

A photograph of an elderly man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a jacket, sitting in a dark wooden chair in a lush garden. He is looking towards the right, with his hands clasped in his lap. The background is filled with green foliage and some pink flowers, with sunlight filtering through the leaves, creating a warm, dappled light effect.

# The restorative powers of plants

Research has shown that people seek out nature in times of crisis or grief. ADOBE STOCK

## People benefit simply from being in gardens and nature, which can, in turn, benefit nurseries as well

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

**S**cience and industry are catching up with what gardeners intuitively know: that our relationship with nature is both innate and reciprocal. It's as foundational to us as breathing. We need each other. And growers, nurseries and garden centers are perfectly poised to become restorative havens.

Humans and plants thrive on each other's mutual well-being, and garden spaces can be healing, therapeutic spaces for people.

### Humans are drawn to nature

Mounting evidence across disciplines shows that green environments boost physical and mental health, creativity, attention, feelings of safety, property values, and more. Just as importantly, new green spaces benefit wildlife and the sup-

porting ecosystem, now struggling with shrinking habitat, pollution and climate pressures. Doctors are ordering “park prescriptions” through the Park Rx America program to get people to visit green spaces. From the beginning of mankind, we have had a strong connection with nature.

“We evolved in nature and thus we have this deep affinity for it,” said Kathleen Wolf, retired University of Washington social science researcher. “Because of civilization and how we crafted cities, we’ve removed ourselves from it, but we still contain that connection knowing we are dependent on nature.”

The prospect-refuge theory of design posits that our attraction to trees is hardwired after centuries of finding shelter and safety among them.

Wolf notes that research at Cornell University has shown that people seek out nature in times of crisis or grief. Even when Japanese Americans were interred during World War II, they found ways to grow plants, sometimes smuggling cuttings in their pockets after being forced to work in the fields, she said.

Necessity is spurring us to find creative

ways to reconnect with nature today. City planners and landscape designers are weaving nature back into newly built environments using biophilic design, derived from biophilia, meaning “love of life” in Greek, and popularized by naturalist E.O. Wilson.

It's seen from Singapore's interconnected trails to Portland's Green Streets stormwater management initiative.

One of the surprising benefits, she said, is that plants may be able to reverse the screen-focused drive in our collective attention. When we engage with a collection of plants, nature's enchanting complexity draws our attention, but — here's the key — in an unstructured, free-form way. We're not trying to win a game, calculate a sum, or interpret the ramifications of an email. We're just following the hummingbird as it zips from branch to branch purely because it feels good.

As such, you can imagine even the smallest container, like a Japanese-style planter of mosses, can be beneficial. On a societal scale, all plant-able spaces can help increase health and biodiversity, Wolf said, from the smallest parking strip or patio to bus stops and schoolyards up >>

## Restorative powers of plants



Teresia Hazen is a longtime horticultural therapist who worked with Portland's Legacy Health System to incorporate healing gardens into their facilities. Above and below is the healing garden at Legacy Mount Hood Medical Center. PHOTO COURTESY LEGACY HEALTH

to highway lids and utility corridors.

Transforming these pieces of cities into something we perceive as living and natural will transform our daily experience. "It's not only parks and greenbelts," Wolf said, "but what about these bits and pieces that could be with a little bit of design could be presented as microparks as well?"

### Horticultural therapy

In the health sphere, therapeutic gardens and programs are helping to heal hospital patients, prison inmates and residents of dementia care facilities. But the idea isn't a new one.

As far back as 1812, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, noted that patients who gardened recovered from "mania" more quickly than those who did not.

However, it wasn't until the 1940s and '50s that horticultural therapy became more mainstream in the U.S. after it was used to treat hospitalized war veterans.

The American Horticultural Therapy





Trees with interesting bark such as paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*) are great choices for therapeutic gardens according to Nancy Buley at J. Frank Schmidt and Son Co. PHOTO COURTESY J. FRANK SCHMIDT AND SON CO.

Association (AHTA) defines horticultural therapy as “the engagement of a person in gardening and plant-based activities, facilitated by a trained therapist, to achieve specific therapeutic treatment goals.” Those goals might be regaining or improving mental acuity, mood, or physical rehabilitation. Horticultural therapy can be performed in workshops or in dedicated programs, gardens and facilities.

