



Benefits of community growing: Mental health

Over the last few years there has been a growing body of evidence supporting the benefits of community growing for physical and mental wellbeing. Horticultural and other tasks involved in community gardening (such as regular exercise) alongside healthier eating patterns (usually the result of eating fresh produce grown in the garden) are often cited in such research.

The Growing Well project was set up by FCFCG in 2014 to provide support, record and share good practice in this field, and to help other groups who want to maximise the health and wellbeing benefits of their work.

Many of the projects that participated in the Growing Well programme highlighted mental health and wellbeing as a key focus, with some running dedicated programmes for those with mental health issues. The combination of working in nature on a meaningful activity, often involving social interaction, seems to offer a particularly effective pathway to improving mental wellbeing.

A major report from Natural England: 'A review of nature-based interventions for mental health care' (February 2016), showed compelling evidence that green care* contributes to a reduction in levels of anxiety, stress and depression.

The report also showed that green care activities provide people with greater social contact and inclusion, as well as a sense of belonging and personal achievement. It called for greater use of green care as a cost-effective solution for mental health and social service commissioners.

This document includes extracts from a number of case studies supplied by projects that took part in the Growing Well programme. These demonstrate the variety of programmes on offer and testimonials from participants and useful advice from projects on implementing and evaluating work. Some of the projects featured run general volunteer programmes while others take referrals through mental health services but all reported benefits to participants.

"My time volunteering.... enabled me to see the light at the end of the tunnel and recover from the depression that I was suffering from."

(Volunteer at Grow 4 Good, Devon)

* *Green Care is used to describe nature-based therapy or treatments designed, structured and facilitated for individuals with a defined need.*

OrganicLea, London

OrganicLea aims to particularly support people 'who are in mental health recovery or at risk of mental ill-health, to reduce social isolation, increase confidence, and improve mood.'

Having begun in 2001 on a once-derelict allotment, OrganicLea's main growing site is now Hawkwood, a 12 acre community market garden and plant nursery. With a workers' cooperative at its core, OrganicLea produces and distributes food and plants locally, and inspires and supports others to do the same. It supports participants to learn skills, gain training and employability, and improve their health and wellbeing, in the context of a functioning organic food enterprise growing and selling produce.

Waltham Forest, where OrganicLea is based, ranks 15th most deprived local authority in England (IMD 2010). Here and neighbouring Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Haringey, where OrganicLea also works, are among the 6 most deprived London boroughs. All these boroughs have limited access to green space and few opportunities for horticultural and food enterprise training, especially for young people and adults with support needs.

OrganicLea aims as much as possible for integrated volunteering, with participants of varying needs and motivation joining the general volunteering programme. OrganicLea believes this is a key strength of their approach and is particularly beneficial to those who otherwise spend their weeks in housing or activities targeted at their particular need.

27% of the volunteers at OrganicLea's Hawkwood nursery

have identified themselves as living with or recovering from mental ill health. Most of those coming for mental health reasons join the general supervised volunteer programme, which runs three days a week.

There is always a task/team leader on the programme to provide supervision and support. Tasks are defined, with options for outdoors or indoors (the glass house), and varying levels of physicality. The team take an active approach to creating a safe space and deliberate structured moments for community and social contact, including shared lunches and seasonal volunteer celebrations.

Their well-established buddy scheme also sees trained volunteers supporting those who need more help with participation, and there are other sessions tailored to specific groups – with the intention of people eventually integrating into the main session.

Robert, an OrganicLea participant, said: "OrganicLea has helped me feel more confident and has dealt with my anxiety. I felt more proactive, and that helped me find a job. I now feel like a more social and reliable person."

OrganicLea believes it is important to mental wellbeing and confidence to ensure that people understand their contributions to OrganicLea to be meaningful and rewarding; and that progression is possible. Individual agency is a strong focus. People are encouraged to choose between different locations (inside and outside), and the selection of tasks on offer involve using different skills (for example, horticulture, veg bag packing and cooking), and varying of social interaction.

Staff track progression through these different activities and courses, so as to support people to take on different opportunities.

Achievements are celebrated and rewarded, with certificates and presentations for achievement including participation. OrganicLea also currently measures progress in improved mental wellbeing using a confidence measurement tool, progression monitoring, and gathering of testimonies.

www.OrganicLea.org.uk

Grow 4 Good South West Ltd

Grow 4 Good was set up in July 2011 by a group of people, all previously involved with community projects or engaged in charitable institutions, who identified a need for greater provision of opportunities for young people facing social exclusion and for volunteers suffering stress related illness.

Based in the grounds of Dartmoor Zoological Park, Grow 4 Good provides opportunities for people to learn about and engage with organic gardening and nursery stock production. Its unique location within a Zoo environment, with close proximity to a range of wild animals with conservation as the highest priority, offers extraordinary learning opportunities unavailable elsewhere.

Grow 4 Good's report for Growing Well said: "During the first year that we were working with volunteers at Grow 4 Good SW we became aware that many of them had reasons for volunteering other than those mentioned at their initial visit and on their application forms.

"We discovered that many of the volunteers suffered from depression, anxiety or other mental health issues that prevented them from working, sometimes on a short-term basis, and sometimes on a longer-term basis. Or sometimes there had been some other upheaval in their

Voices from Grow 4 Good

"I really enjoyed my time volunteering with Grow 4 Good, I got to work in the great outdoors, which I thoroughly enjoyed and this gave me the opportunity to create a better environment at the zoo.

