

## Introduction

This report was written following a study tour of England, spanning 8 months in 2022 and 2023. It was made possible due to the generous funding from The Merlin Trust. Seven gardens were visited during this time; Horatio's Garden (London & South East), Helmsley Walled Garden, Chelsea Physic Garden, Walworth Garden, Sydenham Garden, RHS Bridgewater and the Eden Project. The gardens all facilitate horticultural activities, sessions or courses that aim to be therapeutic for the people who attend them.

This report explores best practice across these initiatives and considers the different activities that are considered to be the most therapeutic for clients. It also discusses the main issues and barriers that face organisations delivering Social Therapeutic Horticulture and how people access the services.

## What is Social Therapeutic Horticulture?

"Social and therapeutic horticulture is the process of using plants and gardens to improve physical and mental health, as well as communication and thinking skills."<sup>1</sup> This can be achieved in a variety of different ways, through many different activities. Therapeutic horticulture has been practised in the UK since the nineteenth century, however it was not known or formalised as a method of care or support until much later. However, the benefits of working productively outside were still evident and recognised as beneficial to people under the care system. Between 1950 - 1975 there was a decrease in the use of therapeutic horticulture as a method of support for patients as it struggled to find its place within a newly established NHS and the increased availability of modern drugs. However, with the development of Occupational Therapy and the creation of the Society of Horticultural Therapy in the 1970s, it once again became an important model of care and support for people's physical and mental health. Since then it has only grown and is supported by a wealth of research and evidence.

## Report Rationale

I have spent the last three years creating, developing and delivering a community organisation called Bloom Sheffield, a flower garden for women, promoting positive mental health through therapeutic horticulture. At Bloom we deliver therapeutic horticulture sessions for women and non-binary people who have self-referred or have been referred to us via healthcare services.

I have always known the benefits of gardening for both mental and physical health. It was this personal experience that led me to starting Bloom Sheffield and it is the development and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thrive.org.uk/how-we-help/what-we-do/social-therapeutic-horticulture>

progression of the organisation that has caused me to ask questions about the future of therapeutic horticulture in our healthcare service. In 2022, our therapeutic gardening sessions were chosen to be part of the green prescribing pilot program being rolled out across the UK. It has been very interesting to be part of the process and to be involved within the development of the program. It has, however, made me consider how other organisations are running, what models and processes they follow and what stumbling blocks are arising due to the health services new reliance on the third sector, in particular green services.

### Aims and objectives

- Develop an understanding of best practice in the field of Social Therapeutic Horticulture and identify the main activities that are helping people's health and wellbeing through horticulture.
  - To identify the main issues facing organisations delivering therapeutic horticulture and see how those barriers can be broken down so that green prescribing can become a viable and sustainable form of prescription in healthcare throughout the UK.
  - Collect feedback from organisations about what they think is working and what needs to be implemented if a model of green social prescribing is rolled out across the UK.
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### Itinerary

21st September 2022

Horatio's Garden

London

<https://www.horatiogarden.org.uk/the-gardens/london-south-east/>

*Horatio's Garden is located at the London Spinal Cord Injury Centre in the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital. The garden was designed by Tom Stuart-Smith and is cared for and tended to by staff offering 1:1 gardening therapy sessions. The garden is for patients of the spinal injury unit and their families and carers.*

15th March 2023

Helmsley Walled Garden

North Yorkshire

<https://helmsleywalledgarden.org.uk/>

*Helmsley Walled Garden, located within the North Yorkshire Moors, is a historic garden that is open to the public and offers mentored volunteering as a way of supporting people to access horticultural activity to improve their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Volunteers are involved in the planning and development of the garden as well as its maintenance. Helmsley Walled Garden has been a therapeutic garden since 1994.*

21st March 2023

Chelsea Physic Garden

London

<https://www.chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk/>

*Chelsea Physic Garden was established in 1673 and occupies four acres of land on the edge of the Thames. The garden was first established by the Apothecaries in order to grow medicinal plants and it is now open to the public and runs 'Help Us Grow' - a free 9-week programme for adults recovering from physical and mental ill health.*

22nd March 2023

Walworth Garden

London

<https://walworthgarden.org.uk/>

*Walworth Garden began in 1987 and is a community growing space and horticultural training centre. It is open to the public and delivers City and Guilds accredited horticultural training, community workshops and therapeutic horticulture groups. Walworth Garden delivers their 'Growing to Grow' sessions for anyone experiencing isolation, anxiety, mild to moderate depression, or other similar challenges, but no specific diagnoses or referrals are needed.*

23rd March 2023

Sydenham Garden

London

<https://www.sydenhamgarden.org.uk/>

*Sydenham Garden was founded in 2002 and aims to help people in their recovery from mental and physical ill-health in Lewisham. They deliver 'Garden Groups' that run weekly for up to 12 months. Sydenham Gardens aim to promote inclusion and reduce prejudice by bringing together co-workers with different degrees of mental and physical ill health, volunteers and members of the local community to work together.*

