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link to Selection article [1]



Garden writer and broadcaster Monty Don once said, “We don’t look after the garden; the garden looks after us”, and it’s true that time in nature is good for mind, body and spirit. In one study, published in the Journal of the American Heart Association, rates of hospitalisation for heart disease and stroke were shown to be lower among adults living in neighbourhoods with “highly variable greenness”.

Improved mental health and pregnancy outcomes and reduced obesity and risk of diabetes are other benefits described in the World Health Organization’s “Urban green spaces and health [2]” 91-page report.

The Bible begins in a beautiful garden, and today we still find ourselves stunned by a summer meadow, wowed by an autumn woodland. Globally, there are thought to be 400,000 types of flowering plants. An article in Country Living [3] describes dahlias ranging from tiny pom pom shaped balls to dinner-plate sized blooms in every colour of the rainbow, and irises in every imaginable shade from palest pink to deep purple and even nearly black. There are at least 90 known species of crocus - a source of cheerful spring colour, and saffron, for centuries.

Most care homes have a garden, sometimes sadly neglected. Yet, there are some simple and surprising ways in which God’s garden can be brought indoors to bring solace, joy and healing.

The drug trolley

At least 120 important drugs derived from plants are in use in one or more countries in the world. Around 11% of the drugs considered 'basic' and 'essential' by the World Health Organisation originated in flowering plants [4] - and there are many more from those without flowers

Childhood leukaemia is treated with drugs derived from the periwinkle, *Catharanthus roseus*, a decorative herb native to the island of Madagascar; the ‘milk’ of the opium poppy contains codeine and morphine – painkillers which are today produced in the lab.

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Both the snowdrop bulb and the daffodil contain galantamine, prescribed in Alzheimer's to slow cognitive decline. It is thought to work by boosting brain levels of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter involved in memory, motivation, attention and arousal. Lectin, also found in the snowdrop, is being tested for its anti-tumour properties and is also showing promise in the treatment and prevention of HIV.

Elsewhere in God's garden, the foxglove plant contains digoxin, widely used to treat heart failure and arrhythmia. Aspirin, the most widely used drug worldwide, is a synthetic version of salicyclic acid, extracted from the leaves of the meadowsweet plant and willow bark.

An open window

A window can do wonders for your wellbeing: a study in 1984 [5] revealed that hospital stays for some surgical patients were shorter, and fewer potent painkillers were prescribed, when the window view was onto a natural scene rather than a brick wall. The poet Dylan Thomas [6] also wanted to let something of the outside in, to "preserve his sanity", writing:

> **'That sanity be kept I sit at open windows, Regard the sky, make unobtrusive comment on the moon, Sit at open windows in my shirt…'**

Author Charlie Corbett entitled his 2022 book *12 Birds to save your life*. Working his way through grief, he describes how the song of a skylark pulled him from the depths of despair; how birds played a part in his mental rehabilitation and even saved his life.

Birdsong brought into care settings through open windows might just minister to tired care staff too - having an impact, in Charlie's words, "almost akin to that first ice-cold gin and tonic after a hot and stressful day at work, or the warm bath after a bone-achingly difficult day on your feet". Let yourself be nurtured by nature.

Virtual gardens

For some, the benefits of nature come more easily in a bottle [7] - with scents of fresh grass, rose, geranium and honeysuckle, accompanied by a CD of garden sounds, offering a virtual journey to nature's garden, especially for people with dementia. Wearing a virtual reality headset [8] meanwhile can take the user on safari, deep sea diving or into a beautiful garden. Used extensively in hospice and palliative care for a number of years, VR distraction therapy is thought to overwhelm the brain with information, leading to a reduction in anxiety and pain. Trialled also in care homes, one study showed an immersive garden experience having a positive effect on heart rate in residents with cognitive impairment.

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The real thing

Upon leaving hospital after a stay of several weeks, neurologist Oliver Sacks wrote of "the pure and intense joy, a blessing, to feel the sun on my face and the wind in my hair, to hear birds, to see, touch and fondle the living plants. Some essential connection and communion with nature was re-established."

Escape from any care environment, even for a few moments, can enhance wellbeing; care work isn't confined to indoor settings, but can sometimes be delivered at a deeper level in a garden, offering an alternative way to engage with residents or patients. "A garden felt like a natural place to talk about well-being, connection, relationships, diet and physical activity," says Dr Susan Taheri [9], a GP who sees patients in the garden next to her surgery, sharing in the work with them. "I practise what I preach", she says.

At one care home [10], staff and residents have together formed a Mediterranean garden, a wild garden, a fairy forest, a herb garden and a Jubilee Red, White and Blue area in one of their raised beds to mark the late Queen's 70 years. Some call it social prescribing; others call it green exercise. It's definitely care work.

Source URL:https://helencowan.co.uk/care-gods-garden

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