

Summer Work Placement:

Community & Social Prescribing at RHS Bridgewater



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July-August 2023

Introduction

As my summer work placement approached I felt a mix of excitement and nervous anticipation. I would be assisting both the Social Prescribing and Community Gardening programs at RHS Bridgewater in Manchester. I was unsure if three weeks would suffice to determine my fit in therapeutic horticulture, but I saw this opportunity as a valuable way to explore my place in the field. In this report, I'll share my experiences and reflections during my time with the team.

Diary

Mondays	I supported participants in the Wellbeing garden referred to the Social Prescription program via GPs, who were part of a 16-week Wellbeing program addressing various health issues.
Tuesday and Thursdays	I worked in the Wellbeing garden with established groups, including NHS Critical Care Teams, caregivers, and parent and children groups, during their 2-hour wellbeing sessions.
Fridays	I joined the Community Grow garden, collaborating with groups that included individuals who had experienced homelessness, survivors of abuse, and local community support groups. In my last week, I reorganized the Wellbeing Space to improve resource accessibility, which was well-received and deemed helpful.

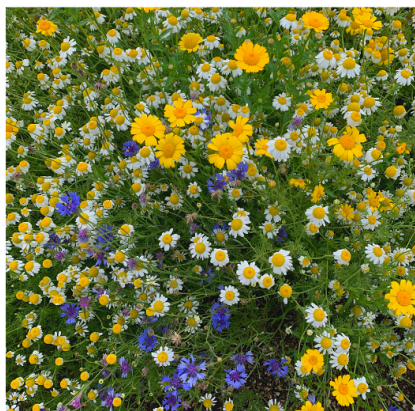
Immersion and Initial Insights

On my first day, I met Emma Cleal from RHS New Shoots, who welcomed me and provided all the necessary materials for my placement, including my uniform – wearing the uniform was unexpectedly welcome, as it eliminated the daily decision at a hitherto unknown waking time of 5.30am. I met the team, who helped me to feel at ease. I was particularly inspired by the approach of Ozichi Brewster, the "Therapeutic Gardener" – after discussion with Ozichi I've placed this in inverted commas, and our discussion will be the basis of an article on trellis website in near future (www.trellisscotland.org.uk).



Images 1: The first and last are plants (Verbascum nigrum and Mespilus germanica) I was able to successfully identify for members of the public, the middle is me on my first day wearing uniform and a rather fetching hat made that very day.

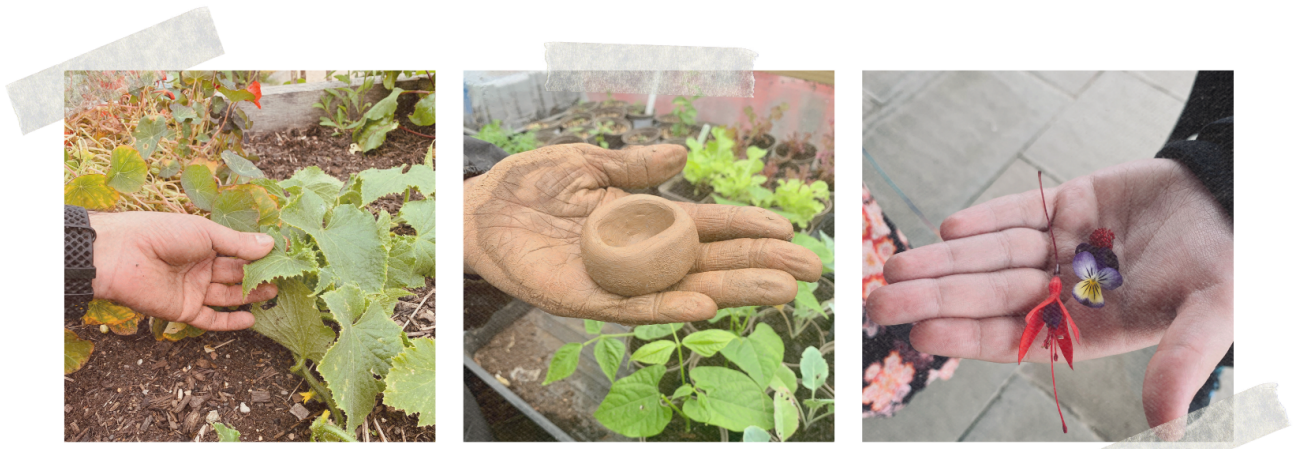
A highlight of my first week was engaging in conversations with clients of the Social Prescribing service. These clients, who lived locally, shared their mixed emotions regarding the transformation of the land into RHS Bridgewater. Their experiences revealed a dichotomy: a sense of nostalgia for the previous easy access and hidden spaces, contrasted with pride in the land's evolution. These interactions prompted me to consider the concept of Community Development, sparking questions about balancing open community spaces with protected sanctuaries.