"It also helped me gain the confidence I needed to start applying for jobs again, which ultimately paid off. Most importantly, it enabled me to see the light at the end of the tunnel and recover from the depression that I was suffering from. I met some fantastic people who I now consider as friends." (S)

"So you've come back from war, you have developed an illness and through that you've been medically discharged, it takes years for you to recover from your illness and then you are in the position where you can't get a job because you haven't been employed for years, your self esteem and your

confidence are shot with every job interview and application that fails and you start to believe that you will never be able to get a job, because the time that you haven't had a job is so great. Then along comes Grow 4 Good that gives you back yourself esteem, you learn new skills and become a person again. Grow 4 Good grows plants and people.

"In 2003 I was discharged medically from the Royal Navy with post traumatic stress disorder, all seemed lost until I met Dave and Liz who work for Grow 4 Good and my life turned around I was made to feel like a good person for the first time in years, and I learnt the new skills that I am still using today,

"I am now a Scout leader, shop manager and Outdoor Activities instructor, I still look after two small gardens with the skills that I learnt at Grow 4 Good. Life is good and I have learnt that there is life after the services" (M)

lives that made volunteering a new prospect for them."

Volunteers at Grow 4 Good benefit from physical exercise in a tranquil environment, and a reduction in social isolation through group working and belonging to a community. Friendships are formed, and to reduce social isolation further social events are built in to the life of the project, eg regular barbeques at the project and visits to other places of interest, including Paignton Zoo or other nearby gardens.

Volunteers at Grow 4 Good come from a variety of sources including word of mouth, Plymouth Volunteer Network and various agencies in Plymouth working with people with mental health issues. Volunteers help with a

range of tasks including general horticultural and landscaping work in the zoo grounds, growing salad which is sold to the zoo restaurant and providing edible flowers to another nearby restaurant. At the end of 2013 75% of those volunteers who had left had moved into employment or training.

Grow 4 Good is still developing its evaluation toolkit, which includes appraisal meetings and exit interviews, and finds the most concrete evidence comes from volunteers' own testimonials.

[www.facebook.com/
Grow-4-Good-South-West-
132309320214652](https://www.facebook.com/Grow-4-Good-South-West-132309320214652)

Scotswood Natural Community Garden, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Scotswood Natural Community Garden used a grant from Growing Well to commission an independent evaluation of their volunteer programme to find out what the impact was, and to scope out the potential for more work supporting people around mental health.

Scotswood is an award winning charity based in one of the most economically deprived neighbourhoods in Newcastle upon Tyne. Established in 1995 on the site of a former school playing field, the 2.5 acre garden includes wildflower meadows, woodland, ponds, heritage orchards and fruit and vegetable gardens designed as forest gardens.

The garden is maintained by local volunteers, many of whom are older people, longer-term unemployed and people with mental health issues and learning disabilities. Many of them would like to enter the world of work, but lack the confidence, skills or qualifications to find suitable employment.

Scotswood provides them with nationally accredited horticulture training through the Open College Network to help them to build their confidence and skills and find employment. Over 60% of the volunteers go on to employment or training.

The independent evaluation of the volunteer programme found that "that the garden is instrumental in improving current and former volunteer's sense of physical and mental wellbeing" (Armstrong 2015).

Current volunteers are referred from a combination of Job Centre staff or work related agencies,



word of mouth, or by other not-for-profit organisations. The volunteers start with an interview with the Garden and Volunteer Manager to identify their needs and interests. Two references and a DBS (child protection) check are obtained. They then attend up to 3 days a week, depending on how often they choose to come in. The Garden and Volunteer Manager will assign jobs, and show people how to do new jobs. On Wednesday volunteers enjoy a shared lunch with staff.

The evaluator developed a short questionnaire including a number of open questions to ascertain existing members thought about the current volunteering project.

The evaluator asked volunteers specifically how volunteering at the garden impacted on their mental health and the responses were very similar:

- “Gets you out the house. You’re working outside in a natural habitat and learning skills for your own gardens... It helps being around other volunteers.” (Michael)

- “Gives people someone to talk to, not just the staff but volunteers. We have good banter, nicknames, laughter and if another volunteer gets wound up, I talk to them.” (Dave)
- “When you’re outside the fresh air clears your brain. It’s great having time to sit outside and think. When I was doing GCSES I was stressed and coming here helped, both staff and people. It’s like a natural way of doing it.” (Aaron)
- “Good to get outside and do some work. It does help.” (Joe)

All respondents said they felt their life had improved in some way as a result of volunteering at the garden. When asked about future plans, half of the respondents sought employment in gardening roles and felt that being at the garden had helped them use and practise their skills.

The evaluator concluded: “It was overwhelmingly clear that all of the existing volunteers I spoke to

benefitted from the dual impact of learning, using or developing practical and often physical skills in the fresh air, combined with the social aspect of being around ‘good company’, laughter, and other volunteers and staff for mutual support.

“Many volunteers pinpoint the social aspect as helping to build their confidence. The group exercise also reinforced these findings that it is the combination of task based activities and the company of their peers and supportive staff that make the garden such a good place to volunteer and which positively impacts on their mental health.”

<http://sncg.org.uk>

Resources

Other case studies in this series:

- Benefits of community growing, green spaces and outdoor education - summary of research and evidence
- Health and wellbeing
- Older people and dementia sufferers
- Refugees and asylum seekers

www.farmgarden.org.uk/resources/health-wellbeing-case-studies-ellerman-project

Which tool to use?

A new guide to evaluating health and wellbeing outcomes for community growing programmes.

www.farmgarden.org.uk/resources/whichtool

The Growing Well Project has been made possible by funding from:

**John Ellerman
Foundation**

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