufficient plug plants to grow on and sell at plant sales, which are an important source of funding.

We have organised a number of events in the garden including workshops such as 'Writing for healing' or 'Mindfulness, drawing and writing' (fig. 14). Besides these formal events, the garden can provide a place for activities such as reading in a secluded spot, meditating, gardening, or spending social time in a group setting. We are establishing links with a number of groups which could make use of the garden, including local school gardening clubs. We have begun discussing the possibility of working with local GPs to utilise social prescriptions. Social prescribing is a formal way for primary care services to refer patients to non-clinical services such as a walking group, tai chi, yoga, or just



Fig. 11 *Rosa* 'Ferdinand Pichard'

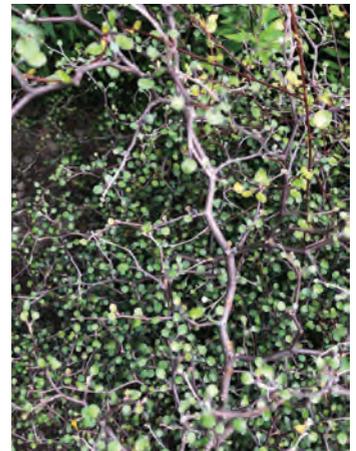


Fig. 12 *Corokia cotoneaster*



Fig. 13 *Heuchera* 'Lime Marmalade' in the woodland



Fig. 14 Outdoor workshop in progress

the experience of a healing garden, as alternatives to – or in addition to – conventional therapy for conditions such as mild depression, loneliness, obesity, or anxiety. Ideally such uses of the healing garden would incorporate specified goals, and evaluation of outcomes. All the workshops in the garden are formally evaluated.

In summary, my own disability and illness, combined with a passion for

plants and gardening, have led to the establishment of a healing garden to benefit the physical and mental health of the local community. Although the Nurturenature healing garden is still at an early stage, it is becoming known within the community. There is strong local support for its further development and use by a range of groups. Many challenges are still to be met, both administrative

and horticultural, such as recruiting volunteers, further planting, and completing the accessibility modifications. Despite this, visitors to the garden are already enthusiastic and approving – a recent visitor with dementia, which is thought to be mitigated by exposure to nature, was heard to claim, “this is paradise”. We are not quite there yet, but it’s something to aspire to! 🌿

Helena Davies had to take ill-health retirement from her job as a consultant paediatrician. She now nurtures plants instead of children, and hopes her healing garden will be a useful resource for the local community.