

Merlin Trust Report

Social and Therapeutic Horticulture Practice — Thrive

Name: Noelia Alonso Escobar

Title

Developing Skills in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture to Support Wellbeing

What I used the bursary for

I was awarded a Merlin Trust grant to support my training in **Social and Therapeutic Horticulture Practice**, delivered by Thrive as a blended learning opportunity.

The course started on **Monday 13th April 2026** and finished on **28th April 2026**, lasting approximately two weeks. The final session provided an opportunity to review learning, ask questions and reflect on how to apply the knowledge in practice.

Originally, I had planned to attend a different horticulture course. However, due to physical difficulties, particularly with my elbow, and later a bicycle accident which temporarily limited my mobility, I realised that I needed to move towards a direction in horticulture that would be more sustainable for my body in the long term.

The Thrive course provided exactly that opportunity. It allowed me to continue developing my horticultural skills while focusing on wellbeing, inclusion and supporting people through nature-based activities.

I am very grateful to the Merlin Trust for making this training possible.

Outcomes — what I achieved from this activity

This course has been a very important step in my development, both professionally and personally.

One of the most valuable things I learned was how to **design horticultural activities with a clear purpose**, based on the needs of the person, rather than simply doing tasks because the garden requires them.

In Social and Therapeutic Horticulture, we choose activities because they can support specific outcomes in people — physical, emotional, social and cognitive.

During the course, I learned how to:

- design therapeutic horticulture sessions
- carry out risk assessments to ensure safe practice
- plan structured programmes centred on the person
- understand how to communicate the value of these programmes to organisations and stakeholders

The course introduced the six wellbeing outcomes used in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture:

- Hope and purpose
- Stamina and balance
- Relationships and inclusion
- Control and choice
- Being present and mindful
- Responsibility

These outcomes can be supported through simple gardening activities that help people feel useful, confident and connected.

For example, activities such as seed sowing, planting bulbs, growing vegetables or caring for plants can help people develop a sense of purpose and optimism about the future. They also support patience, planning and gentle physical movement.

Another example is pruning, harvesting or digging, which can help build physical confidence, balance and coordination, while also encouraging safe working and cooperation with others.

Mindful activities such as watering slowly, observing plants, touching leaves or listening to birds can help reduce anxiety, improve focus and support emotional regulation.

Through this course, I also learned how to adapt activities to different needs, abilities and situations, making horticulture accessible to people who may be experiencing anxiety, isolation, depression, physical limitations or social challenges.

Integrating previous experience

This training allowed me to bring together different parts of my learning journey.

Through my practical training at the Botanical Garden, I developed strong technical horticultural skills, such as:

- planting
- pruning
- weeding
- soil preparation
- composting
- plant care

At the same time, my studies in counselling and spiritual counselling have helped me develop skills in:

- listening
- empathy
- understanding individual needs
- person-centred support

This course connected these two areas. It showed me how to use horticultural skills not only to maintain gardens, but also to support people's wellbeing in a meaningful and structured way.

For me, this felt like the final piece of the puzzle.

Personal impact

Personally, this course has given me:

- more confidence
- a clearer direction
- a better understanding of wellbeing
- a realistic and sustainable path in horticulture

After experiencing physical challenges, including problems with my elbow and a bicycle accident, I needed to find a way to continue working with nature while respecting my physical limits.

Social and Therapeutic Horticulture offers a more gentle and sustainable approach to working outdoors, while still allowing me to use my skills, passion and experience.

It has also strengthened my sense of purpose and helped me feel more confident about my future direction.

Next steps — how I will use this experience

My next step is to continue building experience in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture and wellbeing.

At the moment, I am working:

- two days per week in landscaping
- one day per week in gardening work with a colleague
- and I am planning to start volunteering one day per week in a therapeutic garden setting, such as **Martineau Gardens**

This will allow me to develop more confidence through practice and deepen my understanding of therapeutic horticulture.

In the future, I hope to:

- continue developing my skills in wellbeing and horticulture
- support people through nature-based activities

- possibly run small therapeutic sessions independently
- explore related areas such as mindfulness in nature and forest bathing

I would like to build a career that combines horticulture, wellbeing and person-centred support.

Closing statement

I would like to sincerely thank the Merlin Trust for supporting my training.

This opportunity has helped me move forward with confidence and clarity, and it has allowed me to continue developing in a field that I care deeply about.

I hope to use what I have learned to support others, promote wellbeing and contribute positively to my community through horticulture.

Images from my horticultural practice.