Wolf is working with urban planners in Chicago and Maryland to incorporate horticultural therapy into cityscapes.

Closer to home, Teresia Hazen is a longtime horticultural therapist who worked with Portland’s Legacy Health System to incorporate healing gardens into their facilities. She wrote an article for AHTA, “Therapeutic Garden Characteristics,” describing standards for therapeutic gardens. (See [TinyURL.com/TherapyGarden](http://TinyURL.com/TherapyGarden)).

“In working for 30 years with stroke rehabilitation patients, they always got more engaged quicker when working with plants,” she said.

Tending plants can impart a much-needed sense of control, Hazan said.

“When they can create beauty >>>

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J. Frank Schmidt & Son contributed to the award winning Legacy Emanuel Medical Center Children's Garden. PHOTO COURTESY LEGACY HEALTH

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actively helps improve their mood and  
physical rehabilitation — even just walking  
around the block,” or to their local garden  
center, she said.

### Get outside

Portland-based counselor and reg-  
istered horticultural therapist Rannan  
Blatter finds taking her clients for nature  
walks helps them access their emotions  
more quickly than they can indoors.

“Mindfulness and grounding tech-  
niques that therapists often use in an  
office can be effortless when guided in  
nature,” she said. “Bringing attention to  
the smell of blooming jasmine, feeling the  
wind against your face or the sunshine on  
your skin, hearing the birds chirp, seeing  
the changing colors of the leaves in fall,  
these are all sensory activities that help cli-  
ents attune to the here and now.”

Blatter puts this awareness to work in  
her practice.

“On our first session I may have  
a client that is so trapped in their own  
thoughts that they can’t experience what



Trees with unusual shapes or colorful flowers like this 'June Snow' dogwood work well in therapeutic gardens. PHOTO COURTESY J. FRANK SCHMIDT AND SON CO.

is happening around them,” she said. “Clients with high levels of anxiety start out racing through the trail or walkways and after time are able to slow their pace along with their heart rate. This slowing down is exactly what we need to counteract the impossible cultural demands that lead us to emotional dysregulation and poor health to begin with.”

Nancy Buley has long been aware of the benefits of horticultural therapy.

“J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. has supported horticultural therapy and the science of healing gardens for more than 30 years,” said Buley, who serves as communication director for the Boring-based tree growers.

The nursery has contributed to many of Hazan’s projects, beginning with donat-

ing trees to Portland’s award-winning Legacy Emanuel Medical Center Children’s Garden. Since then, the nursery has also sponsored American Horticultural Therapy Association conferences and a therapeutic garden at the Legacy Mount Hood Medical Center in Gresham.

Growers, nurseries and garden centers are perfectly poised to become resources for gardeners to create restorative havens.

#### Picking the right plants

When selecting trees for a therapeutic space, Buley looks for ones with strong visual and sensual appeal. “Trees with interesting bark (such as paperbark maple, *Stewartia* and American hornbeam) are great choices for therapeutic gardens. Trees with



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## Restorative powers of plants

fragrant flowers, unusual form, and bright and colorful summer and fall foliage are also important design considerations.”

Some of the most popular plants at these gardens are ‘Golden Raindrops® and ‘Royal Raindrops® crabapple — offering multi-season appeal and fruit for birds — and ‘June Snow™ dogwood, which is beloved for its generous canopy, creamy white flowers and elegant branching.

### Creating a sanctuary

Kathleen Wolf sees many opportunities for the green industry to increase awareness of the benefits of plants.

Here are some ways to help transform your fields or display gardens into a healing space:

- Help visitors focus on the moment with sensory stimuli and showcase fragrant plants and create displays incorporating the sound of moving water. Create displays incorporating textural detail and include seating areas for respite. Explain and promote the mental benefits of plants to customers, not just their novelty. A children’s display garden can help benefit the youngest visitors and build a strong connection to nature. You can send kids on a scavenger hunt to find a hidden toy or a plant of the month.

- Displays for the elderly or cognitively impaired might feature smooth walking surfaces surrounded by the fragrance of lilacs and roses.

- Explore monthly themes such as mobility, restoration, dementia, sensory awareness, and pollinators.

- Create a trail or stroll garden.
- Hold guided walks.

Other restorative ways visitors can enjoy your space include workshops in planting, painting, flower arranging, writing, mindfulness, or yoga. ☺

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