

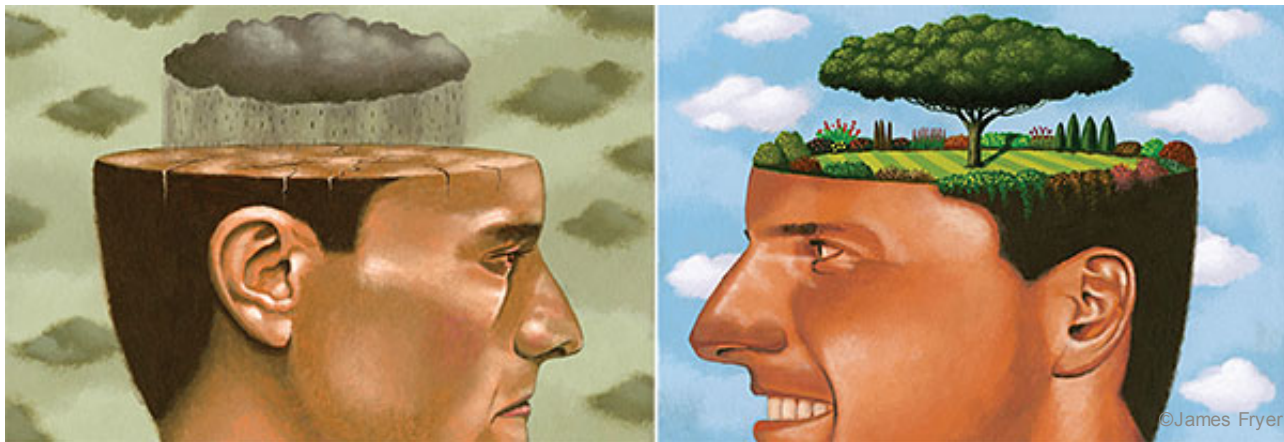
June 26, 2015 3:12 pm

The healing power of garden

Matthew Wilson

[Share](#) [Author alerts](#) [Print](#) [Clip](#)[Comments](#)

The health benefits of green space are profound. And, for terminally ill children, they provide comfort and balm



There's no shortage of proverbs, sonnets and poetry extolling the virtues of gardens and green space and how they make us feel. Most of us appreciate the sensory qualities of plants, the calming nature of a garden pool, the soothing power of green. What can be harder to pin down is any science behind this sense of wellbeing. An hour spent vigorously weeding can be easily plugged into any exercise app to ensure the satisfaction generated from weed-free borders is doubly rewarded with calories burnt.

But can we measure the less tangible benefits of gardens on health and wellbeing? RWF Cameron of the University of Sheffield's Department of Landscape posits that the relationship between green places and human health and wellbeing has been acknowledged for 200 years, although a formal scientific evidence base has only begun to form over the past 30 years. Damningly, he argues that "community leaders in the 19th century had a greater understanding of the relationship between green space and wellbeing than subsequent generations of planners and designers".

Later this year my Chelsea Flower Show garden for Royal Bank of Canada will be recreated in a new permanent location. Thanks to RBC's generosity and the work of the Greenfingers charity, the garden is moving to the Earl Mountbatten hospice on the Isle of Wight. From a personal perspective, it marks not only the final act in what by then will be a 14-month journey from the submission of the original show garden concept, but also the end of my

time as volunteer chairman of Greenfingers.

This small charity — it employs only seven part-time staff — works predominantly with children's hospices to create outdoor spaces, gardens that serve multiple purposes: for education, sensory stimulation, play, and for reflection and mourning. In its 16-year existence the charity has created 45 of these gardens throughout the UK. The children's hospice movement has significant differences to its adult counterpart.

Adult hospices tend to focus on end of life care, whereas children's hospices often deal with cases of limiting illnesses that can affect a child, and its family, for years. It's estimated there are 49,000 children and young people across the UK unlikely to reach adulthood. Children's hospices offer support to the whole family, regardless of whether the child's life is measured in days, weeks or years. The role of outdoor space can be a crucial part of the support infrastructure, not least because gardens offer one of the few "normal" spaces in an environment that can sometimes be, necessarily, dominated by healthcare paraphernalia. Gardens enable well and unwell siblings to do the most normal of things; play, have fun. For parents providing long-term care to children with life-limiting illnesses, one simple but important benefit is being able to access green space without being in the "goldfish bowl" of a park or play area. They also allow families to access nature together, regardless of circumstances.