4th April 2023

RHS Bridgewater

Manchester

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/gardens/bridgewater/>

*The Community Wellbeing Garden was created during the renovation of RHS Bridgewater, which opened to the public in 2021. The garden welcomes individuals whose mental or physical health may benefit from garden-related activities. They are referred by local healthcare professionals to work with Bridgewater's Therapeutic Gardener. They also provide free wellbeing sessions for groups of people facing health issues, as well as carers and frontline healthcare workers.*

17th - 20th April 2023

Eden Project

Cornwall

<https://www.edenproject.com/horticultural-therapy-in-the-outer-estate>

*The Eden Project delivers a variety of programmes from their therapeutic garden on the Outer Estate. These gardening programmes are for those experiencing health-related problems, designed to improve mental and physical well being. They also deliver programmes for specific groups, such as veterans or people over the age of 50. All sessions are delivered collaboratively with a horticultural therapist and horticulturist.*

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Throughout my time visiting the various gardens and observing projects being delivered, a range of themes arose that illustrated best practice in the field of therapeutic horticulture and what improved attendees' sense of wellbeing. I have structured my observations around these themes.

## Activities and Wellbeing

Throughout my visits, I observed a range of different activities that fell under the umbrella of the therapeutic horticulture provision. Activities that would not necessarily be viewed as traditional horticultural practice were sometimes used as an engagement tool to help people access gardening, or to help people feel comfortable outside. Most of the activities ran alongside the traditional gardening tasks, but some were stand alone sessions. Some of these activities included; bushcraft, sewing, cosmetic making, painting and cooking.

Many of the gardens, mainly Helmsley Walled Garden, the Eden Project, RHS Bridgewater and Sydenham Garden created therapeutic activities that were based around the maintenance and development of the gardens. These were seasonal activities that were focused around growing plants, caring for the space and harvesting produce. These activities were purposeful and were valued as the participants were contributing towards something significant and important. Their input was needed and worthwhile and I saw a lot of value and positive outcomes through witnessing people participating in these activities. At Helmsley, it was noted that the 'therapy' is coming from the garden itself and being involved in valuable gardening, not necessarily activities that are just for the sake of it. The Director of the garden said *"feeling useful is very important for our volunteer's psyche no matter what other problems people might be facing."*

Purposeful activity was also highlighted as something of real importance in the delivery of therapeutic horticulture practice at the Eden Project. Their Horticultural Therapist said, *"To achieve something in the course of a session or a number of sessions brings real satisfaction. The main benefit seems to be derived from doing activities which have a purpose – whether that is gardening related, woodworking, bushcraft or willow weaving."*

**Education and achievement** was a theme that arose in nearly all of the initiatives that I visited. There was a real focus on building confidence and boosting self-esteem through education or achievement in various tasks. At Chelsea Physic Garden it was noted by staff that one of the main reasons for people attending their therapeutic horticulture sessions was a desire to learn about both horticultural practice and the benefits and uses of plants specifically. It was clear that people were engaged in the range of activities that they offered throughout the weekly sessions.



Both Walworth Garden and the Eden Project facilitate more formal educational opportunities, which include RHS Level 1 and Level 1 and 2 in Horticulture from City and Guilds, respectively. These were both available as part of the therapeutic horticulture provision that both organisations provided. The activities at the Community Wellbeing Garden at RHS Bridgewater are heavily focused on nature and the benefits of taking part in activities that participants may not have done before or haven't engaged in for a long time. Staff noted that these sorts of activities are ways to help people gain confidence and build a sense of accomplishment and achievement.

**Being with others and feeling part of a community** was another significant theme that arose when exploring what makes an activity or a horticultural practice or provision therapeutic. Sydenham Garden, which is located within a residential community, identified that the most therapeutic aspect of gardening is being part of a caring community. Being involved in, and tending to, a community space is a clear way to do that. At the Eden Project I was able to spend time with participants who attend Eden's therapeutic horticulture group that is in collaboration with Cornwall Housing, which provides support for people who are currently, or have previously been, homeless. I asked one of the attendees what he enjoyed about the sessions, he told me that *"it's just nice being around other people and being outside. It makes you feel part of something and close to other people"*. Bringing people together with shared experiences is a powerful thing and supporting people to work together on a shared project can be very useful in helping people make connections with others.

At Helmsley Walled Garden, the sense of community through teamwork is very apparent. The way their therapeutic provision is delivered is through mentored volunteering. All the 'volunteers' at Helmsley are supported by volunteer coordinators, but every person is made to feel like an integral part of the team, who are doing valuable work. There is no distinction between participants accessing 'therapeutic provision' and people who are helping at the garden. Every volunteer has the opportunity for social interaction, as they are in a managed situation, so they can engage with others



as much or as little as they can. They are all one big team, working towards a shared goal.

Although I didn't observe traditional horticulture practice at Chelsea Physic Garden there was a real sense of warmth and teamwork throughout the session. The course facilitator highlighted that doing activities *with* others is what makes them beneficial. She said, *"it's a shared experience no matter how much or how little you interact with others. You feel others' presence and you're all doing an activity together, which is powerful."*



The staff at RHS Bridgewater also noted the feeling of connectedness nurtured through socialising with others. Gardening is a way of bringing people together and forming friendships and this was evident at the community wellbeing garden, as they reported that they have participants who met through the gardening sessions and are now friends outside the garden.