Images 2: Aspects of the Foraging Garden where the local community can share in the bounty

Connection and Reflection

A significant part of my placement involved supporting well-being sessions for diverse groups, such as NHS nurses working in Critical Care Departments and participants from the Living Well mental health charity. The connection between individuals and nature slowly revealed its beauty to me. Over the three weeks, it began to rekindle my sense of purpose, which I had recently lost.



Images 3: Hands of participants making, touching, or discovering

I had worked as a psychotherapist for over ten years and eventually experienced burnout. I believed that part of this exhaustion was due to the climate crisis, which felt increasingly immediate to me. I felt the process of psychotherapy disconnected from the support needed in this crisis. However, during a walk in the woods with a client from a mental health project, I rediscovered my ability to appreciate his unique view of nature. This reignited a hope that I could contribute to helping myself and others navigate the losses brought by climate change and learn from the wisdom of those currently excluded from our societal norms.



Images 4: Different people engaging in grounding by feeling the earth under their feet

Whether participants were engaged in activities like forest bathing, crafting herb infusions from the garden, or delving into arts and crafts, their deep connections to nature and the nourishment they

derived from it were evident. The word 'nourishment,' which came up in conversations with Ozichi and participants, led me to reflect on how to invite more nourishment into my life and support others in doing the same. Engaging in conversations as we explored the gardens reinforced my belief in the transformative potential of person-centered values and empathetic listening. I noticed my skill and appreciation for staying with someone as they are, allowing creative ideas to emerge through connection and diversity, elements I believed were essential to community development.



Images 5: Caring for others with herbal teas, flowers wreaths or new touches

Working with Ozichi, a compassionate and skilled practitioner, felt promising. Our partnership seemed to blend our strengths effectively, combining planning and flexibility. Our dialogue around therapeutic gardening had already generated ideas that I hoped to explore further in our partnership.



Image 6: Ozichi in her favourite part of the garden

The Spark of Ideas

My connection to the project and the people I worked with inspired ideas that I plan to share with the RHS Bridgewater team to potentially enhance the well-being experience there. I include them here to highlight how thought-provoking the placement was and to document ideas for future projects:

- Dedicated well-being focused areas, such as an outdoor space with reflective questions engraved on wood, developed by community groups to encourage contemplation and shared thoughts.
- Spaces for creating various natural objects with resources readily available, catering to different preferences for solitude, company, activity, or reflection. These spaces would evolve based on community desires.
- Expanding conversations with participants about their hopes for learning and sharing, allowing participants to guide the development of these spaces. For instance, a conversation with a participant revealed their knowledge of bushcraft and a desire to learn about plant physiology.
- A revolving gallery space to showcase participants' recent creative expressions.
- Seasonal activity boards to inspire independent engagement throughout the year.
- Community Harvests, like picking the common 'weed' Valerian across the site with community/social prescribing participants. This could involve methods of identifying the plant, sharing its characteristics, and learning how to utilise its medicinal benefits, such as easing insomnia and anxiety by creating tinctures, tisanes, and teas. An added benefit would be significant weeding completed.

Skills Sharing?

Overall, I recognised the potential for more opportunities to foster skill-sharing. This could involve examining the pedagogical approach to interactions between staff, volunteers, and participants. Personally, I advocate for a collaborative approach with a relatively flat hierarchy, as I believe it encourages community participants to value their skills and develop a sense of interdependence.



Images 7: Helping hands together

However, I acknowledge that this approach may not always align with RHS Bridgewater's priorities, such as aesthetic and design considerations. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to explore which hierarchies are essential to maintain and which ones can be flexible. An example from my experience involved observing a volunteer automatically instructing others on how to cook with a vegetable,

only to discover later that a participant from a non-dominant culture had more extensive recipes to offer. This observation could serve as a valuable learning opportunity, raising questions about consent, power dynamics, and points of reflection. Some suggested considerations within this frame include:

- How can volunteers offer their knowledge to those interested in a given recipe?
- How can choices be provided?
- How can participants' knowledge be valued as highly as the volunteers'?
- Are there volunteers who prefer a teacher/student approach, and how can participants choose?
- Could volunteers who do not favour a capacity-building approach receive training on facilitation?
- What knowledge is held by participants, volunteers, and staff that could enrich our understanding of the world, including non-dominant perspectives?
- How might this help cultivate a community that lives in harmony with the natural world?

Additionally I wondered about the potential for developing specialized volunteer roles to deepen community involvement in the social prescribing projects, based on skills or knowledge.

To have had these thoughts and to feel excited and inspired by the project, both as it is and for its potential future, is a significant gift for me. It has highlighted areas where I can expand my skills, which I will discuss in the following section.

Personal Development Plan

While I don't expect to become an expert in most of these activities, I aim to acquire enough knowledge to serve as a starting point for collaborative learning, should others in the group lack these skills.