Matthew Wilson's show garden

On one hospice visit early in my Greenfingers chairmanship, our tour was cut short to allow a family to sit in the garden with their baby, so the child could die without the intrusion of the medical equipment that had been a prominent feature of the baby's short life. As hard to take as such moments can be, it was a reminder of the emotional power of green space. Children's hospices are not tragic places, and nor are the gardens Greenfingers creates around them — if anything they are uplifting. As one parent puts it: "The gardens have helped to make the unimaginable bearable."

The Greenfingers garden at Chestnut Tree House in Arundel, West Sussex, designed by Ann-Marie Powell, opened up a section of previously inaccessible wet woodland, a semi-natural landscape of mature trees and pools. This has allowed children using the hospice to experience aspects of nature previously denied them for purely practical reasons related to access. For the mother of one child, "it has enabled my daughter to touch and feel the things most of us take for granted every day — a truly life-changing experience".

In recent years there have been

increasing calls for horticulture to be “prescribed” by health professionals. Leaders from the UK ornamental horticulture sector, with Defra and supported by former Deputy Prime Minister Lord Heseltine (who has created his own noteworthy garden and arboretum) met in May to back proposals for gardening to be considered as treatment on the NHS. This followed the Royal Horticultural Society’s MacLeod Lecture, where UK GP Dr William Bird and Swedish professor Dr Matilda van den Bosch presented their case to include gardening and nature in healthcare. According to van den Bosch, “the key point is that gardening, plants and horticultural activities are excellent tools for creating a healthier society where the costs of healthcare and human suffering can be substantially reduced.”



A Makaton sign at the Chestnut Tree hospice in West Sussex

According to Bird, the financial incentives are significant; the NHS currently spends about £60bn on long-term conditions, of which 80 per cent could be prevented by healthier lifestyles. Adopting active gardening as part of a lifestyle strategy (a combination of healthy eating, lifestyle choices and exercise) could, Bird and van den Bosch claim, result in at least a £5 health benefit for every £1 spent.

Horticulture can benefit mental wellbeing as well as physical health. A decade ago, a three-year study conducted by Loughborough University in conjunction with Thrive, Britain’s leading social and therapeutic horticultural charity, found that gardening can have a positive effect on the physical and mental health, social skills and well-being of vulnerable adults. The study groups included people with learning difficulties, serious mental health problems, victims of torture, people with disabilities and the long-term unemployed.

The study team looked at the benefits of 900 horticultural projects across the UK that were offering therapeutic horticulture. They found that “growing things”, being outside in the fresh air and the physical toil helped improve health, wellbeing and mood. There were improvements in the social skills of participants too, and the opportunity to extend social networks between groups often excluded from society. The report concluded that “horticulture and gardening can no longer be treated as a trivial activity — it is comparable to any other physical therapy”.

The benefits of gardens and gardening aren’t limited to groups with special needs. An evidence database kept by Kathleen Wolf at the College of the Environment, Washington university, concludes that the experience of

nature and green spaces “help to restore the mind from mental fatigue [and] provides calming and inspiring environments”. Outdoor activities can “alleviate symptoms of Alzheimer’s, dementia, stress and depression”. Contact with nature “helps children to develop cognitive, emotional and behavioural connections, imagination and creativity”.



A wooden tunnel in the gardens at the Chestnut hospice

My Royal Bank of Canada garden was designed with Chelsea in mind, rather than any future life. But the fact that the components that made it work as an entity at a flower show for a week can make a longer-term contribution to the life of hospice patients says something about the inherent value of gardens.

Matthew Wilson is Managing Director of Clifton Nurseries Ltd, and outgoing voluntary Chairman of Greenfingers Charity.

Illustrations by James Fryer

[Share](#) [Author alerts](#) [Print](#) [Clip](#)

[Comments](#)



Toshiba governance



China opening bond markets



FirstFT - China purge, Toshiba execs resign

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/b764c7e0-166b-11e5-b07f-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2015 FT and ‘Financial Times’ are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.