When talking to attendees, clients, staff and volunteers at all the gardens I visited, one thing that really shone through was the importance and **benefit of being outside and in nature**. Many people have incredibly busy lives and lots of responsibilities and this leads to them not being able to spend time outside. Therapeutic

horticulture practices give attendees time and space to enjoy the outdoors and take notice of the world around them. Staff at RHS Bridgewater said, *"being outdoors in the surroundings of a beautiful garden is also a huge part of why people enjoy coming to us – simply being outdoors and being in nature is so restorative and calming for those that attend."*

This is also a hugely important part of the ethos at Horatio's Garden. Patients, relatives and staff are all encouraged to use the gardens and 'enjoy the immersive benefits of nature'<sup>2</sup>. When I spoke to the Head Gardener, he told me that being surrounded by nature and having the ability to access the outdoors- often in hospital beds- is hugely important to a patient's wellbeing and recovery as it provides a space that is a direct contrast to the ward and gives people the opportunity to focus on something outside of themselves.

Many clients and staff noted that **activities that provide focus and opportunities to nurture** were especially valuable and popular amongst people who attend. At the Eden Project, I spent time with an attendee who, staff had said, struggled to engage when they initially joined the programme. This was until they sowed a tray of sweet pea seeds. At that point they became interested and had a sense of ownership over the plants. They returned every week to check on the plants, care for them and watch them grow. When I was visiting the project I spent time with the attendee and helped them plant out their sweet peas into the garden. When admiring their work, they said, *"it just feels good, you know, looking after something"*.



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### Accessing Therapeutic Horticulture

During my study tour, I spoke to staff at all the initiatives I visited about **referrals and engagement**. I wanted to know how they got people in and engaged in their projects. RHS Bridgewater and Sydenham Garden told me that most of their clients are referred into their service, either through social prescribing, GPs or their local networks.

Walworth Garden, Chelsea Physic Garden and Helmsley Walled Garden explained that even though they do receive some formal referrals from healthcare professionals, most people access their therapeutic horticulture provision through referring themselves.

Across the majority of the gardens I visited, there was a real sense of being part of the community and working with other organisations and initiatives to provide for people. This was particularly

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.horatiogarden.org.uk/what-we-do/>



apparent at The Eden Project, where many of their sessions are based around community collaborations. Some of these include working with Cornwall Housing, Defence Garden's Scheme or local job centres. RHS Bridgewater also offers a scheme called 'Community Grow', which is an area of their garden made up of a number of hexagonal beds. Each of the growing beds are cared for and maintained by community groups and organisations from Greater Manchester with assistance from the RHS Community Gardener and volunteers.

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## Barriers and Issues

When speaking to organisations three main issues facing organisations were identified when it came to delivering therapeutic horticulture sessions and provision.

### **1. Travel and accessibility**

How can people access green space and nature? Aside from in London, it is unusual to see large green spaces, dedicated to therapeutic horticulture in urban or residential areas. So this poses the question of how do people get to them? There seems to be unequal access to nature's benefits, particularly for marginalised groups or people on low incomes. Both RHS Bridgewater, Eden Project and Helmsley Walled Garden raised this as a barrier that they face. Without a car, people struggle to reach them and therefore cannot access support easily.

### **2. Sustained Attendance**

This was notably apparent for organisations working with people who needed support with their mental health particularly, however Hortatio's Garden did note that because people are in hospital their attendance is sometimes sporadic due to ill health. Often, the reason that people accessing therapeutic horticulture services is due to anxiety, depression or a common mental health problem. These often lead to people not feeling well enough to attend sessions and, therefore, do not benefit to the fullest extent.

### **3. Funding and Finance**

Naturally, a huge problem facing every single garden I visited was money. It seemed there was a lack of sustained funding for organisations to be confident that they can continue providing these services. Many said that a lot of resources are used on fundraising and applying for grants.

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## Conclusion

When reflecting upon my visits and the conversations I had with staff, volunteers and service users, I have felt very inspired. People delivering these projects have a deep understanding of the benefits of therapeutic horticulture and how gardening and nature can help people.

I was struck by the variety of activities that fell under the umbrella of 'Social Therapeutic Horticulture' and I would be interested to see the development of standardisation of the term. At the end of my study tour, I was still left thinking how it could clearly be defined and outlined. Many therapeutic horticulture providers had similar ideas about what they thought makes an activity 'therapeutic' and that it was nature, and the connection with it, that provides the therapy not necessarily a specific activity or task. Intricacies and semantics aside, however, it is very clear by observing these groups and people engaging in activities, that the benefits that gardening and nature provide to wellbeing, recovery and health are obvious.

Being able to conduct this study tour has been an amazing opportunity to meet other professionals and pioneers within the field. I have made many valuable connections which will aid me in my career progression. It has also provided much inspiration that has influenced my own therapeutic horticulture sessions and the services we provide at Bloom Sheffield.