Skill Development: I recognize the importance of acquiring practical skills to enhance my contributions to therapeutic horticulture projects. To achieve this, I will:	
Identify Key Skills	I will create a list of specific skills that I believe would be valuable for my role, including green woodworking, woodworking, collaborative garden design, and various nature-related crafts (e.g., dying, weaving, coppicing, baking, and preserving).
Horticultural Knowledge	I will continue with my studies at SRUC in Horticulture to gain essential knowledge and skills.
Training and Workshops	I will seek training opportunities both locally and more widely which offer courses in these areas. I will also seek funding to help me access these.
Hands-On Learning	I will actively engage in hands-on learning experiences, such as joining local woodworking classes, participating in craft workshops, and collaborating with experienced individuals in these fields when I am able.

Knowledge Sharing	I will gather essential resources and materials needed for these skills, and share my knowledge with those who are interested. I will be open to what skills others can share with me.
Community Projects Involvement: To continue gathering good practice from existing projects, I will:	
Networking	I will actively network within the therapeutic horticulture community, attending relevant events whenever I can.
Volunteer and Collaborate	I will seek opportunities to volunteer with existing community horticultural projects, offering my assistance and learning from established initiatives.
Document and Share	I will keep detailed records of my experiences and the practices I observe during my involvement in community projects in case this is useful in the future.
Continuous Learning: Recognizing that the field of therapeutic horticulture is dynamic and evolving and multifaceted I will commit to ongoing learning. This includes:	
Reading Research and Publications:	I will regularly read academic research, articles, and publications related to horticultural therapy and well-being to stay informed about the latest developments and evidence-based practices.
Attending Training Programs	I will enroll in relevant training programs or courses to deepen my understanding of therapeutic horticulture techniques and approaches if resources allow



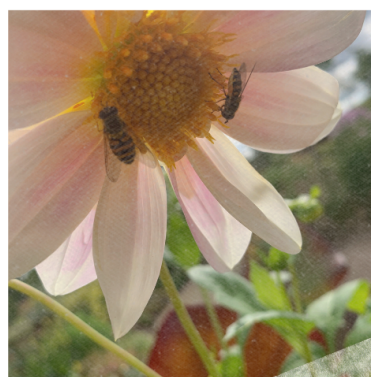
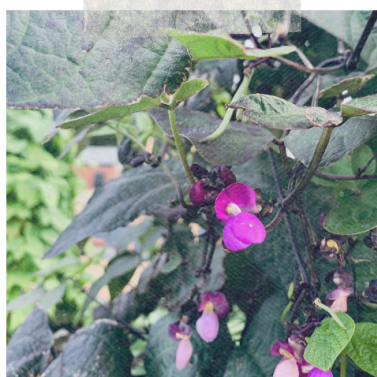
Images 8: Flower arranging and willow wreath making

By following this personal plan of action, I aim to not only enhance my own skills but also contribute positively to the well-being of individuals and communities through therapeutic horticulture in the future while continuously improving my understanding of best practices in the field.

Conclusion: A Journey of Growth & Gratitude

I have gained an immense amount from my placement and hope to continue learning from existing community projects, which will provide me with deeper insights, knowledge, contacts, and support for my future work.

As my three-week placement came to an end, I felt a profound sense of gratitude towards the people who inspired, welcomed, and supported me throughout this experience. The opportunity to facilitate meaningful connections between individuals and nature, especially in the context of the ongoing climate crisis, reignited my sense of purpose. I extend my heartfelt thanks to the entire team, with special appreciation for Ozichi, whose support and camaraderie made my experience truly enjoyable. I am grateful to RHS Bridgewater, particularly Caroline Williamson and Emma Cleal, for organizing my placement, and to the team for creating such a conducive environment for learning. I would also like to express my gratitude to The Merlin Trust and RHS Bursaries for enabling me to witness the immense potential of horticulture in nurturing well-being and fostering community cohesion. I now carry with me a renewed passion for this work and a hope to contribute to the holistic well-being of individuals and communities through horticulture.



Images 9: Some delights of RHS Bridgewater

If you have any questions or comments, please get in contact.

All images are the author's.

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Finances

Please note, due to the distance, location and daily start time of my placement, I unfortunately had to use a car rather than the public transport as anticipated, hence the change of items below, however, I am claiming the same amount awarded to me and have paid the rest from my own funds.

Item	Details	Quantity	Cost	Total Cost
Milage	To and from Manchester (532) and to and from RHS each day (312)	844	45 pence per mile	379.80
Sustenance	There are photos of all receipts in the Appendix in seperate file, here I present the total		please see receipts	719.92
Total				£1099.72

From this total £600 is claimed from Merlin Trust, £240 from RHS Bursaries, the remaining £259.72 is from my own pocket.